

FOSTERING YOUNG VISIONARIES FOR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

by

Priscilla Geigis and Will Snyder

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*Where will people live in your city?
Where will people work?
How will people move around your city?
Where will people play and meet?
What makes your city "good"?*

A group of high school students considered these questions and answered them by drawing their own version of a "good city" in one of the workshops offered at *Community Preservation: YouthVisions*, a pilot youth component of the Community Preservation Institute, developed in 2003 by the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, UMass Extension, and the UMass Donahue Institute. The *YouthVisions* program aimed to engage youth in environmental and sustainable development issues facing Massachusetts communities.

In the "Planning the Good City" workshop, UMass Amherst Professor Elisabeth Hamin asked the group to assume the role of city planners and determine where to place residential, commercial and industrial development, transportation structures and open space -- to balance these various interests to create a "community" for people to live, work and play.

Three "good cities" resulted, each with their own distinct flair, and each, understandably, capturing the experience of the youthful city planners. One group, with members from urban communities, drew a core inner circle filled with housing around a common green and surrounded this circle with municipal buildings and commercial and retail establishments. Industrial uses were located on the outer edge of the community. Another group laid the city out in a grid making it easy to navigate. The third group, with members from more rural areas, drew a river and built the city along the river, emphasizing parks and open space and placing cultural amenities close to the river. As

the groups shared their visions, they learned about each other's communities as well as their own values. In many ways, the workshop captured the essence of *YouthVisions* – encouraging youth as visionaries and leaders by promoting the value of community, and introducing the knowledge and skills needed to be effective citizens.

The Pilot of YouthVisions

YouthVisions is an outgrowth of the Community Preservation Institute. In Spring 2001, the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs (EOEA) and the University of Massachusetts (UMass) launched the Community Preservation Institute, a nine week evening program designed to help local leaders address growth and development issues facing their communities. The Institute used the concept of “community preservation,” a term adopted by EOEA to help local leaders make informed decisions that balance a variety of interests and help them preserve and enhance the sense of place in their community as they continue to see Massachusetts develop at an unprecedented rate.

To date, 252 alumni have graduated from the Community Preservation Institute, held on all five University of Massachusetts campuses. The Institute’s curriculum exposes participants to topics such as land acquisition, water protection, housing, historic preservation and transportation, and to local leaders within their geographical area. Participants gain subject matter knowledge, coalition-building skills as well as an opportunity to network with neighboring leaders and resource people within the UMass system, state agencies and nonprofit groups.

After four successful semesters of offering the Community Preservation Institute, UMass and EOEA turned their attention to youth, reasoning that launching a sustainable development pilot program for high school students would foster a sense of place and commitment to communities at an age when young people are assuming more responsibility. In Spring, 2003, EOEA and UMass launched *Community Preservation: Youth Visions*. Using course topics from the Institute, EOEA and UMass designed a two-day interactive curriculum to help students learn and exchange ideas about balancing growth issues in Massachusetts. For the pilot, five teams of students and advisors were selected from across the state to achieve geographical diversity. Participating schools/programs included: Quabbin Regional High School, Essex Agricultural High School, the Eagle Eye Institute in Somerville, and the River Ambassadors Program from Lowell.

The 25 students took part in a diverse series of workshops, discussions and interactive activities designed to help foster leadership and team building skills and a better understanding of natural resource protection, land use and community development. Through this two-day program, students gained a better understanding of what it means to belong to a community and the role that they can play to help preserve and shape it. Teams prepared and offered “roundtable” discussions concerning: suburban sprawl in the Quabbin area, river protection in Lowell, street tree protection in Somerville, and Marine GIS studies at the Essex Agricultural High School.

Youth Visions included on- and off-campus field trips. Through hands-on lab applications, students learned about the important role of Geographical Information System (GIS) in growth planning decisions. Students also toured the University’s

extensive recycling facility learning about its role in ensuring a sustainable university community. Additional off-campus trips brought students to Atkins Corner to learn about its future as a smart growth designed village center, and to the Sawmill River in Montague to examine the effects of development on ecological health and water quality.

To conclude the conference, each of the five groups made brief presentations about what they learned during the two days and what actions they were going to take in their communities. It was clear that they were influenced not only by the curriculum, but, more importantly, by each other. Predictably, one of the greatest contrasts and learning experiences occurred between the students from Somerville, an urban community flanking Boston, and those from Quabbin, a rural community in the middle of the state, as they discussed differing housing stock and transportation alternatives. If asked to create “the good city” at the end of the conference, no doubt their drawings would be influenced by their enhanced understanding of what makes a good community.

It makes sense that a program that aims to get communities thinking about the future would involve high school age youth. Engaging youth in a particular issue is one good way to educate the wider public about the importance of an issue. But equally important is the education of the young people themselves. High school youth are on the edge of adulthood, ready to contribute their ideas and take on responsible community roles with the guidance of adult advisors. They have much energy and idealism and many questions, and they are anxious to be taken seriously as young adults.

The Right Ingredients

What are the most important components for an effective program that promotes youth involvement in sustainable development issues in our communities? We found such a program requires special considerations ranging from the number and diversity of students and teachers, to the variety of workshop offerings, to the experience of the instructors, to location of the event. All were carefully considered before launching the pilot. This paper outlines some of what we have learned from the *YouthVisions* pilot and other programs about fostering youth involvement. We offer these ideas as "program ingredients" to create a successful program, not only in youth learning, but in educator professional development, and program development for the long run.

1. *Build on Existing Successes and Collaborations.*

YouthVisions built on the success of three established programs and involved students and educators already involved in community issues. First, it adopted and enhanced program designs and educator networks developed by two highly successful high school environmental programs, Earth Connection and Envirothon which involved hundreds of educators and youth in Massachusetts over the past decade. In addition, it used the Community Preservation Institute as a model for identifying the sustainable development principles to incorporate in the youth curriculum. Tapping into the success of these programs allowed us to move forward quickly to design the program, invite participants and hold the conference with confidence that it would be well received by its intended audience.

Focusing on communities was not a new concept for students and advisors who participated in the Massachusetts Envirothon as the high school environmental

competition has included a community exploration component since 1995. In that program, high school teams learn about a current environmental issue (such as open space protection, stormwater management, or wetlands conservation) and investigate how the issue is manifested in their own community. Through interviews, library research, and field work they determine the critical concerns for their town and develop a proposal to address it. At the Envirothon in the spring, the teams present their findings and their proposal in a formal presentation to a panel of judges. Involving students and advisors familiar with this concept almost guaranteed that we would have an attentive audience for our *YouthVisions* pilot.

Similarly, Earth Connection, organized by UMass Extension from 1996 to 2002, provided the model for *YouthVisions*' two-day format involving both high school educators and youth on community service and the environment. At Earth Connection, teams, involving four to eight young people with one or two advisors, represented schools and community groups from rural, suburban, and urban communities across the state. The conference, held on the UMass Amherst campus, included workshops on issues and skills for community environmental action, and opportunities to explore environmental teaching, research, and facilities management on campus. Networking - among teachers, between high school participants and college age conference staff, and among the high school young people themselves - was a central feature of the event. Earth Connection developed the "roundtables" format that encourages information sharing among young people, without the pressure of competition or adult evaluation. The program aimed to be as much a resource for educators as for youth, providing professional development points to participating teachers.

Earth Connection and Envirothon provided *YouthVisions* planners with access to networks of high school educators who were already engaged with their students in community projects. Thus, one ingredient of *YouthVisions*' success was to start with educators who were primed and ready to make the most of the learning/networking opportunity provided by the program. Our assumption in starting with this group was that they would be most likely to contribute to the success of the pilot that would encourage others to join in.

The Community Preservation Institute - a joint project of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and the University of Massachusetts system (described in detail in another paper in this collection) - provided an additional critical component of the *YouthVisions* pilot: a comprehensive curriculum. The CPI curriculum, a 25 hour, nine week introduction to critical issues of community preservation, smart growth, and sustainable development in Massachusetts, was helpful in two ways. First, it provided a framework for selecting workshops and experienced EOEAs, community agency, and UMass staff to offer them. Second, it provided participating teachers and youth group advisors with a well-defined framework for introducing their young people to community issues. This piece had been missing from both Envirothon and Earth Connection.

Drawing on the experience and readiness of Envirothon and Earth Connection audiences, and on the Institute curriculum and faculty, allowed *YouthVisions* planners to move forward quickly to design and launch a successful *YouthVisions* pilot on an aggressive three month timetable. Involving advisors and students that were active in community issues was key as they were most receptive to our invitation since we didn't

have to “sell” the program to them because they were familiar with Envirothon and Earth Connection and saw the value to it. We knew if we had a successful pilot, we would be in a better position to attempt outside funding for future offerings.

2. *Strengthen Youth/Adult Partnerships*

YouthVisions used the Envirothon/Earth Connection model of an adult advisor with a small group of young people. This model assumes that community projects for environmental improvement benefit from the involvement of both youth and adults. Youth provide energy and new eyes. Adults provide experience and judgment, and knowledge of the community. The presence of youth in a project can encourage the whole community to think more about the future and the larger public interest. The *YouthVisions* pilot included five groups of five young people, each with an advisor. The low ratio allowed adults and youth to be with each other in a more relaxed and informal relationship than they usually experience in the classroom. The arrangement also encouraged an atmosphere that greatly reduced behavior concerns practically to zero, even in a Friday overnight on a college campus.

3. *Seek Diversity*

At the opening of the 21st century, Massachusetts communities are increasing in diversity. Issues of racial, ethnic, and class diversity will be a major challenge for American society and are connected in many ways with issues of sustainable development. *YouthVisions* sought to include groups that represented both the ethnic and geographic diversity of Massachusetts classrooms and communities. In the end, the

pilot included groups from among the most rural (Barre) and the most urban (Somerville) communities in the state, and a majority of youth of color.

While addressing diversity issues was not a primary goal of the conference, it was clear from the final team presentations that significant bridges of understanding had been built among these communities. In particular, rural and suburban teams voiced new understanding of the urban environment, and admiration for the environmental improvement work that the urban teams were doing.

Earth Connection's experience was that the most active, empowerment-oriented youth projects in urban areas came from community-based youth groups rather than schools. This was borne out again at *YouthVisions*. A major benefit of bringing together these community-based urban youth groups with more suburban school-based classes and clubs is that, in addition to learning about diversity, the school groups learn more about how to run projects with youth empowerment and leadership as an explicit goal.

4. *Emphasize Networking*

"Meeting people from other communities" was the most important *YouthVisions* benefit, according to youth participants. The conference was structured to maximize opportunities for young people and advisors to get to know each other. One important feature was the "roundtables" session, an idea borrowed from the Earth Connection conference. Each team was asked to come to the conference prepared to lead a discussion on a topic of their choice. Each team had a round table as its home base. At any given time during the session, half the team members were at the home table leading a conversation, and half were visiting other tables. The atmosphere was different from a

poster session or a science fair: the emphasis was on informal conversation rather than presentation, and for at least the first half of the session there were no adults present. During the youth roundtables session, team advisors were meeting separately to share ideas on how the program should grow.

The roundtables proved to be one of the highlights of the conference because the session allowed participants to communicate with each other one-on-one and learn about each other's communities and schools. Students from Essex County demonstrated their GIS (geographic information systems) mapping work. Students from the Quabbin area presented their concerns about suburban sprawl. Youth groups from Lowell and Somerville talked about their work in river protection and street tree protection.

5. *Exposure to University Sets High Expectations*

YouthVisions was a professional quality conference, held in the conference center at UMass Amherst. For some of the young people, this was their first experience at a college level institution, offering them a glimpse of campus life and exposure to students and faculty. By holding the conference in a college setting, we set high expectations for learning and conduct.

In part, the *YouthVisions* setting exposed students to what it might “feel” like to be a University undergraduate. The conference was held in the campus center which was bustling with student activity and the workshops were held in the University classrooms. The GIS workshop exposed them to the interactive GIS lab, and the tour of the recycling center helped them to understand the University as a community unto itself. Two landscape design graduate students assisted interested students in designing and building

a model landscape and spoke to students about their majors and experience at UMass. The UMass setting helped reinforce *YouthVisions* as an educational experience to enhance student learning. The environment also helped teachers “sell” the idea to administrators when seeking permission to bring a team of students to *YouthVisions* on school time.

6. *Put Teachers in the Lead*

University/agency outreach efforts to high schools sometimes spend much time and effort developing a uniform curriculum and then training teachers to use it. *YouthVisions* adopted a different approach. We aimed to offer resources and guidance, not a recipe for a program. This approach is both practical and philosophical. Rather than attempt to create a one-size-fits-all program or curriculum, we opted to expose participants to ideas and resource people that they could use to build and extend their own teaching and learning in their own ways. This approach recognized that each educator is operating under different constraints of curriculum, time, calendar, and funding, and so will surely not be able to implement a program exactly as planned. It also recognized that each community has different issues that rise to the top, and each educator has his/her own particular teaching style and relationship with youth. This approach provided important resources while leaving the creative initiative for education in the hands of the most experienced professionals - the teachers and youth leaders who brought groups to *YouthVisions*.

The *YouthVisions* conference in April included a brainstorming session for team advisors and conference staff to gather feedback on the specifics of the conference and

plans for the future. A follow-up meeting at the end of the school year provided an opportunity for feedback on plans for the future. Such sessions are valuable to planners in that they collect information on the resources and formats that will be most useful to teachers and youth leaders in their community initiatives.

To provide an attractive benefit to teachers, we offered the opportunity to earn graduate credit from UMass Amherst by participating in *YouthVisions* and the Community Preservation Institute. *YouthVisions* required a significant time commitment from advisors as it involved two full days, Friday and Saturday, and an overnight overseeing five youth. The teachers invited to participate in the pilot were those teachers and advisors who were already active in their schools and communities so participation in *YouthVisions* was another commitment on an already full plate. While we didn't have anyone take advantage of the course credit option during the pilot, we plan to work with teachers to further refine this option for future offerings.

7. *Encourage Interaction*

We have found that regardless of the subject, youth participate more fully and learn better in an interactive environment. Many experts in this field are very generous with their time and see the value of involving young people. Lecture presentations can work with a youth group when the group is already engaged in the topic. However, we found that the initial introduction of sustainable development topics to youth audiences benefits from interactive, hands-on methods and examples.

The *YouthVisions* curriculum was most successful where we adapted the Community Preservation Institute curriculum to achieve maximum interaction. For

example, student feedback indicated they enjoyed “Planning the Good City” workshop, described above, and the GIS lab where each student had a computer to test the applications. While some instructors didn’t make adjustments from standard presentations given to adults, with more lead time, these presentations can be adapted to be more interactive.

9. *Seek Publicity for the Work of Youth and Their Advisors*

Recognition in the media and by policy-makers is good for the youth group, the program, and the public understanding of sustainability issues. It is possible to build opportunities for visibility into the program in ways that enhance the core learning value. Future citizen activists need to learn not just how to do good things, but how to get caught doing them. Positive visibility sends an important message to other educators and youth that this work is valued.

We informed legislators that students in their district were selected to participate in the pilot program. While not extensive for the pilot, the publicity helped promote the importance of youth as community leaders. Such recognition often leads to other experiences for youth such as an invitation by local legislators to visit the State House. It also makes legislators aware of state programs to build the constituency, especially important around budget time. The recognition provides a thank you to students and teachers, and encouragement to continue good work.

Next Steps

The *YouthVisions* pilot demonstrated one way that state agencies and the state university can team up to support community and school-based initiatives that involve youth in sustainable development and environmental improvement in significant ways.

Building on this success is a challenge, at least for the present. Severe budget cuts have left state agencies and the university system weakened. What next steps are possible in the near future? Three ideas for follow-up are underway or under consideration:

First, the pilot continues in the form of an advisory committee, composed of the adult advisors who participated in *YouthVisions*, who have agreed to advise EOEA and UMass as we develop future offerings. Their input will be important in the ongoing work of linking young people with sustainable development learning opportunities in Massachusetts communities. A meeting of this group held in late June provided both advice for us and an opportunity for further networking and idea-sharing for them.

Second, EOEA is in the process of designing a classroom exercise that allows students to create a community using "game pieces" of housing, industrial and commercial development, parks, etc. The exercise can be expanded, at the teacher's discretion, to use GIS and additional state mapping resources. It is intended to help students think about balancing a variety of interests in a community and siting development to achieve the best impact on quality of life and the least impact on the environment.

Third, UMass Extension is developing a major proposal for private funding for a project that will introduce Community Preservation/sustainable development knowledge, skills, and values into the formal and informal Massachusetts' high school curriculum.

The proposed project would combine professional development with curriculum development for school and community settings, providing opportunities and support for educators to research, experiment with, and share innovative approaches to teaching environmental and civic literacy. We are particularly interested in community-connected projects that encourage youth to take initiative and leadership in addressing real community issues.

Launching new initiatives, in ways that ensure the sustainability of the effort, requires immense amounts of energy, ideas, time, and funding. In addition to pursuing the ideas outlined above, there is much that can be done to support existing, grassroots initiatives. For example, a high school teacher, who participated in the Community Preservation Institute, proposed a model for having students participate in the work of local boards or commissions (e.g. Select Board, Conservation Commission, Zoning Board, Planning Board, etc.). EOEA and UMass could provide assistance that would help this teacher give students first hand experience of the development issues facing their communities. In addition, EOEA, UMass, and interested businesses and non-government organizations could do much to support these ideas by providing time and expertise to programs like the Massachusetts Envirothon, which have a mission that is closely related to *YouthVisions*, and have a broad and diverse constituency of volunteer support and an established group of private funding sources.

We look forward to pursuing these and other good ideas for engaging youth, the future planners and leaders of our cities and towns, in the sustainable development of their communities.