



THE POWER OF YOUTH IN GOVERNMENT



YOUTH ADVISORY COUNCILS HELP MAKE CITIES STRONGER, DEVELOP NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

BY MELODY FINNEMORE

Mt. Angel is the latest in a growing list of Oregon cities benefiting from young members of its community getting involved in city government. The city recently recruited a group of high school students to participate in its inaugural Youth Advisory Council (YAC), a program initiated by its student councilor, Abby Frey, for her senior project.

City leaders had previously learned about the positive impacts of YACs in other communities, but weren't sure if Mt. Angel (pop. 3,375) could sustain one, and school and after-school requirements sometimes make student involvement a challenge, said City Manager Amber Mathiesen.

Instead, the city created a student councilor position that allows a high school senior to serve on the Mt. Angel City Council for one year and, if the student attends all of the council's meetings and completes other requirements of the position, they receive a \$500 scholarship. Frey, who serves on her school's student council, knew she would gain invaluable experience as a member of the City Council.

"I have learned that the majority of things that get done in town take a lot of work and get little recognition. Our council are all volunteers who do not get paid to be there and put a lot of work into it anyway," she said. "I have also gained many skills, including public speaking and leadership. Our city councilors are great leaders and I have learned a lot from them."



Inspired by the Oregon Youth Summit, Mt. Angel Student Councilor Abby Frey (at right) worked with city leaders to recruit high school students for its inaugural Youth Advisory Council.



As Frey prepares to graduate and go on to college, Mathiesen said she has enjoyed seeing how her leadership experience impacted her.

"At first she was really shy and hesitant to speak in public meetings, and then after the Oregon Youth Summit (in February) she came back and was really excited about all of these ideas," she said, noting Frey worked with Police Chief Mark Daniel to organize a local drug take-back day event on April 28 that collected 97 pounds of unwanted prescription drugs. The event will now be held semi-annually.

As Mt. Angel launches its YAC, other cities with well-established programs continue to grow and hone the ways students can be involved in making their communities better for young people and adults alike.

Beaverton Program Nears 20th Year

In 2000, while serving as mayor of Beaverton, Rob Drake helped establish the Mayor's Youth Advisory Board (MYAB), creating a more formal service option for the group of high school students who regularly volunteered to do community service. The MYAB gained further traction when members of the group began attending the annual U.S. Conference of Mayors in Washington, D.C.

"I think that's been a great incentive to get the students involved and it's a great launching pad from an educational perspective because they come back excited and full of ideas," said Emily Van Vleet, outreach specialist with Beaverton's Neighborhood & Public Involvement Program. "When we go to Washington, D.C., we take six students and, for many of them, it's their first time in

(continued on page 22)



The Mayor's Youth Advisory Board (MYAB) in Beaverton, established in 2000, involves 20 students from 16 schools each year. Among other civic engagement projects, MYAB members have provided nearly 1,000 hours of community service in the last year alone.

Washington, D.C., and sometimes it's even their first time on a plane."

Today there are 20 students serving on the MYAB, and the program involves 16 schools, including the city's homeschooling program and the Portland Community College Early College High School program. The students range from freshmen to juniors and are selected through an essay contest and interviews.

In addition to educating the general public about issues affecting youth through public forums and publications, the MYAB recommends solutions to specific problems that impact young people and provides comments to elected officials and decision-makers about public issues, projects and proposals that affect themselves and their peers.

Van Vleet said MYAB members have provided nearly 1,000 hours of community service in the last year alone, ranging from street cleanups and letting residents know about upcoming events to serving dinners at HomePlate, a nonprofit that supports young people experiencing homelessness.

"They are also able to provide a perspective that is missing because a lot of our volunteers tend to be older," she said.

Van Vleet said the Oregon Youth Summit is a signature event for the MYAB members, giving them a chance to learn about different careers from guest speakers and interact with government leaders

from other schools. In addition, MYAB members often have an opportunity to meet with Oregon's elected officials, and recently talked with Sen. Jeff Merkley about gun violence and how it impacts young people.

"That's something they don't get through the schools," Van Vleet said.

Cornelius Introduces Students to City, State Government

Drake, who now serves as Cornelius city manager, has worked to establish a local YAC in his current city, and said the first group of 10 participants, selected this spring, will begin meeting in the fall when the new school year starts. Most of the applicants were eighth graders who will be freshmen in the fall, and a couple of older students who will graduate next year. Drake said the ordinance allows up to 20 participants, and the city's goal is to have a more even mix of ages as the YAC evolves. The students attend Glencoe High School and Forest Grove High School.

"These are what I call do-er kids who are similar to the kids we had in Beaverton. They accomplish a lot, they are very responsible and they are moving ahead to college. They are a joy to have around and are very nice kids," he said.

Drake said the program is mutually beneficial in that it exposes students to city government and they learn more

about state government as well. Drake and City Recorder Debby Roth drove the YAC members to Salem, where they met with their local legislator, Representative Susan McLain (D-Hillsboro).

"None of them had been to the Capitol," Drake said before recalling his first visit to the building as a college student in the late 1970s and how the experience impacted him. "I think for them, too, it gets the city's message out in the community more. They convey that message and all 10 of them have been regular participants in volunteering at city events."

The YAC students meet their schools' community service requirement by helping out during the city's annual Thanksgiving dinner, holiday tree lighting, a cleanup event each May and Cornelius' recent anniversary party.

"It's nice having them there, and I think they are learning about organizational skills and the people they live with in the community. I think they also learn about when things work and when they don't work as well as you would have liked them to," Drake said.

Redmond Students Serve on All City Committees, Commissions

Thanks to young people in Redmond, the local airport has an updated and expanded children's play area, and people feel safer in parks where previously drug



Members of the Redmond Youth Partnership Advisory Committee (left) sit on each of the city's 10 committees and commissions, giving them a voice on a variety of issues that impact young people. Students, including Tualatin's Youth Advisory Council at right, also learn about leadership development, project management, community service, public speaking and civic engagement.

activity kept them away, said Mayor George Endicott.

The city established the Redmond Youth Partnership in 1996 that was a task force comprised of both young people and adults. In 2013, the city's Parks and Recreation department took over the program and renamed it the Redmond Youth Partnership Advisory Committee (RYPAC) while retaining its similar mission of youth voice and empowerment.

Endicott said a student sits on each of the city's 10 committees and commissions. As openings come up on the RYPAC, he advertises at the two local high schools, the charter school and with the body that governs homeschooling in the region. The students' participation on the committees and commissions gives them a voice on a variety of issues.

"Those kinds of things work both ways because they need to say it and we need to hear it. They benefit because they have input in the system and we benefit from that input," he said.

As an example, a conversation about transportation could include a student

perspective about Safe Routes to Schools. One young woman who served on the budget committee reminded city leaders about the importance of funding parks and school resource officers. Redmond reinstated the use of community service officers to regularly patrol the parks and discourage illicit activity.

Endicott said the students recently participated in the "If I Were Mayor" contest, a statewide program the Oregon Mayors Association started, and did presentations on what they would like to accomplish if they were wearing Endicott's hat.

"I love having the kids involved and the community benefits tremendously," he said.

Tualatin Youth Engage in Community Service, Gain Skills to Last a Lifetime

Tualatin city leaders note that having an active YAC demonstrates a city's commitment to its youth in several ways, including providing free or low-cost activities and events for teens. It encourages the development and engagement

(continued on page 24)

“ By the time they graduate they are comfortable presenting at city council meetings, leading subcommittees, researching best practices for programming, and marketing YAC events. I love hearing from alumni, and I do remember one former YAC member expressing regret that there is nothing like the YAC in college! ”

JULIE LUDEMANN
RECREATION SUPERVISOR FOR
TUALATIN'S COMMUNITY SERVICES
DEPARTMENT



Tualatin's Youth Advisory Council initiated Project F.R.I.E.N.D.S, a daylong, anti-bullying workshop for the city's fifth graders (left), and Hillsboro's student leaders travel to Washington, D.C., to discuss youth-related policy suggestions with elected officials.



of an active and informed citizenry, said Julie Ludemann, recreation supervisor for Tualatin's Community Services department.

She added that the YAC gives students opportunities for leadership development, project management, community service, public speaking and civic engagement. There is plenty of fun involved as well. YAC members get to plan and run a haunted house and serve as volunteers for some of the city's marquis events, such as the West Coast Giant Pumpkin Regatta and the Blender Dash Fun Run.

"One of my favorite things about being the staff liaison to the YAC is watching the youth grow and develop as leaders," Ludemann said. "Many of our members begin as eighth or ninth graders, and by the time they graduate they are comfortable presenting at city council meetings, leading subcommittees, researching best practices for programming, and marketing YAC events. I love hearing from alumni, and I do remember one former YAC member expressing regret that there is nothing like the YAC in college!"

The Tualatin YAC's Project F.R.I.E.N.D.S. workshop was featured in the National League of Cities' publication "Municipal Leadership for Children and Families in Small and Mid-Sized Cities." Project F.R.I.E.N.D.S. is a

daylong, anti-bullying workshop for the city's fifth graders that is designed and led by YAC members and is supported in part by the Washington County Commission on Children and Families Youth Summit grant.

Hillsboro Offers Internships, Fellowships for Students, Recent Graduates

Hillsboro city leaders created a job position specifically to connect youth with local government and help develop the next generation of leaders in public service. That position was filled four years ago by Kristi Wilson, youth development coordinator, who works with about 30 students from several schools within the Hillsboro School District through the city's YAC.

Nearly all of Hillsboro's boards and committees, including its 2035 Plan Committee and Sustainability Task Force, have a youth representative, and city councilors attend YAC meetings when possible. Students travel to Washington, D.C., and have a chance to discuss youth-related policy suggestions with elected officials. The city collaborates with the Hillsboro School District, the Hillsboro Chamber of Commerce and local colleges, including Portland Community College's Future Connect program, to offer a comprehensive and robust youth development program.

In addition, the program provides about 30 internships for students ranging from those in high school to those earning master's degrees. The paid summer position gives them the chance to learn about different careers in public service and help determine what type of work they might be interested in doing. The summer internships also involve professional development courses such as public speaking and resumé writing, as well as tours of the city's various departments and operations.

"Whether it's working at an event side-by-side with a police officer or digging in to help on a habitat restoration project, our interns do a whole lot more than file and make coffee," the city notes on its website.

Hillsboro also recently launched a fellowship program that is designed for graduates of a master's program in public administration, public policy, public affairs or a related field. Selected fellows are placed in a year-long, full-time, local government position and rotational assignments in various city departments.

Happy Valley Encourages Youth to Envision Their Future, Initiate Improvements

Happy Valley Mayor Lori Chavez-DeRemer said she and other city leaders have one charge for young people: Envision what they want their city to look like in



Happy Valley's 11-member Youth Advisory Council traveled to Washington, D.C., earlier this year (left), and they host an annual town hall that draws at least 100 participants.

“We want to be a community that listens to its young people. They are going to be voting in a few years, so we want to make sure they are informed and are informing all of their friends who are 18 years old. They are great advocates for the city.”

STEVE CAMPBELL
HAPPY VALLEY COMMUNITY
SERVICES DIRECTOR

the future and make it happen for their future selves and their families.

The city's 11-member YAC hosts an annual town hall that easily draws 100 participants. Last February, it organized an inaugural youth summit in Salem that drew about 100 YAC members from throughout the state. They spent

the morning at Willamette University, where they shared ideas, learned from each other and listened to a panel of state agency directors. Then, they met with legislators at the Capitol. In addition, the YAC recently hosted a drug take-back event that collected nearly 400 pounds of drugs.

“The benefit to the kids is they get experience in municipal government, listening to other viewpoints that are different from their own and leadership training,” Chavez-DeRemer said. “I think it helps them look at a problem from a 30,000-foot level and figure out how to solve it.”

She described some projects YAC members have initiated, including a free tutoring program that pairs high school students with younger students who need a little extra help with classwork. “The young woman who started it is now going to go off to college but that program is going to stay, so she's created a legacy already at 18 years old,” Chavez-DeRemer said.

Happy Valley Community Services Director Steve Campbell noted that many YAC members begin as freshmen and serve through their senior year, and

said their maturity grows exponentially during those four years.

During the annual town hall, no adults are invited save for a facilitator, and the “punch bowl” is an opportunity for students to write anonymous comments about the challenges they face. The notes, which raise issues ranging from peer pressure and drug and alcohol abuse to how to cope when parents are fighting, are presented to the City Council so its members can be aware of the challenges and explore ways to address them.

“We've got this dynamic group of youngsters who are providing a voice for the teens in our community,” Campbell said. “We want to be a community that listens to its young people. They are going to be voting in a few years, so we want to make sure they are informed and are informing all of their friends who are 18 years old. They are great advocates for the city.”

Ms. Finnemore is a Portland-area freelance writer. Contact her at precisionpdx@comcast.net. ■