

Youth involvement important in community development

By Amy Whitehead

Involving youth in local community development efforts is something elected officials, nonprofits, and community leaders would like to promote, but finding substantive ways to include youth in the conversation and engage them in meaningful ways can be challenging. However, it's a challenge worth taking on, because one of the priorities of local leadership should be to create the kind of community where young people want to live, work, and play. The decisions that are made at the local level will have long-term impacts on the community that the next generation inherits, so they should be part of shaping that future.

Here are some ways that Arkansas communities have engaged youth in local development efforts.

Kick Start Lonoke is a community-based planning effort that has had significant community involvement. Dr. Suzanne Bailey, Superintendent of the Lonoke School District, always brings a high school student with her to the planning meetings. This is an easy way to expose youth to the local decision-making process and gives an opportunity for input. Additionally, Kick Start Lonoke has significant involvement and leadership from millennials and next-generation leaders that have the energy, ideas, and technology skills to organize a grassroots effort.

In Heber Springs, the high school EAST program created a YouTube channel for the Chamber of Commerce and helped create a promotional video highlighting tourism opportunities in the area.

The Park Hill Business and Merchants Association, from North Little Rock, participated in a Think-a-Thon hosted by the University of Central Arkansas (UCA). The Think-a-Thon was an intense weekend of brainstorming and problem solving conducted by an interdisciplinary team of UCA students that were tasked with looking at the design and marketing challenges of Park Hill, and offering solutions. Following the success of the

Think-a-Thon, the Park Hill Business and Merchants Association received follow-up assistance from a UCA graphic design class. Led by Professor Li Zing, the class' work resulted in the creation of several promotional videos that can be used by the association on their website and through other channels.

In an effort to equip UCA students with an understanding of community and economic development, graduate students recently participated in an intensive one-day training on the basics of community development in Arkansas. By helping these graduate students understand the current challenges and opportunities to development in Arkansas, the next generation of leaders and researchers are being prepped to tackle some of the most stubborn problems being faced at the local and regional level.

There are many other ways that youth and young leaders are being engaged at the local level. Need some ideas on how to get started?

- Partner with your local university to determine if students or faculty are available to assist with community projects or research.
- Contact your local public school system to see if student organizations or the EAST program can assist with a service project.
- Actively recruit youth and millennials to serve on boards and other community initiatives.

For more guidance on how your community can engage youth, contact UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development at (501) 852-2930 or amyw@uca.edu.



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