

# Democratic Spaces for Young People

Developing Shared Civic Infrastructure *BUILDING BLOCK 3 OF 12 – CREATING SPACES FOR CITIZENS*

Young people (high school students and young adults) are an often-overlooked civic asset. Establishing youth councils or other structures for youth leadership not only brings the perspectives of the younger generation to the table, it also catalyzes and enriches engagement efforts generally.



## Environments for Youth Leadership

Novi, Michigan (pop. 55,000)

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The 19-member Novi Youth Council contributes to city decision-making and conducts a range of activities that engage hundreds of other young people each year. Members of the council are selected each year from area high schools by the city council. One role of the youth council is to make recommendations to city council concerning the needs of children, youth and families. The youth council also organizes activities in three topic areas: drug and alcohol prevention, connecting teens and seniors and teen depression and suicide. These initiatives include:

- The Youth Hope Convention, with more than 500 high school students attending annually. The convention educates teens about causes of depression, its attached stigma and methods of treatment and prevention.
- Meetings with middle school students every May in which Youth Council members describe the workings of Novi City government and invite students to participate in the Memorial Day Parade.
- “Addicted to Movies, not Drugs,” an all-night movie marathon organized in partnership with the Novi Police Department and a local chain of movie theatres.
- “Sticker Shock,” a project in which teens place more than 6,000 warning stickers on packs of alcoholic beverages.
- The “Senior to Senior” Prom, in partnership with Walton Wood, a regional chain of senior living facilities. More than 100 Novi seniors twice a year spend an evening with members of the Novi Youth Council, with dinner and dancing.
- The annual Fall for Novi, a local festival that includes a parade, fair and other events. The Youth Council organizes children’s games and presents the city to visitors.

The annual budget for the youth council is \$500; a key element of the council’s success is volunteer help from residents, businesses and local and regional organizations.

## PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS:

- Inform and educate citizens.
- Build a stronger sense of community.
- Tap the power of citizens as problem-solvers.
- Develop smarter, more widely supported policies.
- Give marginalized voices a place at the table.

## POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- Create a city-wide youth council.
- Help establish other youth engagement programs and activities.
- Connect with neighborhood, school and online spaces listed above.

## WORK BEST WHEN:

- It is clear that the youth leaders are being selected to help engage their peers, not simply represent their interests.
- The youth leaders are a diverse group, and include young people who are non-traditional leaders in addition to students who already excel academically.
- They operate or are linked to an online forum.
- Youth leaders are trained in engagement skills, along with adults.
- City-level decision-making bodies and neighborhood groups adopt a process for recognizing and incorporating youth contributions.