



HOW LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE ENGAGING YOUTH: AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONNECT WITH TRANSPORTATION

a three-part series

Engaging youth in local government road safety initiatives

COMMUNITIES ARE ENGAGING WITH YOUTH IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN MEANINGFUL WAYS AND ENJOYING THE BENEFITS. We looked at three ways municipalities engage youth: inviting youth to serve on local boards and commissions, creating youth-only boards that report to local government on various issues, and involving youth in specific community initiatives.

Fresh perspectives, community connectedness, and workforce development are all ways local governments benefit from including youth on short-term activities that address road safety and transportation needs. These collaborations also create opportunities for hands-on learning. Local governments have resources to engage youth in a variety of ways. Some receive grants to support teaming up with young people, others give grants to local organizations, or they develop partnerships with local community organizations and schools.

To explore how youth are engaged by local governments on specific projects, we conducted a web-based scan to characterize these activities.

“Our Youth Ambassadors come up with highly original and impactful programs every year,” said Montgomery County (Virginia) Department of Transportation Director Chris Conklin in a May 2023 news story about the department’s Vision Zero Youth Ambassador Program. “We can learn so much from them and I look forward to hearing what they have to say.”¹

In another example, Renee Espiou, Complete Streets Administrator for the city of Honolulu, Hawaii, noted, "I love the statement from our middle school leadership class, 'We don't drive but we still matter. This is our community, and we are committed to making it better,'" when talking about youth action with the city of Honolulu's quick-build projects.²

"Fostering the next generation of civic leaders is vital to ensuring healthy neighborhoods and safe streets in Milwaukee for decades to come," said Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Mayor Tom Barrett in 2021 on recognition for its Safe Routes to School program achievements that included youth engagement.³

Communities discovered through the scan use their work with youth in three main ways: understanding community and youth needs;

providing public education; and making changes to the built environment through quick-build installations. Local governments are engaging youth both as participants and as leaders of needs assessments. Youth input helps planners understand gaps in accessibility, safety, and connectivity, and helps pinpoint specific locations that need attention. Local governments are also valuing young people's insights into cultural trends and digital media, bringing fresh creativity to government communications. Young people were actively involved in making changes to the built environment through their assessments, recommendations, and work helping to install quick-build projects. The following project descriptions provide more details about how youth worked with local governments, often with each group using a combination of the three approaches.

Remaking streets with quick-build designs in Honolulu, HI

Students at Farrington High School mapped out their neighborhoods, identifying locations they felt were unsafe and needed improvements, then worked with city planners and engineers to draft road murals for quick-build designs for curb extensions. These murals were then installed by students with guidance from the city. This project was supported by a transportation planning practice called Street Plans along with the City and County of Honolulu, and the Hawaii State Department of Health.

Similarly, at Stevenson Middle School, the student leadership class launched a Safe Routes to School program on campus through a partnership with the Blue Zones Project, a local wellness initiative. They secured funding for a quick-build safety project in front of the school. The students evaluated conditions around the school, developed an action plan, designed the street murals and curb extensions, and painted the murals. Compared to before the project installation, walking distances dropped by 20-40 percent and exposed time to cross dropped by 55 percent.²



*Stevenson Middle School students helped evaluate conditions, create an action plan, design the project, and contribute to the installation.
Source: City of Honolulu*

Listening to youth through surveys and focus groups in Boston, MA

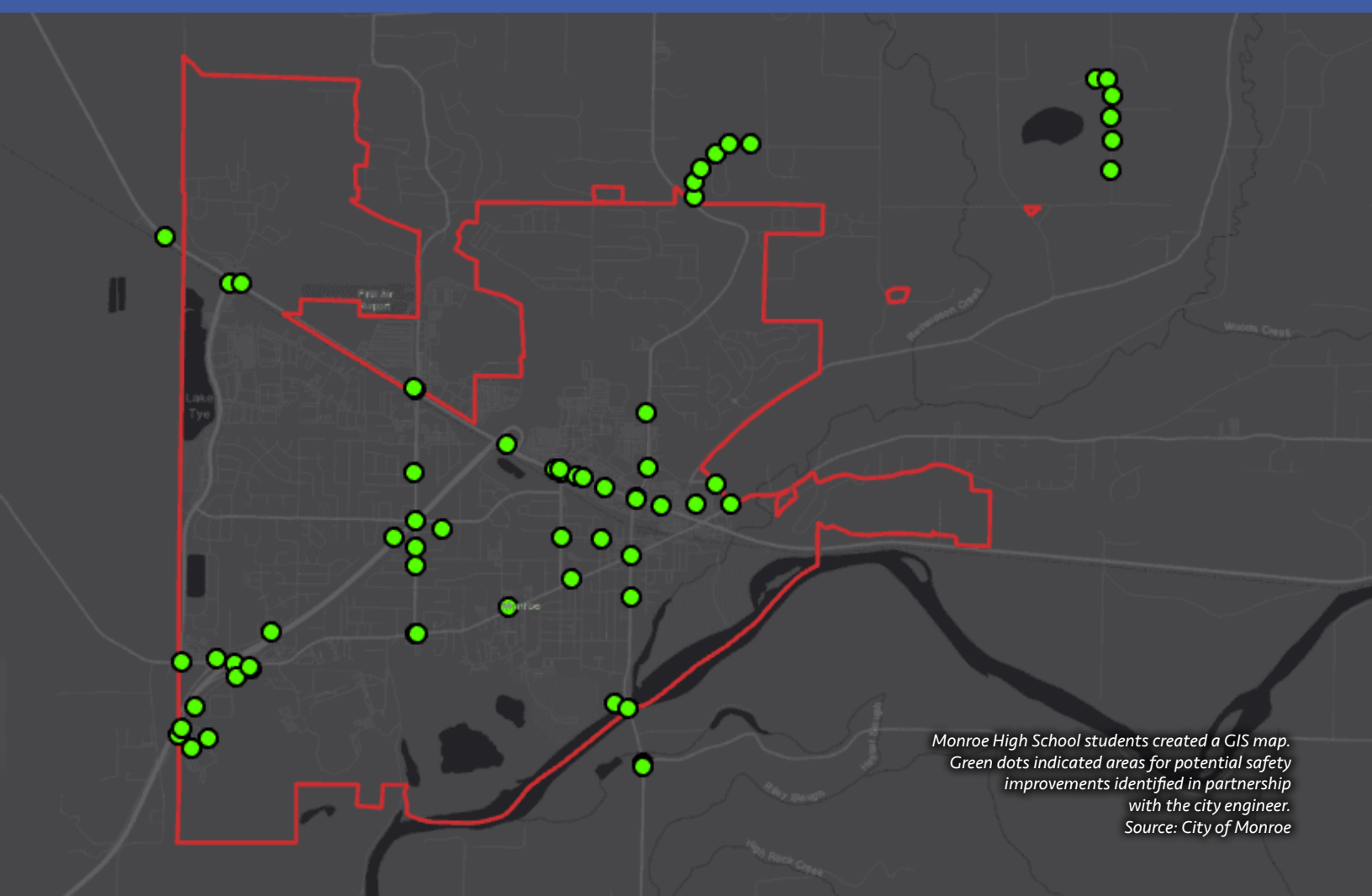
The Boston Youth Transportation Project (BYTP) led by former City Council member Michelle Wu's office explored barriers to transportation faced by Boston youth. The project also addressed their attitudes towards different modes of transportation, while also factoring in other aspects of transportation such as environmental impact, safety, and socioeconomic mobility.⁴

Released in 2018, the BYTP conducted in-person and virtual survey and focus group sessions with a total of 264 youth, ages 12-19. The report provided a list of recommendations for the City of Boston and other partners, from funding allocation and policy changes to youth outreach, employee training, and improved services and communication.⁵

Teaming with students in Monroe, WA to collect information for a Safe Routes to School application

The city of Monroe, Washington, worked with students from the Monroe School District to apply for a Safe Routes to School grant from the state's Department of Transportation. Monroe High School marketing students created a survey and promotional materials to collect feedback on current walking and biking routes and safety

concerns. Also, the high school's engineering class worked with a city engineer to find areas around the city that could benefit from safety improvements and pinned the locations on a new GIS map. The students' GIS map was integrated into the city's GIS system and will be used to prioritize future traffic safety treatments.⁶



Monroe High School students created a GIS map. Green dots indicated areas for potential safety improvements identified in partnership with the city engineer. Source: City of Monroe



2025 Vision Zero Youth
Ambassador Training.
Source: Montgomery County
Department of Transportation

Youth-conceived road safety projects in Montgomery County, VA

The Montgomery County Department of Transportation has organized the Vision Zero Youth Ambassador Program for high school students since 2022. The program teaches local youth about how road design, enforcement, and education are all key components of improving road safety. Students also learn outreach skills to enable them to advocate for road safety in their

communities.⁷ One project from May 2023 was a social media “takeover” of the department’s social media accounts where students managed the road safety messaging for a day.¹ For all projects, youth participants work with county leaders and Department of Transportation staff to implement projects from January to May.⁷

Advocating for traffic calming in Commerce City, CO

The Colorado Department of Transportation and the Governors Highway Safety Association partnered to provide a grant to Adelante Community Development, a local organization in Commerce City, Colorado, focused on serving Spanish-speaking community members, to recruit teens to a Traffic Safety Youth Advisory Board (TSYAB). In a news announcement, Darrell Lingk, director of the Highway Safety Office at the Colorado Department of Transportation, stated, “This approach allows for a more equitable and youth-centered approach to

identifying possible solutions to these traffic safety challenges with the ultimate goal of saving lives.”⁸ Adelante’s work resulted in the participation of eight student ambassadors in 2023. The students chose to focus on advocacy and pedestrian safety after 16-year-old Karalynn Kincaid died in a hit-and-run crash. The group created a project titled “Voz y Vision Valida” (Valid Voice and Vision). Writing letters and presenting to City Council members contributed to the installation of 58 speed tables and humps around schools.⁹



Students paint as part of a quick-build project in the Littlefield Neighborhood of Detroit. Source: City of Detroit

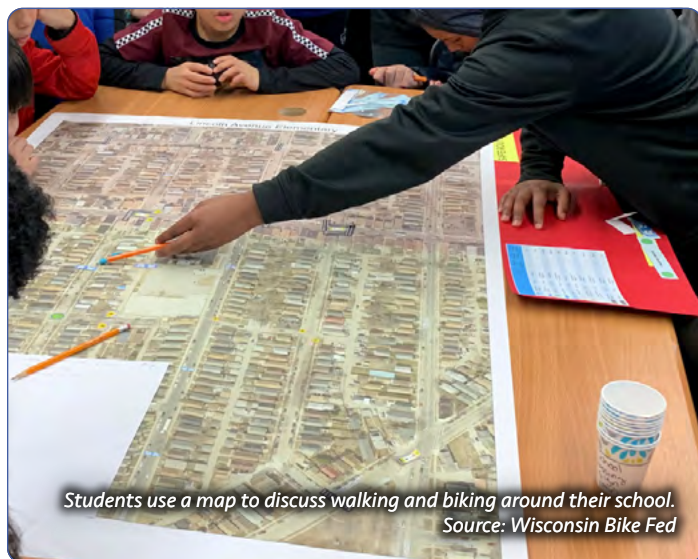
Putting paint to purpose in Detroit, MI

The City of Detroit worked with the Littlefield community to create a quick-build project that would make a school crossing safer by slowing down motorists. Through a grant from the National Center for Safe Routes to School made possible by General Motors, students from the Noble Elementary-Middle School worked with the city of Detroit and a local artist. Students were engaged from the beginning by brainstorming themes and

ideas for artwork, which were then provided to artists from Detroit City Walls, a local civic organization, for inspiration. Students and teachers later joined a panel to select the design that best captured their ideas. Students, teachers, city staff, and community members then came together to paint the mural. This mural will be part of the Joe Louis Greenway, a 30-mile path that passes through a multitude of other neighborhoods.¹⁰

Equipping students with skills to explain the change they want in Milwaukee, WI

The Milwaukee Safe Routes to School program engaged community members to understand their preferences for street changes around eight schools. The city of Milwaukee Department of Public Works held workshops and walk audits to identify infrastructure safety improvements around the schools, which primarily serve low-income and Black or Latinx families.³ The non-profit organization Wisconsin Bike Fed then worked in partnership with these schools to engage the students in mapping areas around their schools they felt needed improvement and wrote essays to present their ideas. The community's ideas determined where \$75,000, earmarked for low-cost improvements, would be spent.¹¹



Students use a map to discuss walking and biking around their school. Source: Wisconsin Bike Fed

MOVING FORWARD

The projects featured here illustrate how communities can find creative ways to engage youth in important ways. These efforts not only provide young people with valuable learning opportunities but can also generate fresh insights for municipal leaders. To successfully implement these initiatives, local governments might consider partnering with external organizations that already engage youth, such as schools, community groups, or non-profit organizations. Such partnerships can provide structure, resources, and expertise,

particularly for municipalities that are new to this approach and may have concerns about “getting it right.” By drawing inspiration from these existing initiatives, local governments can design programs that fit community needs and meaningfully include youth.

This series of resources is an invitation to transportation professionals, city staff, and others, to consider what their communities are currently doing to engage youth, and, more specifically, how youth can contribute to dealing with important transportation issues.



VISION ZERO FOR YOUTH is an initiative of the National Center for Safe Routes to School supported by the FIA Foundation and UNC Highway Safety Research Center.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Collard de Beaufort, A., Pullen-Seufert, N. and Marchetti, L. (2025). *Engaging Youth in Local Government Road Safety Initiatives, How Local Governments Are Engaging Youth: An Opportunity to Connect with Transportation*. National Center for Safe Routes to School.

¹ Herron, P. (2023). *Vision Zero Youth Ambassadors to Take Over Montgomery County Department of Transportation Social Media for 24 Hours on Monday, May 8*. The Mocoshow.

<https://mocoshow.com/2023/05/01/vision-zero-youth-ambassadors-to-take-over-montgomery-county-department-of-transportation-social-media-for-24-hours-on-monday-may-8/>

² Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center. (2023). *Youth-Engaged Design and Quick Build Installation*. Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center. https://www.pedbikeinfo.org/pdf/Webinar_PBIC_080123.pdf

³ National Center for Safe Routes to School. (n.d.). *Milwaukee SRTS Program: Advancing kids' active travel during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Vision Zero for Youth. <https://www.visionzeroforyouth.org/stories/milwaukee-wi-2021/>

⁴ Michelle Mayor for Boston. (2018). *Boston Youth Transportation Project*. <https://www.michelleforboston.com/plans/boston-youth-transportation-project>

⁵ Ko, L. T. (2018). *Boston Youth Transportation Project*. https://assets.ctfassets.net/1hf11j69ure4/76UiX1C67Xwy8cw4K70Nzk/dc63d68a41ff29590d235df2c4e53033/BYPT-Report_final.pdf

⁶ City of Monroe. (n.d.). *Safe Routes to School*. Monroe Washington. <https://www.monroewa.gov/1155/Safe-Routes-to-School>

⁷ Montgomery County Department of Transportation. (2025). *Vision Zero Youth Ambassador Program*. Montgomery County Department of Transportation. <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/DOT-pedsafety/VZYA/>

⁸ Colorado Department of Transportation. (2023). *CDOT Partners with Adelante Community Development to Provide Grant for Safe Youth Mobility*. Colorado DOT. <https://www.codot.gov/safety/shift-into-safe-news/2023/march/cdot-partners-with-adelante-community-development-to-provide-grant-for-safe-youth-mobility>

⁹ Governors Highway Safety Association. (2024, May 9). *Youth Active Transportation Safety Grant Results: Colorado*. Governors Highway Safety Association. <https://www.ghsa.org/resource-hub/youth-active-transportation-safety-grant-results-colorado>

¹⁰ McCargar, E., Jadun, A., Mutahr, I., Palcher-Silliman, J., & Pullen-Seufert, N. (2024). *Detroit Creates Connections at a Crossing*. Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center. https://www.pedbikeinfo.org/cms/downloads/PBIC_DetroitCreatingConnections.pdf

¹¹ Meyer, M., Pullen-Seufert, N., & Anderson, M. (2021). Supporting Kids' Active Travel During the Pandemic: Milwaukee SRTS Program. *Journal of Healthy Eating and Active Living*, 1(4), 241–246. <https://doi.org/10.51250/jheal.v1i4.23>