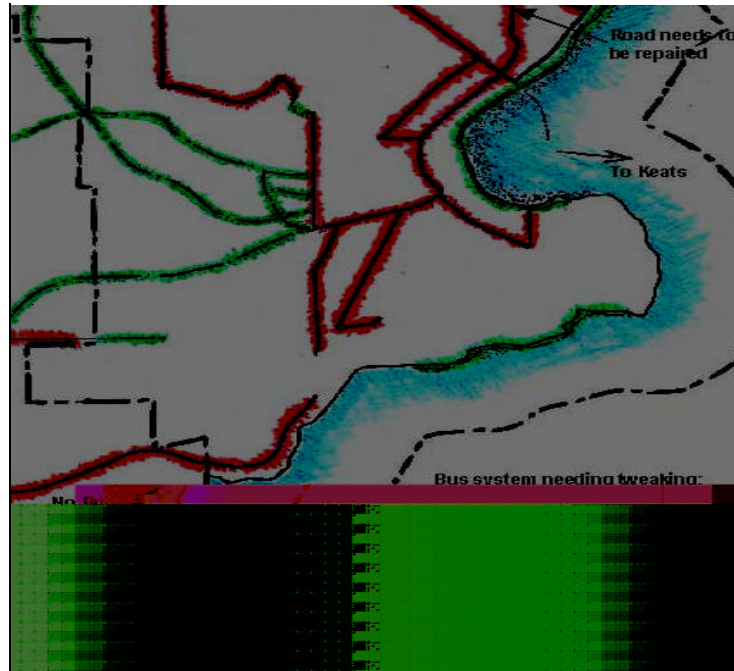


KIDS IN SPACE



talking with young people about planning and design in Gibsons

I. INTRODUCTION

Planners have ethical and professional responsibilities to address the needs of diverse citizens in a variety of contexts. Whereas certain groups and individuals in society are relatively well served by conventional methods of service delivery, governance and participation, others are more difficult to reach. Among the latter, young people represent a significant sector of the population that is often unwilling or unable to develop an effective voice in the decision-making processes that affect the communities where they live, learn, work and play. The result, in rural as well as urban areas, can be a dearth of services and facilities designed to meet the needs of children and youth. Where such facilities do exist, young people are seldom involved in the planning and design processes that precede construction or implementation. At worst, the consequences can be empty buildings, disenfranchised citizens, property damage, and a range of other problems often attributed to teenagers or youth. On the other hand, communities have exciting opportunities to recognise the potential benefits of young people's active and authentic participation in shaping the public realm. Positive examples of such opportunities are myriad; scholars and community planners have documented many cases that provide constructive lessons for the future. From schoolyard gardening projects to citywide youth planning initiatives, the benefits - and challenges - of linking young people and planning are clear. This paper seeks to build on existing theory and practice to examine the possibilities for involving youth in planning in the Town of Gibsons, British Columbia.

The rationale for an exploration of youth participation in community planning and design has two basic components. First, the process of developing community visions for Gibsons during a six-week studio with graduate students in Planning, Architecture and Landscape Architecture raised questions about the local and outside voices that informed the projects. Transportation and time constraints affected the extent to which residents of Gibsons could contribute to the designs. In many ways, limited interaction with locals was justified in the sense that the class truly did bring "fresh eyes" to the town. On the other hand, the valuable local input that was elicited came mostly from the adult world of officials, decision-makers and property owners. With the major design projects complete, an opportunity existed to uncover a different set of "fresh eyes", whose perspectives, in their creativity and originality, might rival those of the Vancouver-based graduate students. Certainly the technical skills of younger people are unlikely to be as advanced as those of the graduate students, but their ideas, passion and local knowledge represent a significant

resource in the effort to produce innovative proposals. As such, this study aims to test the assumption of young people's potential for contributing to community visions.

A second and more personal reason for the project relates to my own inclusion in the ambiguous category of "youth". David Woollcombe suggests that, "One cannot make any kind of youth policy until one has a workable definition of what "youth" is: the best definition is to allow the phrase "young people" to refer to all people under 25. "Youth" should be agreed to be all young people aged 15-25". Thus, at the time of this writing, Mr. Woollcombe's definition puts me in the category of youth. Furthermore, having spent the majority of my living years as a student, I have the unsettling sense that my claim to citizenship is less than complete. I find myself uneasily located in a liminal stage where my rights and responsibilities are yet to be fully realised and my ownership of the public sphere is tenuous. In this sense, I am still stuck between youth and adulthood, in an interesting position to ask questions about the potential for young people's participation in the profession for which I am training.

Michael Dove asserts that the direction of academic inquiry is a critical component in efforts to make useful contributions in practice. "The key to conserving resources and empowering local communities is not so much coming up with the right answers as asking the right questions--or problematising the right issues--in the first place" (Dove 2000). Considering current indications of environmental change in global and local contexts, and the associated trend in community planning to focus on social, economic and ecological sustainability, Dove's assertion is relevant to the issue of youth participation in Gibsons. Nevertheless, it is unreasonable to expect that a sudden transition towards the inclusion of young people in local decisions will result from a rigorous intellectual search for "the right questions". Thus, this paper asks why and how youth participation in Gibsons might be undertaken, and outlines the preliminary results of an effort to initiate a tangible local project.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of the relationship between planners and the diverse individuals and groups whom they purport to serve. To understand some of the theoretical justifications for making greater efforts to involve young people in planning, I introduce relevant literature from a variety of academic and practising planners. The treatment is necessarily cursory, but attempts to highlight key themes, both established and emerging, that contribute to a more complete understanding of why and how young people can help to shape their communities. I then describe the process and results of my very preliminary efforts to engage a small group of high school students in a nebulous but authentic planning project in Gibsons. Finally, I reflect upon the relationship between theories of youth participation and the Gibsons experience, and provide a number of recommendations for future action.

II. PLANNERS WORKING FOR CHANGE

Public-sector planners, especially in municipalities, are often characterised, rather pejoratively, as development control workers. From this view, private sector developers or quasi-government corporations take the lead in urban design, social policy, economic growth and even political decisions. Planners then respond with zoning by-laws, permits and public hearings, to ensure that the interests of the community are not compromised. Beyond this limited technical role, however, planners have the capacity to address broader questions of public interest and respond to abstract goals of justice and sustainability in practical, everyday situations. Indeed, John Forester argues that,

To be rational in practice, planners must be able to...anticipate and reshape relations of power and powerlessness. Only if the practical context of power relations, conflicting wants and interest, and political economic structures are assessed clearly can planners respond to real needs and problems in anything approaching an actually rational, if not textbook-like, way (Forester 1989: 7).

Forester's understanding of planning includes, but certainly goes beyond, a limited definition of planners as development control workers. The issue of youth participation in Gibsons presents an example of the potential to examine power relations and seeks ways to promote equitable decisions. Moreover, it emphasises the need to propose a workable response to the kind of abstract questions suggested above. Even more than other groups in the community, young people demand and deserve transparent forms of communication that eschew the often indecipherable language and theoretical solutions associated with academic writing on social, political and economic transformations in society.

Nevertheless, cultural theorists have devised insightful and sometimes complex theories of young people's marginalisation in society. Youth cultures, it is argued, have a history of separation from the adult world around them. While children remain in a state of innocence and purity and adults are given control and responsibility, adolescents are valued only in the sense of becoming adult, not as citizens in their own right (Hersch 1998; Oldenburg 1989; Valentine et al 1998). Especially in (post) industrial societies, middle class education has prolonged this transition period without extending its legitimacy beyond a limited definition of teenagers - and even twenty-somethings - as potential adults (Valentine et al 1998). Researchers have elaborated the consequences of youth marginalisation through theories of hegemony and resistance to describe and sometimes justify the traditional view of youth as rebellious alienated 'others' attempting to subvert the control of adults (Valentine et al 1998). Despite their

explanatory power such theories fail to unravel the problematic contexts that they elucidate. Indeed, “youth-centred definitions of their lives remain largely absent. Young people have not been enfranchised by the research conducted on their lives” (Valentine et al 1998: 30)¹.

Power relations lie at the heart of political economy approaches to a broad range of topics including, for example, social movements, environmental change, militarisation, gender relations and racism. In their work, planners confront all of these issues and more; however, abstract theories of social structure and transformative actions are insufficient to the practical circumstances of the planning profession or the everyday experiences of young people. Such theories fail to explain the details of personality and place, or suggest appropriate solutions in specific situations. Thus, planners must bring their recognition of power relations in line with the opportunities and constraints of the contexts in which they work. Whereas these contexts are likely to be rife with the power and powerlessness described by Forester, there are possibilities for levelling the playing field, responding to the needs of diverse constituencies and, most importantly, building on the strengths of individuals and groups of citizens in the community. In this sense, and without entering the politicised realm of complex equity and social justice dilemmas, planners can move beyond development control to become partners for positive change in a variety of settings.

The young people who I have been privileged to meet in Gibsons do not need social movements theories to grant them a voice in the community. They need to be included in real decision-making processes that respect their individual and collective talents and enthusiasm. Kids can be troublemakers. But the energy and creativity that leads them to adopt unconventional behaviour is precisely the kind of resource that communities need as they struggle to plan for the future in innovate ways. Besides, making trouble can be fun. And, whenever possible, planning and design should be fun and productive for all citizens, not just professionals.

III. THINKING ABOUT PARTICIPATION

In an influential guide to community development, Kretzman and McKnight (1993) distinguish two paths commonly available to community leaders and planners. The first focuses on “needs, deficiencies and problems” and responds with programs and services designed to address these

¹ For an interesting example of a project that involved youth in participatory action research on a topic that directly affects them, see Kelly's (1993) study of high school drop outs

difficulties. An alternative path begins with a community's "assets, skills and capacities," and seeks to build on these strengths by allowing individuals and groups to develop according to their own unique set of abilities and gifts. Thus, rather than identifying negativity and turning troubled neighbourhoods into clients for professional service delivery, effective community building asks how local development can be "asset-based, internally focused and relationship driven" (Kretzman & McKnight 1993: 15). Gibsons is not the kind of "troubled neighbourhood" identified by Kretzman and McKnight, but the authors' insistence on identifying assets highlights the importance of understanding young people as a key community resource, rather than a problem to be solved. This approach also avoids the troubling consequences of turning planning into an exercise in social transformation, and focuses instead on local possibilities for simple and productive activities that a variety of citizens can design and implement on their own terms.

Why youth participation?

Like adults, kids deserve a voice in community decisions because, quite simply, they are citizens in the community. Though obvious, this assertion is a fundamental tenet of youth participation. Their involvement is justified by principles - social sustainability, justice, equity, community empowerment, local control etc. – which warrant the active participation of any other group in a community ². (These principles should not be invoked as goals for every instance of participation, lest they raise unreasonable expectations. Moreover, they are probably too long term and difficult to measure to provide useful standards for discrete projects.) Thus, problems that might rightly or wrongly be associated with young people are immaterial in the sense that kids deserve the opportunity, like other citizens, to participate on their own terms, in a context that respects their experiences (Save the Children Canada 2000).

Authors whose insights have implications for community planning and design discuss the importance of recognising young people as citizens. In a chapter titled "Shutting out Youth," Ray Oldenburg argues that "pervasive zoning laws and poor planning have eliminated from new neighbourhoods places where youth and adults once encountered one another frequently, casually, informally. The exile of youth from the adult

in continuation schools in California.

² Citizen participation is a concept that has provoked lively debate among academic and professional planners. This paper does not enter the debate, nor does it assume that participation is an acceptable substitute for experience, leadership and informed professional practice. It does assume, however, that citizens have a right and a responsibility to meaningfully be involved in decisions that affect their communities.

world still proceeds apace as if nothing can be done to reverse the process" (1989: 263). He provides examples of the ways in which youth are planned for, but not with, and proposes the inclusion of young people in a variety of flexible public spaces, not just schools and playgrounds. More recently, British geographers have echoed Oldenburg's remarks that the public domain is still considered adult territory. "Young people need help to develop and articulate their ideas about how local places can be changed. At present there is no co-ordinated campaign for the involvement of young people in environmental planning; instead lobbies for the voice of young people tend to focus on child protection and welfare issues" (Matthews et al 1999: 1736). In a more accessible volume, journalist Patricia Hersch (1998) documents the separation of youth from adult society in the town of Reston, Virginia. The title of her book, *A Tribe Apart*, describes the situation of the teenagers Hersch met during three years of research in her hometown, where many kids were struggling to make connections between their own world and that of their parents and other adults.

Hersch's research suggests that too often discussions of youth cultures begin by asking: "What's wrong with young people?" When this question guides adults' perceptions, young people are viewed in at least two problematic and unproductive ways. Often, they become problems (e.g. gang members, graffiti artists, drug dealers, and prostitutes) to be solved through adult intervention. At the same time, youth are construed as victims (e.g. street kids, pregnant teens, and substance abusers) in need of help in the form of professional services (Finn & Checkoway 1998; Matthews et al 1999a). These negative perceptions often extend beyond individuals actually involved in potentially undesirable activities to affect the voice of even the most privileged and well-behaved kids. Moreover, many harmless pastimes are deemed unacceptable simply because youth are enjoying them. Because so much attention is devoted to so-called 'youth at risk', the potential concerns and capacities of other young people can be overshadowed (Finn & Checkoway 1998).

As far as I am aware, the students I know in Gibsons are not delinquents. If they are not, it seems important to involve them in community decisions. But even if they are, they have demonstrated in a very short time that they are also capable of positive thinking, constructive behaviour and sophisticated community analysis. And these are precisely the kind of strengths that Kretzmann and McKnight urge us to focus on. Indeed, youth participation "is necessary, not only for the development of active citizenship amongst children and young people but for sustained community ownership of regeneration initiatives and the development of new forms of community governance" (Speak 2000: 32). Thus, a second powerful reason for their participation is that young people can contribute effectively, as equal partners with adults, to community development.

Increasingly, planners and educators are asking questions about the role of youth cultures in their communities that challenge negative perceptions. For Mullahey et al (1999; see also Checkoway et al 1995), these questions eschew the notion of youth as victims to be treated, problems to be solved or threats to be feared and characterise them instead as thoughtful and active citizens. Similarly, Matthews et al (1999) argue that young people must be respected as “active social agents in their own right” (136) rather than as future adults. If difficult theoretical issues of power relations, hegemony and subordination are to be addressed, Finn and Checkoway (1998) argue that young people must themselves be engaged in questioning the politics and ideologies embedded in adult cultures. This approach is likely to be far more constructive than a youth involvement project that carries the assumptions of an abstract cultural critique without asking young people to participate in the formulation of such a critique. The Grade 11 students I met in Gibsons are certainly capable of more than simply making demands for programs and services that suit them. They can easily articulate the reasons why they should be involved in the first place. These should be encouraged to search for the right questions on their own.

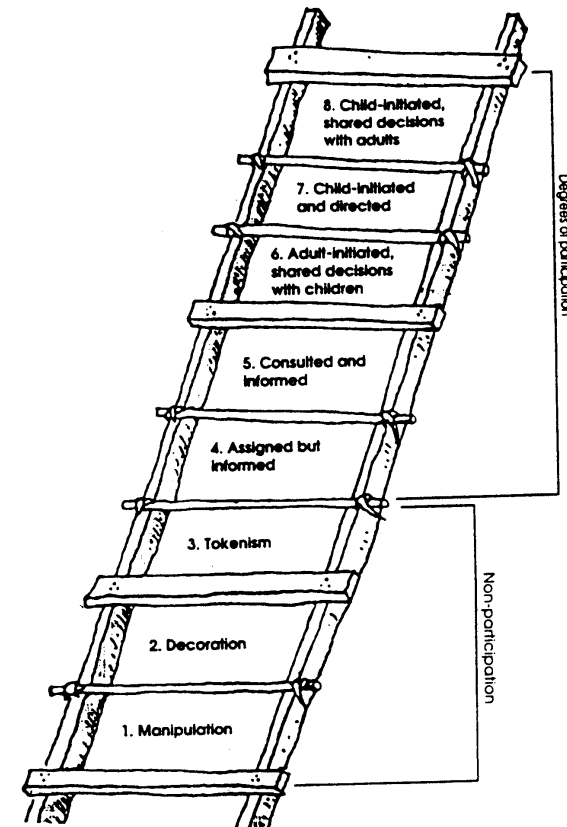
Strategies for effective youth participation

Theories emphasising the positive role of young people in their communities are accompanied by strategies for increasing their participation in planning processes. Such strategies often begin with the “ladder of children’s participation” formulated by Hart (1992; 1997, see Figure 1). Drawing on Arnstein’s (1969) invocation of a ladder metaphor for characterising citizen involvement, Hart identifies eight levels, or rungs, to describe varying degrees of participation, or non-participation. In the category of non-participation, Hart includes 1) Manipulation; 2) Decoration; and 3) Tokenism. These labels emphasise the fact that young people may be involved, but, through insufficient or incorrect information, remain unaware of the significance or goals of their actions. All three examples of non-participation are deemed unacceptable. The five upper rungs on the ladder imply varying degrees of participation, all of which are acceptable and may occur simultaneously for different individuals in various initiatives. Through the five “models of genuine participation”, Hart (1997: 42) emphasises “*choice*. A programme should be designed to maximise the opportunity for any child to choose to participate at the highest level of his or her ability”. Although the ladder does not prescribe specific activities for achieving the various levels of participation, Hart’s description offers useful examples and a guideline for designing and evaluating efforts to involve young people as active citizens in community change, rather than passive recipients of adult interventions.

For Checkoway et al (1995), active participation of youth can take one or more of a variety of forms. Social action, for example, implies the organisation of youth around issues such as “environmental protection, racial discrimination, and neighbourhood revitalisation” (134). Other forms include community planning for local programs, public advocacy for policy changes, community education to encourage critical thinking and local service development in response to basic needs. Any of these forms of participation can involve youth in initiation, direction, organisation or implementation and have clear benefits for individuals, organisations and communities (Checkoway et al 1995). To ensure that efforts are genuine, constructive and oriented to the assets, capacities and skills of young people, Hart’s ladder is often suggested as a reference point for designing and evaluating initiatives.

Clearly, researchers and practitioners are beginning to agree on important principles and strategies for youth participation. Nevertheless, Matthews et al (1999b) cite at least three factors that conspire to perpetuate the difficulties associated with their efforts: young people’s participation is often deemed inappropriate; the capacity of young people to participate is questioned; and the form of participation is uncertain. Together, these factors contribute to the perception that participation is an adult activity.

Figure 1. Hart’s Ladder of Participation



Even when adults are genuinely committed to working with and for young people, strong stereotypes and institutional constraints promise to limit their effectiveness and challenge truly participatory initiatives (Matthews 1995). Mullahey et al (1999: 9) suggest that “the overriding goal is to help young people be competent participants as well as community leaders”. But even such broad objectives carry adult biases about what constitutes effective, responsible citizenship and which characteristics justify participation. By whose standards should young people’s competence and leadership be judged? Do competent participants and community leaders ride skateboards, dye their hair pink, speak out of order, cut class to go to the beach, or break curfews? Is the silencing of young people justified if they do not aspire to, or even care about, the democratic ideals of increased participation? Planners need to think carefully about the importance, relevance and agenda of working for and with young people.

While engaged in such reflection, however, it is possible to continue with efforts at including kids in community decisions. Comprehensive schemes, robust theories and unified visions are unnecessary, if not detrimental. “Successful, enriching and diverse life is a product not of predetermined doctrine, but of vernacular forces that work because they have come about through trial and error in response to the constraints of environment and a thousand small decisions made in the interest of practical necessity” (Hough 1990: 66). Without explicitly striving for a broad transition to participatory democratisation, or universal youth participation in global governance, how can young people be engaged in a trial and error process of contributing to small decisions in their communities?

David Woollcombe, of Peace Child International, (1997) offers a useful set of values and principles that might inform youth participation activities, which are included in Figure 2. In a recent *Working Paper on Child Participation*, Save the Children Canada (2000) goes a step further by describing a system of indicators and measurement tools for guiding the planning, implementation and analysis of the organisation’s participation activities. They suggest early involvement, information sharing, small groups, participant observation, interviews and log books as means to evaluate their work.

Numerous opportunities exist for involving young people in school councils, town planning, ecological research, environmental monitoring, greenways design and construction, public artworks, action research, public awareness, community mapping and networks of information exchange. There is no shortage of literature and organisations and discussing these and other activities (e.g. Child Friendly Calgary 2000; City of Toronto 1991; Evergreen Foundation 2000; Graves 1993; Hart 1997; Mullahey et al. 1999; Race & Torma 2000). Throughout these diverse efforts, and the principles noted in Figure 2, the importance of openness, honesty, respect, transparency and authenticity is highlighted.

Figure 2. Principles for Youth Participation (after Wollcombe 1997)

Ownership – Young people must know, and be assured, that the work they do belongs to them.

An enabling culture – The surroundings and chemistry of participation activities must affirm the culture and life-styles of young participants

Real power – Unless young people know that decision-makers are listening to their efforts, they will perceive these efforts to be a waste of time and will quickly become disillusioned with the process.

Expectations – Harbours unrealistic expectations of what the kids can do is destructive both for the children, and the adults working with them

Honour their forms of expression – Paintings, illustrations and other forms of expression should be presented without adjustments. Written work may be edited for spelling or clarity, but the style of language must be retained. This principle helps to ensure ownership, and aids in authentic communication.

Support – Young people must be supported, not threatened, with adult experience. If possible they should be encouraged to lay off difficult tasks for adult professionals without feeling like their ownership is compromised if they do not do everything themselves.

Respect – It is impossible for any partnership to work without respect. Respect for the young partners is the essential component of adults' attitudes, and when all other principles are observed, the kids will return this respect.

Openness and communication – Adults and kids must communicate constantly and openly for any partnership to work.

Time alone – Young people must be given time totally alone with no adult presence. Preferably in small groups, this enables less vocal members to feel included, and enables the chemistry that can produce unexpected ideas and strategies that are the most lasting products of any participation.

Democracy and other ground rules – Without belabouring procedural guidelines, the principles of democracy, fairness, respect for minorities, etc., should be reinforced. Fair discussions are fundamental.

IV. A GIBSONS EXAMPLE

Armed with this rich theory to justify my intentions of speaking with some Gibsons kids about planning and design in their town, I began, ironically, by talking to adults. The kind advice of a few local residents eventually led me to a Grade 11 Social Studies class at Elphinstone Secondary School. I arrived in Gibsons one afternoon with no money, limited time, no laptop computers, no professional drafting supplies, scant experience and very little direction. I wanted to test my suspicion that the energy and creativity of a small group of young people could overcome a host of other apparent limitations. Opinions, suggestions or support of other adults were neither solicited nor offered at the outset. The class was not asked to realise their potential as future community leaders, or undertake a campaign to raise awareness about community development issues, or even give me the time of day. With a little help from their teacher, however, we managed to spend an hour discussing a range of concerns from international development ethics to local neighbourhood design.

The possibility of continuing the discussion to address some specific planning issues in the community was offered, and the example of the Town's Trails and Bicycle Network Master Plan was suggested as a potential forum for youth involvement. From a class of approximately thirty students, thirteen (six boys, seven girls) provided their phone numbers and e-mail addresses to indicate their interest in participating in future activities. Encouraged by this response, but unsure whether these students were seriously interested in continuing, I immediately sent them all e-mail thanking them for their interest and suggesting some possibilities for following up on the original offer. I also spoke with many of them briefly on the telephone, to reinforce my willingness to meet again if interest was sufficient and a suitable time could be arranged.

Lessons Learned

The students' feedback indicated that the first of these conditions would easily be met; they were enthusiastic about meeting again. Figure 3 includes a series of excerpts of the students' written responses to my initial visit, e-mail message, and phone calls. Although not presented in their entirety, their words are quoted at length because they affirm many of the theoretical insights and principles outlined in the first part of this paper.

Figure 3. IN THEIR WORDS: KIDS' RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT PLANNING, THEIR COMMUNITY, AND THE WORLD

I really appreciate the whole no bullshit attitude. Most of us are used to the opposite and usually expect it. A friend of mine from Togo who I was talking to today has some amazing ideas on how to save the world. The both of us are probably very idealistic people with big dreams. We're very dedicated though. There's just so much I think needs to be done so urgently and such a small group of people in order to save the world from becoming doomed.

I also think it is so cool what you are trying to do because it's not everyday us youth get an offer like this to be involved. It takes a lot out of our time to go and find places to be involved in but when it is brought to you it is so much easier.

I definitely think young people should be involved with planning, and that the process should be fast enough so that we can still make use of our results!... ***Although, not all youth should be involved in planning. It should be youths that actually show a genuine interest in it, and have the support of their peers (ooo! like parliament sort of except with out voting and corruption!)*** I plan to save the world before I'm 30 by either 1) transforming into sailor moon (anime super heroine) and using my cosmic power to fight evil! or 2) getting involved and informed to take rapid action on our earth's decrepit state!

I'm looking forward to this gathering of friends and fun. Thank you for bringing it up in the first place I think getting our community to actually move and make decisions to better anything but ourselves is wonderful.

I hate how people have this idea that you can't start changing or contributing to the world until after you finish school. I hope to save the world by the time I'm 30 by learning as much as I can about the world, by traveling, going to school and listening to people that have something to say about what's going on out there. While I'm doing this I want to help groups and start my own, that make an effort to improve the quality of life for people, and animals. As well as take care of the environment. If I could get paid to do this that would be an added bonus.

in my mind, too many times in this day and age are kids simply bypassed in issues facing their world, but who is gonna be resulted by those issues? the very people that aren't allowed to make decisions! i can ensure you that these issues wont be effecting the old men making the decisions, but still, time and time again, old men make decisions! i wanna leave something here, because i have to leave next year and it would just be great to make a difference in this wonderful little community!

Two weeks after our first meeting, a second short session was organised to allow interested students a chance to speak further about the possibilities for acting upon their passions and frustrations and my offer of support. They were provided with a small cadastral base map of the town, and worked in small groups to indicate two main categories of space: 1) Important routes (Figure 4), and 2) Important places (Figure 5). They also recorded and discussed some of the reasons why these places and routes were significant. Descriptions including characteristic feelings, smells, people, events, positive features, negative aspects and suggestions for improvement were encouraged. The students then presented the maps to each other. Figures 4 and 5 are composite maps that combine the students' written comments and drawings. Further discussions and refinement would be necessary to render the maps a strong analytical tool, as many of the students did not have the opportunity to fully describe or clarify their drawings. The maps are snapshots alluding to the special information, knowledge and experience that can be offered by a small group of kids in a very short time. Many of the students were not able to stay for the entire meeting, but all participants agreed, before departing, that it would be important to meet again and explore the possibilities for future activities.

At the time of writing, it is unclear what direction these future activities might take, or whether they will in fact take place. Drawing on Woolcombe's principles and values, the process to date has included openness and respect, honoured youthful expression, and has been careful not to raise unreasonable expectations. On the other hand, it has not been possible to assure the students that anything they might decide to do will have real power, continued support from other adults or youth ownership of results. The mayor of Gibsons has assured that these values will be forthcoming, so optimism is justified. In any case, the privilege of working with the students for only a short period of time provides at least six preliminary lessons that relate to the experiences of other planners and academics working with young people:

1. These young people feel left out of local decision-making processes and outcomes,
2. They have the energy and inspiration to contribute to positive change,
3. They have special knowledge of the local environment that is relevant to community planning and design,
4. They are busy being students, athletes, musicians, poets, artists, friends, kids...and constructive citizens in their own right,
5. They are ready to act,
6. They deserve the support and trust of their community.

Figure 4. Routes map based on students' drawings and comments

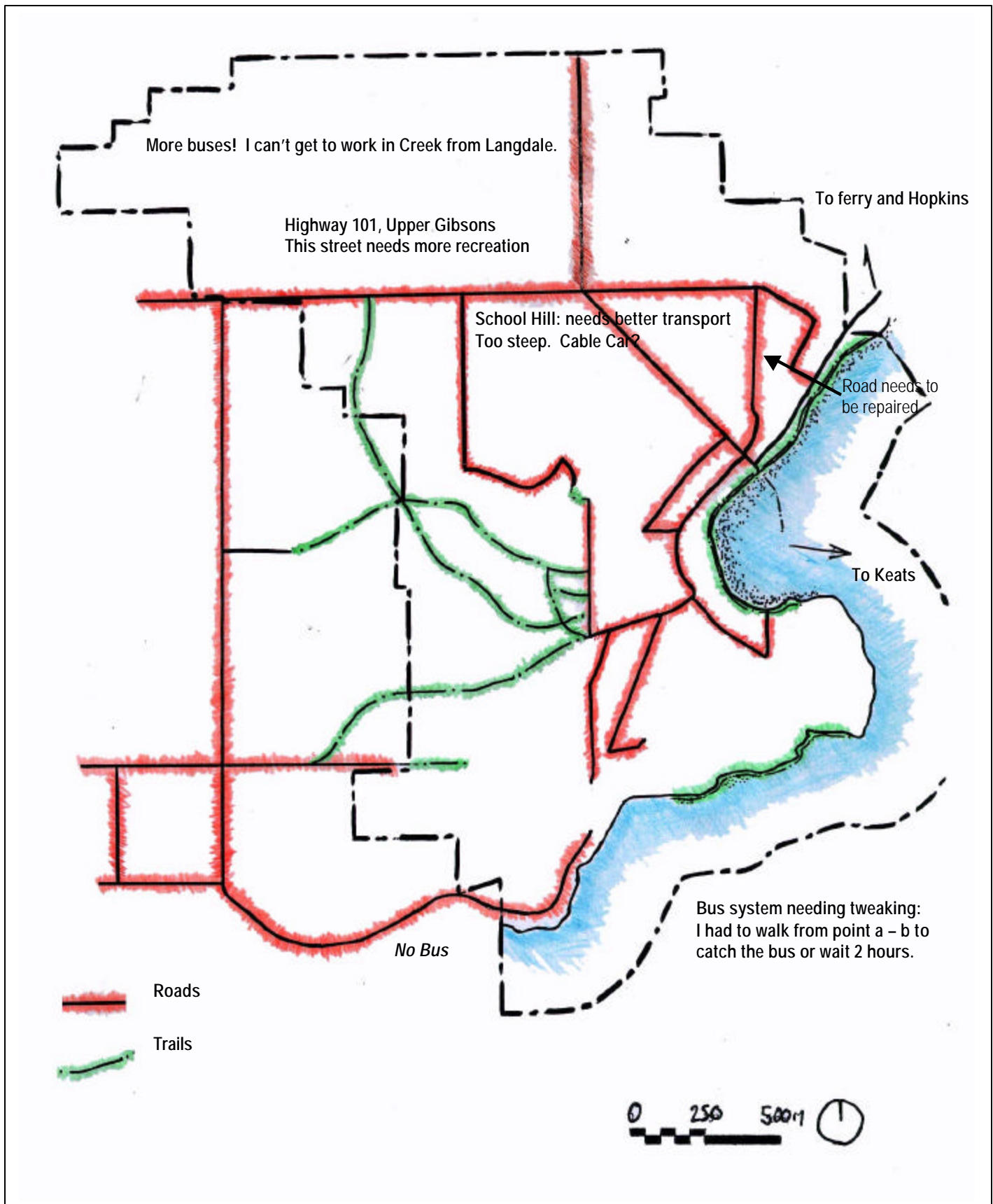
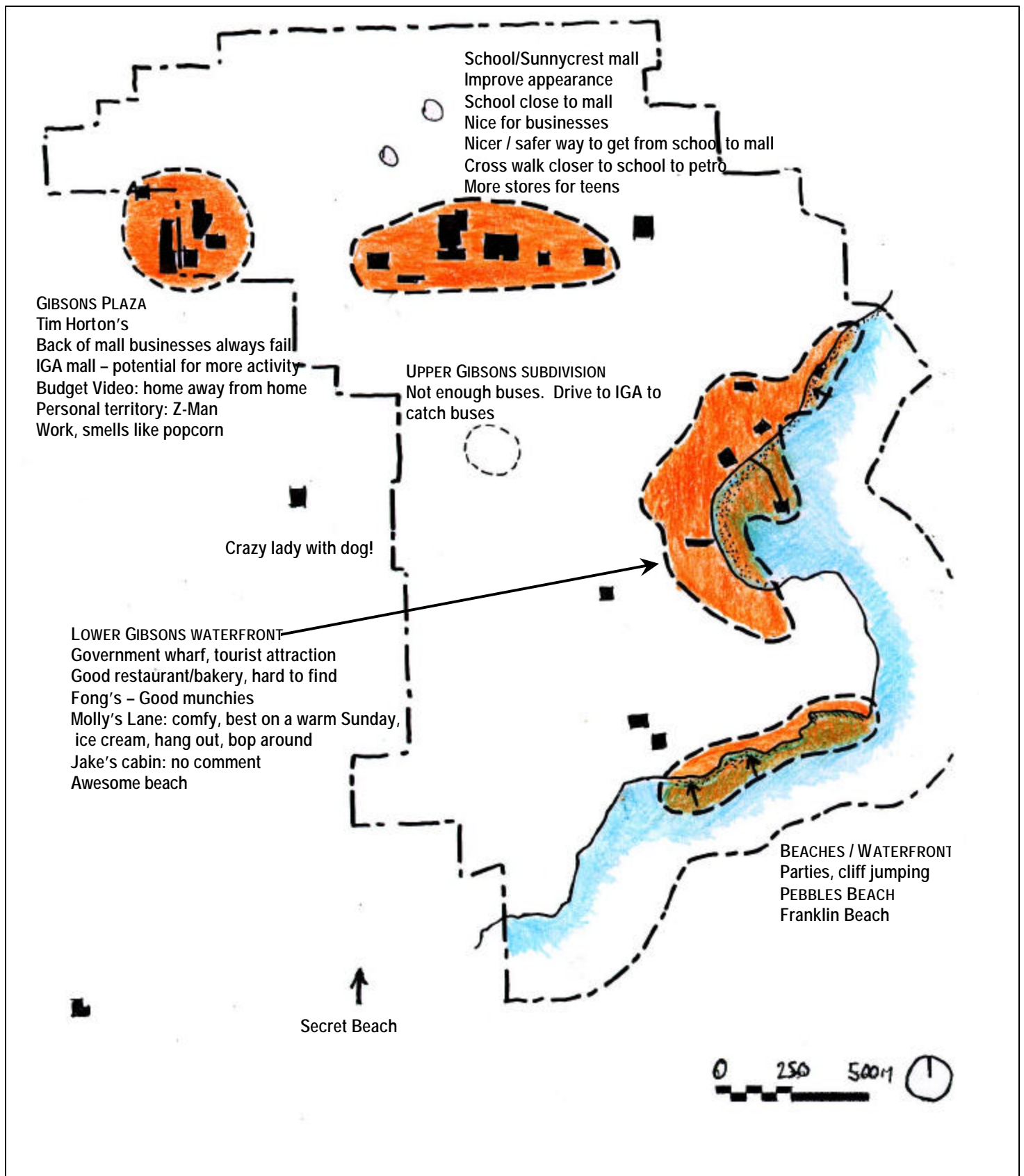


Figure 5. Places map based on students' drawings and comments



V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Considerable research attests to the theoretical and practical benefits of genuine youth participation in community planning and design. Preliminary efforts in Gibsons indicate that, for a number of reasons, the town has the opportunity to involve at least a small group of kids in a local planning exercise. Town officials are committed to working with youth to develop long range visions and short terms projects that are relevant and feasible. The community design work completed by UBC graduate students provides an excellent starting point for locally generated visions, and offers an exciting range of possibilities for meeting the demands of anticipated growth in Gibsons. Public response to the presentation of this work indicates that residents are prepared to consider a range of innovative options for neighbourhood design, land use, transportation, residential development, infrastructure, ecological protection and architecture. The Trails and Bicycle Network Master Plan that is currently being developed in consultation with a local steering committee is one example of work already underway that will help the town to better meet the needs of residents and visitors.

In this context, it has been a pleasure to meet local youth who are excited about contributing to the future of their community, even if they will soon be moving away to work, learn or travel in other cities or countries. A relevant question, then, is how the support of the Town might be combined with the enthusiasm of the kids to design a constructive process for local youth involvement. Drawing on insights and examples from a review of relevant literature, along with the results of admittedly brief interactions with a group of grade 11 students, I offer the following suggestions for developing such a process.

A. **Short Term:** Because a number of students have already indicated their willingness to get involved, immediate measures can be taken in response to their initiative. The local Trail and Bicycle Network Master Plan is one opportunity for youth participation in a real and timely community project, but others could be identified. To allow interested students to participate effectively in any activity, six steps for a successful short-term youth planning project are recommended.

1. *Initiation:* Local politicians and planning staff must let the students know that their voices are valuable and that suggestions they make will be taken seriously. To help the students understand the possibilities, and to give them a sense of real power, it would be useful to

provide a list of general issues or topics for youth participation. The students can then consider these options and decide on a focus, with appropriate goals and objectives, before undertaking further work. If they are going to commit time and energy to local issues, they must be assured that their work is truly relevant and can produce something that local decision-makers are interested to discuss.

2. *Feedback:* If they decide on an appropriate local planning issue, the students might be asked to develop a brief proposal outlining a strategy to address it. The proposal could include a general timeline, necessary resources, and a suggested final product. Input and guidance from adults (i.e. parents, teachers, and/or Town staff) should be available to the youth should they require it. The proposal should be read by at least two adults who would be responsible for responding on behalf of the Town, and the students should receive a prompt reply indicating any necessary revisions, and the Town's willingness to support the proposed activities.
3. *Time alone:* The students must then be encouraged to begin the work indicated in their proposal in accordance with the timeline. With advice and support, senior high school students can easily run their own meetings, and should be provided with any resources necessary to do so without adults present.
4. *Support:* Although the kids must meet on their own, they should also report on their progress to one or two adults who can then give constructive feedback. They must feel comfortable in asking for help if they need it, and adults can certainly assist in facilitating meetings, arranging transportation if necessary, dealing with money, etc. If they receive kind support from adults, they will be more willing to share their insights and communicate their experiences openly. These are essential ingredients for a productive partnership.
5. *Closure:* Whether they work for a few weeks or a number of months, draw a map or build a trail, produce a handbook or structure a committee, paint a mural or develop a transportation plan, the young people must be encouraged to reach an identifiable end point in their work. Moreover, this end point must be recognised by local decision-makers, who can respond with congratulations, constructive criticism or gratitude.
6. *Reflection:* Young people should be encouraged, individually or as a group, to reflect upon their experiences and make recommendations for future projects. A designated forum to communicate and discuss these reflections is desirable; a meeting, a party, an electronic bulletin board, or a class discussion would suffice.

- B. **Long Term:** If Gibsons is truly committed to better representing the voices of its young people, a long-term strategy for youth participation should be adopted. Such a strategy must, of course, be developed by the kids themselves, with the support of the Town, rather than the reverse. Indeed, it could be the job of a short-term youth committee to write the long-term planning strategy. In any case, a vision for youth participation in the future might consider the following elements.
1. *Start in School:* Michael Gray, of Child Friendly Calgary, suggests “getting kids involved first by approaching a teacher and offering to work in the school with a classroom first...then work with the public planning. Too many times, kids are thrown into a public planning session and in the end they are merely decoration”³. As many young people have busy schedules outside of school hours, it is important to give them time during class to begin thinking about opportunities for participation in community planning and design. Particularly in their initiation, efforts to start in school carefully avoid creating a lot of additional work for teachers.
 2. *Outreach:* Many local and regional planning agencies have projects that might be relevant and interesting for young people. Representatives from the Town of Gibsons, the Sunshine Coast Regional District, various provincial ministries, and UBC Schools of Planning, Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Education could be invited to visit classrooms to speak about their work and the possibilities for youth participation.
 3. *Workshops:* On a regular basis, perhaps two or three times each year, the Town could host youth planning and design workshops. With the help of adult professionals and possibly as partners with other local citizens, students could work in small groups to address pertinent local issues through drawing, mapping, writing and speaking.
 4. *Children and Youth:* A great way to get young people of all ages involved in planning is to have older kids design and lead activities with children in their community. Giving older kids the responsibility of mentoring younger partners can motivate them to learn as much as possible in preparation for passing on their knowledge to other eager learners. Save the Children Canada (2000), as well as the Evergreen Foundation (2000), provide Canadian examples of organisations successfully adopting this approach to get young people of all ages working together in community planning activities.

VI. CONCLUSION

Planners concerned with power relations and participation recognise the marginalisation of young people in various contexts. The strengths youth can bring to decisions that affect them are well documented, and justify calls for increasing their participation in community planning. Moreover, the positive individual, organisational and institutional benefits associated with youth involvement in planning are numerous. Responding to these suggestions, it is argued that a vision of democratic citizenship and sustainable community development depends on the inclusion of young people as citizens in their own right, not as adults-in-waiting. Thus, in addition to big ideas about the democratisation of their communities, planners can find youth cultures working for change. Whether these issues have transformative implications for participatory citizenship is unclear, and perhaps irrelevant to the everyday concerns of young people.

The Town of Gibsons, faced with likely population growth in the coming decades, has the opportunity to let local youth make positive contributions to the future of their community. To encourage and facilitate such contributions, youth must be involved as equal partners in the planning processes that affect them. Short or long-term projects for youth involvement must adhere to the principles of honesty, openness, respect, power sharing and support. Young people are citizens. As such, they should be afforded the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, in a manner that respects their unique experiences and abilities in the challenging but empowering context of community planning and design.

³ I gratefully acknowledge Michael Gray's kind and insightful response to an e-mail inquiry regarding his experience with youth participation in planning.

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