



Decatur Youth Council. Source: City of Decatur.

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

a three-part series

Youth boards that report to local government

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.

Youth boards established by cities, counties, and other local governments provide unique perspectives into issues communities and their youth care about. Road safety and transportation are among those issues. These youth-only groups also provide opportunities for civic engagement, leadership skill building, and professional development.

To understand the characteristics of youth boards (sometimes called youth councils) and their involvement with transportation issues, we used a combination of interviews with local government staff and a review of 30 websites describing youth advisory boards.

CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUTH BOARDS

Youth advisory boards typically consist of approximately 10 to 30 young people. There is no single set structure for these boards; the composition and operations of the councils are decided locally.

Of the youth groups we reviewed, members represent a range of lived experiences and typically can relate personally to the issues addressed by the group. Some common considerations for membership included academic requirements, age and grade levels, and leadership and service experience.

Typically, youth members who devote substantial time to the boards are compensated; forms of compensation include stipends, school credit, or service hours.

Having an organized, thoughtful adult advisor is critical. Meredith Roark, the liaison for the Decatur Youth Council (DYC) in Decatur, Georgia, summed it up, “An important characteristic to do the job well is to enjoy being around young people and learning from them. You also have to know your stuff in regard to the city organization but be willing to show you don’t know everything. You also need to be a good listener while at the same time be empathetic when offering course corrections should you overhear inaccurate information.”

Decatur Youth Council: Part of the city’s history of involving youth

The City of Decatur, Georgia, has a history of involving youth and is the third city in the US to be designated as a UNICEF Child Friendly City.² The creation of a youth board was a priority in the city’s 2010 strategic plan. Decatur now has two youth-only bodies: the DYC and the Child Friendly Cities Initiative Teen Leadership Team. Some of the City’s boards and commissions also include youth members; for example, the city’s school board also has a student board member.

The DYC is a city-sponsored, community-based leadership program for high school students who live within the City of Decatur and attend public, private, and home-based schools. Council members serve one-year terms, meet monthly during the school year, provide guidance to the city manager’s office on areas of interest impacting the youth community. At the conclusion of each year, the DYC presents its work to the city commission.

When the DYC was formed in 2017, the student members decided to focus their efforts on the environment and walkability. DYC members are invited to participate in public meetings for the city’s master planning processes and often have separate sessions with consultants on topics such as transportation planning, recreation center design, and affordable housing. A portion of each monthly meeting is devoted to meeting city staff members from various departments to learn about initiatives, ask questions, and give feedback.

The four youth boards featured here all have a focus on transportation issues and report to local government. The DYC and the Lane Youth Transportation Advisory Council in Lane County, Oregon, focus on a range of transportation issues. In southern California the Los Angeles Metro Youth Council and the Orange County Transit Authority deal specifically with public transportation. (The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency Youth Transportation Advisory Board is another impressive example that was highlighted in a previous resource, *Engaging Youth to Advance Safer Streets for All*.¹)



Decatur Youth Council. Source: City of Decatur.

The City Chief of Staff Meredith Roark is the liaison with the youth board. When reflecting on successes with having youth involved, she noted “A few years ago the City received a grant to build a playground facility at Decatur Legacy Park. While our Parks & Recreation staff are amazing at their jobs and are in the know about a lot of things, we took the time to ask elementary students about their desires for the equipment to be included. They shared the playground needed elements that all kids could use no matter age or ability. The resulting build out includes ADA accessible and inclusive equipment and has been in constant use since it opened in 2022. We may have gotten here on our own as adults, but it was better and quicker with the input from our students.”

Lane Youth Transportation Advisory Council: Creating space for the youth voice

The Lane Youth Transportation Advisory Council (LYTAC) in Lane County, Oregon, is comprised of youth ages 13 to 19 working to support better mobility for people of all ages. LYTAC receives support from local SRTS coordinators, regional planners and representatives of the local transit agency. These supporters embrace a mindset of being open to possibilities. "It's vital for decision makers to hear and elevate the youth voice. Their ideas, vision, and concerns should hold weight as we shape our community's future. Working with young people has proven to be filled with hope, it has also been made clear that we have a responsibility to ensure they have a seat at the table," says Rural Lane County Safe Routes to School Program Coordinator Megan Shull.

The council was formed to give youth a voice in transportation issues in the region. The group provides feedback on transportation plans and projects, has written letters of support, and serves in an advisory role to the Metropolitan Planning Organization. Student projects include walk audits and mapping, quick-build projects, and family and youth bike maintenance events. Members receive a \$100/month stipend.

The youth council has three subcommittees shaped by council member interests:

1. The communications subcommittee uses events, websites, and flyers to engage the community.
2. The quick-build subcommittee conducts quick-build projects in partnership with Connected Lane County a local youth organization which strives to improve outcomes for underserved youth. These quick-build projects are truly "pop up" in that they are meant to be in place for a day or two to spur interest and dialogue around potential changes. The council used this experience to create quick-build kits with a focus on bike, walk, and transit.
3. The walk/bike/transit subcommittee is considering transit training for youth to complement the free transit passes available to all K-12 students in Lane County.

"LYTAC helps build the foundation for youth engagement in transportation programming and planning in our region. Youth and planning staff collaborate on projects that result in more equitable implementation. We've made progress bringing youth to the table and we are ready to take the next steps towards a shared leadership model of youth engagement," says Ellen Currier, GIS Program Manager at Lane Council of Governments.



The Lane Youth Transportation Advisory Council. Source: Lane Council of Governments



Los Angeles Metro Youth Council. Source: Metro.

Los Angeles Metro Youth Council: Helping shape public transportation in the country's most populated county

The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, known as Metro, plans and operates funding for most of the public transportation system in Los Angeles County, California, the most populated county in the United States. The Metro Youth Council was created to develop the capacity of young people to engage and participate in Metro's projects, programs, and initiatives. The council is made up of 27 members ages 14 to 17 who serve one-year terms, attend monthly meetings, participate in Metro events, and provide their perspective on various projects and programs.

The Metro Youth Council has had the opportunity to shape various Metro programs and initiatives. For example, it started development of the Youth Destination Digital Guide, provided feedback that resulted in improvement to the 2023 Customer Experience Plan and Survey, the Transit Watch App, and provided a youth perspective on the Metro Micro fare proposal (an on-demand rideshare service). The Council also has submitted letters of

support to the Metro Board for the continuation of GoPass, which allows students at participating schools to ride the Metro for free.

The Youth Council has five main objectives:

- Listen to young people and future riders to understand their concerns and hopes.
- Learn about the issues Metro may face and hear new ideas and perspectives.
- Engage youth as future community leaders.
- Empower youth to share their voices.
- Create life-long ridership.³

Stephanie Wiggins, CEO of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, sums it up best: "I'm amazed and inspired by the dedication and thoughtful feedback of the young people who are part of Metro's Youth Council. They have their eyes on the future and are committed to helping us make transportation better now and in the years to come."⁴

Orange County Transportation Authority Teen Council: Providing insight into public transportation

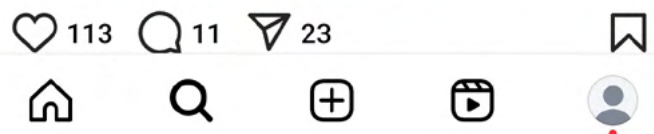
The Orange County Transit Authority in Orange County, California, provides bus and rail transit, rideshare, environmental programs, active transportation, express lanes, and freeways to support travel in the county.⁵ OCTA established a Youth Council in 2015 to provide feedback and suggestions to enhance projects and programs and to encourage more efficient use of public transportation. Young members of the community ages 13 to 18 provide valuable insight into transportation programs that could most benefit the public.

The OCTA Teen Council meets every other month during the regular school year to discuss land use, environmental equity and impact, transportation planning, funding, legislation, marketing, ridesharing, and use of all transit modes, including active transportation such as walking and bicycling. In addition to providing valuable insight to county officials, the youth are improving their understanding of transportation issues, strengthening their leadership skills, and participating in community service.

The Youth Council has six main goals:

- Share insights on emerging trends.
- Build leadership and teamwork skills.
- Enhance critical thinking and communications skills.
- Engage in discussions, exchange ideas, and take part in projects.
- Enhance their professional development and leadership skills.
- Participate in community service.

In 2023, Gene Hernandez, then Chair of the OCTA Board of Directors and former mayor of the Orange County city Yorba Linda, praised the value of youth involvement: “The work of the Teen Council is so important, both for the young people



Members of the OCTA Teen Council, pictured above, created an Instagram video to promote the free youth pass by riding to various destinations around the county. Source: [Instagram.com/@RideOCBus](https://www.instagram.com/@RideOCBus)

who are able to get valuable insights about OCTA’s transportation programs and services and for us to get their perspectives.” He added, “It’s great to see so many teens investing time and energy to help improve Orange County’s transportation network.”⁶

MOVING FORWARD

As described in our resource, *Engaging Youth to Advance Safer Streets for All*, “youth in high school and early adulthood across the country have a long track record of caring about road safety and are having an impact on safe transportation in their communities. City officials cite how important the diversity and different perspective youth provide can be, how they can be closer to the topic being discussed.”

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, whether a youth board is feasible and, more specifically, how youth can contribute to dealing with important transportation issues.

MORE INFORMATION

Decatur Youth Council

<https://www.decaturga.com/bc-dyc>

Lane Youth Transportation Advisory Council

<https://www.lcog.org/thempo/page/lane-youth-transportation-advisory-council>

Metro Youth Council

<https://www.metro.net/about/youth-council/>

Orange County Transportation Authority Teen Council

<https://www.octa.net/getting-around/bus/oc-bus/how-to-ride/youth-programs/octa-teen-council/>



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- ¹ Collard de Beaufort, A., Marchetti, L., Smith, J., & Pullen-Seufert, N. (2023). *Engaging Youth to Advance Safer Streets for All: Guide and Inspiration for Partnership Between Youth and Adults*. National Center for Safe Routes to School.
- ² UNICEF USA. (n.d.). *Become a Child Friendly City*. <https://www.unicefusa.org/what-unicef-does/respect-children/child-friendly-cities/become-child-friendly-city>
- ³ Lane Council of Governments. (n.d.). *Lane Youth Transportation Advisory Council*. <https://www.lcog.org/thempo/page/lane-youth-transportation-advisory-council>
- ⁴ Metro. (2023). *Metro Wants Input from LA County Youth to Improve its Transit Experience*. <https://lbt-preprod.la-metro-web.net/about/metro-wants-input-from-la-county-youth-to-improve-its-transit-experience/>
- ⁵ OCTA. (n.d.). *Keep Orange County Moving Safely*. www.octa.net
- ⁶ OCTA. (2023). *OCTA Teens Step Up to Help Shape O.C. Transportation Future*. <https://www.octa.net/news/news-releases/octa-teens-step-up-to-help-shape-o-c-transportation-future/>