Boulder’s Plan to Become a Child- and Youth-Friendly City

A city that is friendly to children is a city that is friendly to all.

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Just a few of the school-aged design proposals that resulted from Growing Up Boulder’s visioning process for the City of Boulder’s Alpine-Balsam community project. Participatory design at its finest. And it’s just one of the many ways that Boulder has incorporated children into the planning and design of community projects, as well as improve community engagement.

The ICMA Innovations and Emerging Practices in Local Government Survey 2016, conducted in collaboration with Arizona State University and the Alliance for Innovation in April 2016, asked CEO respondents to rate the extent to which they use 16 different engagement tools in their jurisdiction on a five-point Likert scale with these response options: never [1], rarely, moderately [3], regularly, frequently [5], and don’t know. Findings show that participatory design is the eighth most frequently used citizen engagement tool by local governments.

Growing Up Boulder and the city of Boulder are actively involving all stakeholders to make it a child- and youth-friendly city. To learn how they are doing this with such success, we caught up with Growing Up Boulder program director, Mara Mintzer, to get tips and advice on how to make your community a child- and youth-friendly place.

ICMA: Tell us about Growing Up Boulder (GUB) and how the initiative came about.

Growing Up Boulder is a child-and youth-friendly city initiative that began in 2009 as a collaboration among the University of Colorado (CU Boulder), the city of Boulder, and the school district (Boulder Valley School District), working in partnership with local nonprofits, businesses, and children and youth ages 0-18. Child- and youth-friendly cities recognize the rights and interests of children in local policy, law, programs, and budgets as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Growing Up Boulder’s partnership is formalized through a memorandum of understanding between the three founding institutions. It is a program within the university’s Community Engagement and Design Center (CEDaR), a collaborative of CU faculty, staff, and students engaged in community-based education and research in city design and urban management.

ICMA: What is the vision of the program?

GUB grew out of the vision of CU Professor Emeritus Willem van Vliet and Boulder’s former executive director of Planning, Housing, and Sustainability, David Driskell. Professor van Vliet started a similar child- and youth-friendly city initiative in Denver, and we wanted to implement a similar program in our own city of Boulder. We started with a small amount of funding from each of the founding partners, volunteer time (mine), graduate student support, and a good deal of enthusiasm.

GUB combines the rights-based approach of child-friendly cities with the participatory planning approach of the Growing Up in Cities program started by Kevin Lynch in the 1970s and revived by CU Professor Emerita Louise Chawla in the 1990s. David Driskell stated in a 2014 interview, “The idea behind [GUE] has been that we are able to leverage our dollars by paying into a collective fund... Unlike a model where we would ‘contract’ for each individual project and think of them as consultants, the idea of the program is that it is an ongoing partnership that provides shared benefit[s]...with working relationships built over time between the three institutions [the city, university, and school district]...I think we’ve gotten a lot of value -- not just in having young people involved in individual projects, but in building a stronger culture of ongoing youth engagement and partnership.”
ICMA: What are the benefits of involving children in participatory design?

A city that is friendly to children is a city that is friendly to all. Children and youth design cities that work for many different types of people—for example, those who cannot drive, those with limited financial means, those who need smooth surfaces for rolling—because those descriptions often apply to young people themselves. Not only are we preparing future citizens, but we are engaging our current citizens; like other users of the public realm, our young people deserve a chance to shape the city around them. Research shows that children are more flexible and creative in their thinking than adults, and they can offer new perspectives on entrenched issues. Our young people, who are growing up in a time of climate change and environmental instability, think about the consequences of their designs on other species and of the planet as a whole. More than once, city department heads have remarked on how adept our 8-year-old students are at participating in meaningful dialogue and deliberation around complex issues.

ICMA: How is the program changing the culture of decision-making in the city of Boulder?

Cultural change in a large institution takes time, but I believe that we are seeing a shift in how our city leaders, staff, and boards think about decision-making for the city’s residents. Because GUB has been operational for more than 8 years, Boulder now has numerous examples of projects where young people influenced the final plans, ranging from park designs to transportation planning to the city’s resilience strategy. The latest evidence of a city culture that promotes the inclusion of young people appears on the first page of the city’s June/July 2017 newsletter, where City Manager Jane Brautigam devotes her entire column to the value Boulder places on including young people in city planning: “Their involvement matters, and we’re listening!” she concludes.

ICMA: How are the city of Boulder, GUB, and CU Boulder’s Community Engagement, Design and Research (CEDaR) Center working together in participatory design initiatives?

A great example of the collaboration between all three entities is the Alpine-Balsam redesign project. During the 2016-17 academic year, GUB engaged youth in the visioning process for the City of Boulder’s Alpine-Balsam community project. Alpine-Balsam, purchased by the city in 2015, is 8.8 acres of land located at a former hospital site, and it is proposed to house city offices, civic engagement space, retail, and housing.

Growing Up Boulder staff, undergraduate GUB interns, and undergraduate mentors worked with high school and middle school classes to gather youth voice for the project. GUB was one of five university groups based out of CEDaR involved in the project. GUB’s comprehensive, multimodal curriculum created an educational and interactive exchange between Boulder’s youth and the larger Boulder community, whereby youth studied the redevelopment of the Alpine-Balsam area using an “ecodistrict” lens. Focusing on an ecodistricts’ six priorities—place, prosperity, health and well-being, living infrastructure, connectivity, and resource restoration—students developed their ideas into digital presentations and proposed them to city and community members at the conclusion of their study. They also critiqued undergraduate student design proposals for the space, helping college students make their designs more youth-friendly. I’m pleased to report that many of the young people’s ideas are reflected in the final vision for the space.

ICMA: What is the strategic plan for GUB (goal, mission and vision) in the next three to five years?

Our vision is to make Boulder an exemplary child- and youth-friendly city. Our mission is to empower Boulder’s young people with opportunities for inclusion, influence, and deliberation on local issues that affect their lives. We accomplish this through many diverse partnerships and supporters. Because underrepresented children and youth are even less likely to have their voices heard than majority groups, we aim for 50% or more of Growing Up Boulder participants to include young people who are immigrants, English language learners, low-income, ethnic minorities, first generation college-bound students, and/or young people with disabilities.

Growing Up Boulder has four programmatic goals:

1. Ensure meaningful opportunities for young people’s participation in Boulder decision-making.
2. Make Boulder a more inclusive place for children and youth of all income levels, ethnicities and abilities.
3. Give GUB partners a voice in setting the direction of GUB projects.
4. Disseminate lessons learned from GUB to the community (Boulder-at-large, youth, academics, GUB partners, other child-friendly city communities).

Over the next three to five years, we hope to expand the scope of GUB to engage more parents and more businesses. Due to requests from colleagues across the continent, we also plan to offer workshops and tools for those who want to start child- and youth-friendly city initiatives in their own communities.

ICMA: If a community was interested in launching an engagement program such as GUB, what should managers and engagement officers know firsthand?

I would recommend that a manager or engagement officer interested in launching a child- and youth-friendly city initiative in their community begin by gathering interested leadership from key areas—local governments, universities, schools, nonprofits, and businesses. After presenting an overview of the child-friendly city concept, those who are most passionate in the group should move the concept forward. It is important to partner with a local organization that has expertise in working directly with children and youth in order to effectively engage young people from the beginning. Community leaders and young people partnering together can utilize the child-friendly city toolkit to examine their community through a child-friendly city lens, then use this information shape their own child-friendly city initiative.
ICMA: What type of citizen outreach do you do for the city of Boulder and its residents to be aware of GUB?

We inform Boulder’s residents about Growing Up Boulder through a number of different city channels. Our city partners provide links on their project pages to GUB’s website, which is updated with the latest project information. When the city holds public engagement meetings, GUB prepares informational posters and sends representatives to the meetings so that we may inform the public of the children’s work. It is not unusual for GUB staff, children, or youth to present at city board and council meetings. Articles and interviews describing GUB collaborations are shared via government news channels, print publications, and electronic newsletters. In addition, our partner youth organizations update families about GUB projects in their classrooms. Over the next five years, we aim to create even greater resident awareness of GUB so that our young people’s great work becomes household knowledge in Boulder.