

Growing Up Boulder: Boulder's Child-Friendly City Initiative

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Photo by Ethan Herrold

In many council, commission, and board rooms across America, this is what child participation looks like:

A courageous youngster, usually age seven to 12, walks up to the podium. Occasionally, the speaker is flanked by a few supportive peers. Sometimes, the child cannot reach the microphone, and a quick-thinking staff member runs to get a chair for him or her to use as a stool.

The child speaks his or her truth about an issue or an experience.

Elected officials try as hard as they can to be friendly. They smile. Sometimes they clap. Often, if a teacher or parent is present, they tell the adult to give the child an "A."

And then?

Nothing.

While many elected officials love to hear from future voters, it is not always clear what to do with that feedback. How do you reconcile a child's thoughts with other, perhaps more sophisticated, input? What if the child's feedback simply is not feasible financially or politically?

Too often, the child receives little or no information about whether – or how – the substance of what he or she has said will be considered.

One Front Range community is working to change this, leaning into a creative and evolving collaboration between municipal government, the school district, and a best practices program housed at the University of Colorado Boulder's Community Engagement Design and Research (CEDaR) Center.

The program is called Growing Up Boulder (GUB), and it is celebrating its 10th anniversary. Headed by Mara Mintzer, co-founder and program director, the program strives to make Boulder a child- and youth-friendly city in a variety of ways, including partnering with city departments to create meaningful youth engagement. To date, the program has facilitated 85 projects and worked with more than 4,000 young people.

"The City of Boulder's partnership with Growing Up Boulder has allowed us to think creatively about how we reach children early in planning processes, and in a way that allows us to truly incorporate their feedback," said Boulder City Manager Jane Brautigam. "It is important to remember that

Continued on page 25

Case Study 1

Parks and Recreation: Civic Area



Photo by Cathy Hill

In 2012, the City of Boulder began a visioning process to improve the city's downtown Civic Area, a 26-acre space next to Boulder Creek downtown. The ongoing Civic Area Project seeks to develop an urban design vision for public and private spaces, to guide decisions for building in a high-hazard flood zone, and to explore potential recreational and cultural uses.

GUB worked with the city to create meaningful youth engagement to inform the remodel of the first section of the Civic Area: Central Park West.

How many kids participated?

225 children and youth, ages four to 16, between 2012 and 2018

What forms of engagement were used, and what were the key tactics?

GUB and the city worked together on this project for more than six years. GUB co-developed a curriculum with teachers of elementary, middle, and high school students; engaged with after-school programs for underrepresented youth, such as I Have a Dream; and partnered with the Boulder Journey School, a preschool that integrates city requests into early childhood learning. Methods ranged from youth interviewing relatives to 3-D model building to young people testifying before City Council.

What did young people say?

Participating children told the city they wanted more opportunities for play, safety enhancements, experiences with nature, art, places to "hang out," and water features. Most of these themes have been realized, and several others will be considered in future phases.

"The signature spaces in Boulder's Civic Area were originally envisioned by Growing Up Boulder participants," said Yvette Bowden, Parks and Recreation and Community Vitality director. "From the bridge's kid-friendly see-through spaces and the naturalized access points along Boulder Creek to pollinator-friendly plantings along our winding pedestrian and bike paths to the park's water education play features and the awesome rope-versus-rock climb to the top of the playground slide, the area inspires fun, learning, and connectivity for all."

Case Study 2

Community Vitality: Revitalization of University Hill



Photo by Erika Chavarria

In early 2014, the Boulder City Council identified improving the quality of life in University Hill as a priority. The city decided to specifically focus on 11th Street, which connects the downtown Pearl Street Mall with the Hill neighborhood, which includes a retail district near the university.

Throughout fall 2017, GUB staff, undergraduate interns, and senior mentors from a retirement community worked with a fourth-grade class to gather youth perspective on improving 11th Street.

How many kids participated?

24 students

What forms of engagement were used, and what were the key tactics?

GUB team and mentors worked in the classroom once a week for 10 weeks. Lessons included creative placemaking and deliberative democracy. Engagement techniques included a site analysis, studying revitalized corridors in other cities, developing group recommendations, and a class replica of the 11th Street corridor. Three tactics were key: the intergenerational quality of the project (ages 9–82), hosting city experts midway through the engagement to listen to students' ideas and stretch their thinking, and including elementary students with university students to present their recommendations in a community meeting.

"My favorite part of working with GUB was when I got to share my ideas with some super important people," said a Flatirons Elementary fourth-grade student.

What did young people say?

The children saw great potential for improvement on 11th Street. Student proposals emphasized beautification of space, interactive activities, safety, environmental consciousness, and pedestrian-friendly attributes. Specific suggestions included artistically themed trash cans, interactive murals and navigation signs, artistic benches made from recyclable materials, improved bus stops, and more opportunities to be in nature.

The city drew upon many of these ideas as it enhanced the 11th Street Corridor experience.

Case Study 3

Open Space and Mountain Parks: Master Plan



Photo by Will Oberlander

The City of Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) department is nearing completion of a multiyear master planning process. In 2016 and 2017, GUB and OSMP partnered to research how young people wished to be engaged in the process. Building upon findings from this work, the two organizations partnered again in 2018 to support youth outreach to shape the plan itself.

How many kids participated?

163 children, youth, and/or parents

What forms of engagement were used, and what were the key tactics?

GUB conducted a focus group with high school students in the Junior Rangers program and developed curriculum for an elementary school classroom about how and where children wish for their voices to be heard. GUB then helped city staff simplify outreach materials for use with young people and conducted a focus group with parents of children with disabilities. Finally, GUB trained the city's teen youth advisory board to reach out to a wider group of teens regarding their vision for OSMP's future. Through this train-the-trainer method, GUB and the city were able to hear from more young people while empowering teens to be leaders in their own community.

What did young people say?

Students in the Junior Rangers focus group were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about contributing a year-round youth voice to OSMP, such as through a teen advisory board.

Elementary students suggested locations for engagement, such as the YMCA, libraries, schools, trails, coffee shops, and parks. They told the city they would participate in activities like youth councils, games, speaking to people in the community, drawing, and writing letters.

As for materials, GUB generated a "kid-friendly snapshot" booklet with images and words that described OSMP's initial nine topic areas. The document was used by GUB staff in one-on-one interactions with children to guide conversations and facilitate the completion of a questionnaire.

"Over the years, Growing Up Boulder (GUB) has been instrumental in helping the Open Space and Mountain Parks department engage directly with youth on issues of importance to the city's open space system," said Dan Burke, OSMP director. "OSMP always enjoys the opportunity to collaborate with GUB in bringing to life the voices and perspectives of our youth."

Case Study 4

Transportation: Whittier HOP Transit Study



The 2016–2017 HOP Transit Study sought to gather input to revitalize the HOP bus user experience and address changes that had occurred in land use and transportation options since the HOP's inception 22 years earlier. During fall 2016, GUB staff, undergraduate interns and volunteers worked with Whittier International Elementary School's second-grade emerging bilingual students and their teachers.

How many kids participated?

Twelve bilingual students, ages seven and eight

What forms of engagement were used, and what were the key tactics?

Engagement highlights included mapping the HOP route to learn about the HOP bus, photo-framing during a field trip to identify likes and dislikes about the HOP and bus stops, and classifying photographs taken into four categories: safe, fun, comfortable, and easy/convenient. Key tactics included research, a collaborative decision-making process among the students, and a persuasive letter-writing campaign to a city planner.

What did young people say?

The students had three main recommendations. First, children valued being able to ride the bus independently, which meant needing to read bus signage that is currently at an adult level. They suggested lowering the signs at bus stops to the level where most children can read them. Second, students wanted a place to sit while waiting for a bus. To this end, students recommended the city install a bench at the stop closest to their school. Last, students wanted riding a HOP bus to be a fun and interesting experience. They recommended placing entertaining student artwork on each HOP bus.

The result? Students created artwork with the caption, "How many bunnies do you see?" The city printed the artwork for every HOP bus and installed a bench with a plaque dedicated to the Whittier students.

"The city's partnership with Growing Up Boulder on this and a variety of other mobility-related projects has been fantastic," said Kathleen Bracke, interim co-director of the city's Transportation Division. "The creative, unbridled, fun, and heartwarming input from the children and their families has created legacy impacts for several of Boulder's streets, underpasses, and local HOP service for people of all ages to enjoy for generations to come."

Continued from page 22

decisions local governments make have long-lasting implications, and the children in our community are highly likely to experience the effects. We have a responsibility to grow young people's capacity for civic engagement and consider these valuable perspectives."

The most recent result of this collaboration was the creation of a child-friendly map of Boulder, informed by robust feedback from a variety of stakeholders, including parents and children. The colorful, bilingual, two-sided map highlights free and low-cost features and locations of interest to children and provides navigation assistance that helps children get there. Thanks to support from several partners, maps were made available to every schoolchild in Boulder. Online versions, including one for teens, are in the works.

"The child-friendly city map was created by children and families for

children and families," Mintzer said. "Children are delighted to see themselves and their ideas reflected in the map; and they are using the map to navigate the city in new ways. One 10-year-old asked her family to take her to a nature center her family had never visited because she discovered it on the map. The map builds children and parents' capacity to engage in the physical and civic space of their city and provides equitable access for all residents."

The City of Boulder supports GUB through financial assistance, approximately \$62,000 yearly, open access to city staff, strategic thinking about the projects that should be prioritized, and shared learning. The program employs two part-time staff members, Mintzer and Education Coordinator Catherine Hill, as well as university student interns. GUB is also supported through donations from other partners and supporters. CEDaR administers the program on behalf of CU Boulder, provides additional financial support, and organizes

initiatives across campus to promote the effort, including internships, classes, and specialized research projects.

Connections to the school district help provide meaningful access to students, as well as synergistic opportunities for teachers to make classroom learning relevant.

"The best learning happens in places where teachers and students are engaged in meaningful and integrated areas of study, where students have a voice and opportunities to step into leadership," Hill said. "A culture of child and youth participation has many benefits, not the least of which is that we all benefit from their energy and desire for a better future. When we empower our young people, our communities become more vibrant, inclusive, and democratic, and children grow up knowing their voices matter."

Resources

In 2019–2020, GUB will partner with the city for more than 500 hours on the following efforts:

- An 18- to 24-month subcommunity planning effort, the first of 10 such efforts that will occur in Boulder over the next decade;
- Building Bridges, an ongoing effort to increase community understanding of what supports/prevents constructive civic dialogue; and
- Planning for a new neighborhood library.

The program also will continue to support the Transportation Master Plan, which has already been informed by children, including some as young as three years old, as it comes to council for consideration later this year. Finally, the GUB team will develop and deliver training to share its wisdom about youth-centered participation with 25 city employees who have an active role in planning engagement.

Wrestling with how to involve young people in a project or decision? **Below are five youth engagement best practices to keep in mind:**

1. Go where young people are instead of asking them to come to you.

2. Use fun, creative, and varied engagement methods.
3. Build upon children and youth's assets instead of deficits.
4. Be transparent about the process and outcomes.
5. Reflect, evaluate, improve, and be tenacious.

Additional Resources:

- GUB website: www.growingupboulder.org
- TEDx talk featured on TED: How Kids Can Help Design Cities
- Book: *Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities*, by Victoria Derr, Louise Chawla, and Mara Mintzer
- Boulder's Child-Friendly Map: www.growingupboulder.org/gubmap

Full reports from each of the case studies are available on GUB's website.