



**Clark County Youth Commission  
Recommendations to the Clark County  
Board of County Councilors  
Citizen Voice & Engagement  
May 24th, 2016**

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## Introduction

We, the members of the Clark County Youth Commission, present our annual policy report. To begin, we will describe our work on a week-to-week level, the importance of our group and why we have an assigned area of study each year.

## Who We Are

The Clark County Youth Commission is a collective of intelligent youth who discuss issues affecting the county in which they reside. With this group, a variety of viewpoints and backgrounds are showcased. Towards the end of our work year, we create a policy report that is presented to the county for review.

As members of the Clark County Youth Commission, we provide a diverse youth voice and many unique perspectives to a variety of community and county projects, giving insight into how to engage and attract young people to whatever program it may be. Although we work on many different projects that range from the Youth House Art Show to the Clark County Youth Achievement Awards throughout each year, our policy report our main assignment. As a citizen advisory board to the Board of County Councilors, the assigned research topic we study for you is our priority and focus throughout the year. This annual report is shared in the spring of each year with the Board of County Councilors and other county leaders.



## Our Process

Eighteen Youth Commissioners collaboratively authored this report using Google Drive. The entire Youth Commission shared in the research and development of recommendations beginning in August 2015, and their voice is equally represented in this report.

Our report is based on 10 months of research, including reviewing statistics, scholarly research articles, and focus group analysis. After months of studying our assigned topic, the information we have learned is compiled along with our unique youth vision and insight to create the recommendations that we share in our report. We hope that by the end of this policy report the statistics, research, expert opinions, recommendations, and our year of hard work will help to teach you how to engage a more diverse range of voices in both County and other types of work, as well as the importance of youth perspective.

We believe that having many voices in the community allows us to better understand the diverse groups that live here. If everyone is engaged and consistently stays informed on the

issues, there is no disconnect between us and other citizens, allowing for a more informed and progressive community.

Without further ado, here is the 2015 - 2016 Clark County Youth Commission Policy Report on Citizen Voice and Engagement.

### **Citizen Voice and Engagement – What is it about?**

It's the minority...It's getting the common day person interested in what is going on in the large scale community and getting them to speak up. It is important because it encourages us to work together in our community and allows us to take ownership and get invested.

### **Youth Voice**

Youth Voice is important because we are the next generation of community leaders and change makers. We have a unique understanding of what is going on because we are living it- the policies adults make for youth affect *us*. We recommend that more adults come to youth with things that are relevant to their daily lives and their future. Bring ideas to the table and allow our important set of eyes to take a peak. Youth involvement is not practiced enough in local government.

*"We believe that there is limited youth representation in our community."*

We believe that there is limited youth representation in our community. This is because of the small amount of opportunities provided for youth to participate in Clark County, or the lack of awareness around current opportunities. Youth voice is the power of young people working as a collective body to make a positive impact in their community. This is important because youth voice is determining the future. **We believe that rather than having the youth find engagement opportunities, community members should bring these opportunities to the youth.**

### **What Makes Youth Voice Distinctive from Others?**

Youth Voice is different from an adult because the voice of an adult is often viewed as mature and gained from experience. What is not seen in the voice of the youth is that they have fresh, innovative ideas stemming from pure imaginative thinking.

The youth voice of Clark County is also very unique in comparison to the youth of past generations. We crave platforms to speak our minds and get involved. The potential for the current generation of youth in Clark County is so high that it may fuel innovation for future endeavors for the county. This difference in generations could be due to the changing conditions which Clark County has presented to these youth. The youth of today's generation have seen a focus in the sciences, math and technology. With these changes it diversifies the ideas. Since many youth are still in school and probably in other extra activities after school they have another perspective in society that could help make more things enjoyable for youth and provide opportunities for political involvement.

Youth have different perspectives on events and situations, among other things. Unfortunately, young people are frequently ignored or disrespected. However, there are many valid reasons to include youth voices. Adults are more likely to get stuck in their ways and become blind to new ideas or processes. By engaging the ideas and thoughts of youth community members, a whole new set of ideas and viewpoints are available to the officials of Clark County. If we encourage youth instead of portraying them as misinformed or telling them “you’ll understand when you’re older”, thousands of new ideas from leaders, listeners, and many other types of people are available regarding public and governmental issues.

## **Ways to make Clark County More Youth-friendly & Inclusive**

In order to make Clark County public meetings more youth friendly, officials need to foster an environment where youth feel that they are able to voice their opinions and have it be heard by the government. Officials should implement social networking to educate the youth and interact with the youth more often. If this method was to be implemented then the youth will take more of an interest in the role that the government plays in their day to day lives, if anything it would be much more accessible.

To better include youth, opportunities should be presented to schools for students and the students who are interested would have information they need to voice their opinion.

Lastly, treating youth as though their opinions matter just as much as an adult’s is key to having a friendly environment. Youth voice does matter very much.

## **Ways the Youth Commission Engages in Our Community**

### **Youth House Art Show**

Every year the Youth House holds a community art show. The Youth Commission works in collaboration with different groups of the house, such as the Options program and STASHA (Strong Teens Against Substance Hazards and Abuse), to make the event happen. The overarching theme of the show is based on the Youth Commission's policy report topic assigned each year by the County Manager and Board of County Councilors. The intent of the art show is to share our community’s youth perspective and ultimately providing an insight of what present-day youth are experiencing. This is a form of community engagement as it is an indirect way for youth to express their ideas to the people of our community. This year the art show was, “Becoming YOUNIQUELY, an art show about identity, voice and communication.

### **County Connections**

Members of the Youth Commission were given the option to job-shadow a county employee in the fields of their choosing. This activity was called the County Connections program. In our shadow, we followed and/or interviewed a county employee during their typical work

week. The selections of jobs were immense; we had options to shadow county employees such as policemen, low-cost housing specialists, and even the medical examiners. In our job shadows, we were given a taste of those particular fields, as well as a greater general understanding of how the county government is run.

This County Connections job shadow opportunity was important for a number of reasons. First off, it gave Youth Commissioners perspective on all the possible career fields with the county. Secondly, it provided insight on how learning about the government inspired citizen engagement. As we learned more about certain government positions, we felt a stronger sense of interest and stake to the country government. We felt that this was important. It seems as though as people learn about the government and how it operates, the more they become engaged and feel compelled to participate in it.

**We recommend implementing a government job shadow program, similar to the one the Youth Commission participated in, for schools.** A program integrated with schools would give youth insight into possible career fields, as well as creating a will for youth to be involved in government by exposing them to it. County government can reach out to Contemporary World Issues and Contemporary World Politics classes and invite students to county hearings and other events, just like the Youth Commission got to attend.

### **Should the county continue some form of “County Connections” for Youth Commissioners and other youth?**

The county should definitely continue County Connections for not only Youth Commission members but many other interested youth. It could be run through their website, where there would be an online application that lists different county departments and have each youth list their top three choices to connect with. After that, students could receive the email from the department head or senior member they have been matched with an opportunity for job shadowing.

### **hOUR IMPACT- Time Bank**

hOur Impact is a time bank where people volunteer their skills and talents to others in exchange of tokenized hours. We partnered with hOur Impact time bank to experiment and see how youth would like it. Traditionally it has been used for adults but hOur Impact isn't exclusively for adults. We were there to give insight on how to make it better for a younger audience. We were asked how we felt about safety and to review the categories of skills available to teach youth skills for everyday adult lives and further increase job availability and knowledge. hOur Impact increases civic engagement by giving a platform for people to donate time, learn new things and meeting new people. The program helps create a better community. We gave recommendations to help Clark County's hOur Impact Program in the form of a direct report to their coordinator.

### **The Youth Commission Experience**

The following observations were based on discussions regarding our own involvement and engagement with the Youth Commission. **Since our term began in August of 2015 we**

**have collectively donated more than 2300 hours to Clark County.**

We saw our involvement on the Youth Commission as a way to investigate how we, youth, started to engage in our community. We first asked ourselves, “How did Youth Commissioners become aware of the opportunity to volunteer on the Youth Commission?” Many members said they first heard about the opportunity at the Clark County Youth Achievement Celebration (YAC), when we were recognized by a community member for an achievement. These youth were excited by the fact that their achievements were being recognized, and felt drawn to have their voices heard in the Youth Commission. Youth voices are often not given the respect they deserve, so if youth find an opportunity to have theirs heard in a group like the Youth Commission, they will often take that opportunity. An alumnus can also be a source of information for the Youth Commission

While at the awards we saw the Youth Commission give speeches and that is when we were exposed to the idea of volunteering for the county and being engaged in our community. YAC offers the Youth Commission an important tool for honoring youth for specific achievements that are not always given the opportunity to be honored. While most school award ceremonies offer fairly narrow awards for only a few specific achievements like sports or arts, the YAC offers these in addition to many other achievements, like Family Life, Tolerance, Empathy or Career Development. The YAC also gives us a chance to honor businesses that go out of their way to cater towards a youth demographic with the Youth Friendly Business Award.



Other ways became aware of the Youth Commission opportunity was from direct referrals by school counselors and teachers. A notable portion of Youth Commissioners learned about the program through family members. This relates to the [Knowledge Gap Theory](#), which we will dive into more later on. In short, the theory states that the people on the “inside” will filter information and keep it from the ones on the “outside” because of increased opportunities such as the Youth Commission (Knowledge Gap 1). Those whose parents inform them about the Youth Commission could be considered “inside”.

The second question in our work session was, “What made you decide to fill out the application?” Our answers were, meeting new people, a close friend or mentor encouraged me, or we felt it would be a cool opportunity. Others admitted their parents gently, or not so gently pushed them into the youth commission. We believe there are ways the county could encourage the same type of answers in their own programs.

The next question in our work session was, “What are some other groups or activities you’ve chosen to join? How did you hear about them?” Our answers were, library youth



advisory board, ballroom dance, film club, student council, youth advisory board for Clark County Fair, and multiple sports. Our members are extremely involved in the community, as are most of today's youth in the county. Youth are constantly seeking new opportunities for engagement.

## Reasons People Engage

### •*Family Vibe/Culture*

### •*Our Voice is Heard*

What keeps us coming back to the Youth Commission and other groups we are a part of is when it has a family “vibe,” or a strong sense of culture. Another reason we engage is being able to have your voice heard in the community. Far too often, youth’s opinions are brushed off as naive or immature without being fully considered first. If asked, most youth will say that there has been multiple times where their voice has not been acknowledged or adults have paid no heed to youth advice. This is why the Youth Commission is so important to its members. It gives them a way to speak when it seems society has stitched their lips shut. Being able to voice what you think, and have those thoughts taken into the minds of others gives youth the confidence to contribute their ideas in other situations as well. Youth Voice is entirely valid, and the Youth Commission knows it.

*“Far too often, youth’s opinions are brushed off as naive or immature without being fully considered first.”*

## Other Reasons

### •*Equality Among Members*

The Youth Commission stresses equality for all of its members. No one person’s ideas are more important than another’s, and all ideas are treated with respect. There is no hierarchy, even if someone has been there for years.

### •*Shared Agreements*

The Youth Commission also has shared agreements which all members agree to before entering a discussion or activity. These agreements, such as ***assuming good will and being open to all ideas***, help create a positive environment where everyone feels safe to share.

### •*Food*

Youth are attracted to food, and the pizza that is provided at meetings puts everyone in a positive mood and is one way to get people to the meetings.

### •*Supportive Adults*

In partnership with youth, it is important to have positive and supportive adults. Elizabeth Hill, our coordinator, is a shining example of positive support. She is encouraging, while not being overbearing. Elizabeth helps capture youth voice without changing it, and helps provide a platform for youth voice.

### •*Build Community Connectedness*

When youth participate in programs similar to the Youth Commission, they gain a stake in their community through engagement, and also gain a feeling of connection to their community. We want to feel valued in our community and have a judgement free zone to spend time at.

What helped us and motivated us to take a risk to join Youth Commission and other groups was the concept/idea of the group was really appealing, being forced into taking a healthy risk, being in the age of trying new things. For some youth, the group aspect of the Youth Commission and the potential for new friends fueled their decision to join. **Youth are more likely to join a group if there are other people who look like them, or are their age in the group as well.** For other Youth, an opportunity to have their voice taken seriously in a safe environment caused them to take a risk to apply for the Youth Commission. Risk can be a put off for many youth. The Youth Commission's easygoing selection process helps put applicants at ease, and the summer retreat helps Youth Commissioners work well together.

Being engaged on the Youth Commission has benefited us in many ways and some of those ways are: friendships, building connections, fulfills community service, college and career prep, the feeling of making a difference, and looks good on a resume. Not many programs provide all of those outcomes. We are excited about our work it benefits us and we get to benefit the community.

## **Recommendations**

### **•Share Information about Advisory Boards**

We recommend that the county provides more information to schools informing them about existing advisory boards and volunteer opportunities within the county. Make sure people have a proper understanding of what the programs do.

### **•Apps for Youth**

We also recommend that the county create youth apps and use technology to teach youth about opportunities and local county government. Make the apps strategically marketed only for youth.

### **•Show that People Have A Voice**

We believe the kind of benefits that might motivate people to join and stay involved in community efforts include knowing that their voice is being heard in the county. It's necessary to show them you are listening by implementing something they shared (Promoting Youth 6). Teach them all the ways they can participate in local government. Actually listen, and take notes- don't just go through the motions. Report to the community the efforts youth are making. Make their voices visible.

### **•Take Testimonials from Councilors/ Past Advisory Boards**

Put them on the county website to show how everyone benefited from working with youth.

### **•Build A Stronger Presence Among Youth**

Have county leaders visit schools and teach about how important youth involvement is to the community. Youth don't get enough opportunities to informally interact with their counselors and other community leaders. If a community leader directly interacted and recruited youth, it would show how truly passionate they are and that you are genuinely interested in their participation.

## **Reasons People Disengage**

While looking at the reasons we have stayed in groups we also wanted to look at groups

that we have joined and then quit in the past. One common reason is that we get too busy and had too much on our plates. Students today have many things that they devote their time to, such as sports, after-school clubs, family life, other county commitments, and schoolwork. As students get older, school becomes more and more of a salient figure in their lives, and given the fact that a majority of Youth Commissioners are in or entering high school, time can be scarce. **We recommend making programs that youth can come in and out of without a huge amount of backtracking or hassle.** If we get busy at certain parts of the year, we should be able to take a step back, but then return later and participate more (Thompson 6).

Another thing that made us leave programs is the adults running the program were not respectful to youth. To keep youth invested in programs we think it is important to have an environment that makes you happy and feel respected. **We recommend groups be interactive and use varying methods and processes to keep youth feeling welcome and engaged.**

### In Summary of the Youth Commission Experience

The Youth Commission strives to ensure that the Commissioner's voices are heard. Not only are our voices heard as a collective group of people, but as individuals too. We feel youth voice and involvement is so important to have in our community. It helps youth get a foot in the door at community level and feel invested. It is relationship building with the people you will be working with. It is a skill builder for youth. Community involvement in one program opens doors for other types of involvement. It helps give us a positive view of our future and shows us of what is possible. We are more likely to hear about other opportunities if we are involved. Youth have a unique perspective and we know about issues that affect youth first hand. We like to be used as a resource and as an expert with youth issues.

### Recommendations Related to Technology



### Suggestions for County Twitter Accounts

The Youth Commission reviewed twitter accounts for Clark County Public Works Department, Public Health Department and Clark County Sheriff.

- Youth Commissioners noted that Public Health provided interesting facts and have a nice header that “looks fun”. We suggest more original posts that pertain to the

county and more photos. Also, perhaps use a header that pictures people who might actively use Twitter.

- We noticed that Public Works provided interesting facts, good use of photos and had nice responses to public ideas. We think they can make a more interesting header and bio and follow more county residents' accounts to increase engagement.
- The Sheriff's account has a nice header and cover photo. We suggest more follow backs, less links to Facebook, and post more from the community. Also consider the use of emojis.

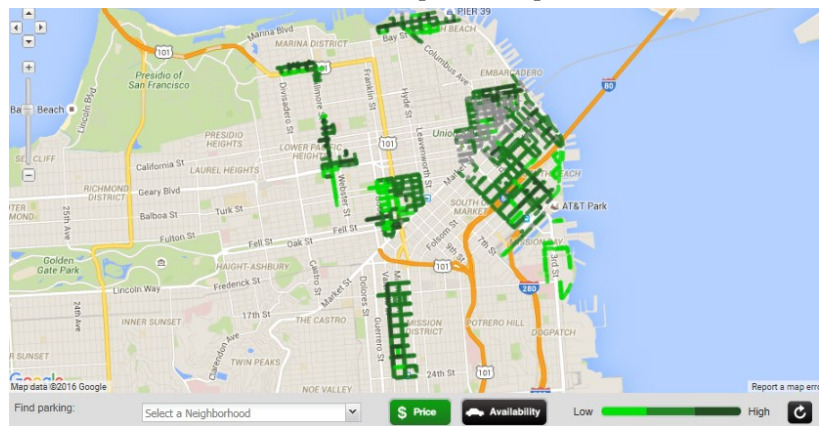
It is greatly encouraged that more county entities have social networking accounts. Every department should have a username and social media manager.

## Utilizing Apps and Technology

### System of Apps

We need a system of apps for Clark County that serves the purpose of providing information to the public. An example of an app system close to what we recommend is the SFPark Mobile App (Apps- SFPark 1). The SFPARK is, "A real time inventory of available parking spots for residents and tourists. The goal is to reduce circling and double parking. Result: less congestion, cleaner air, safer streets, and a clearer path for public transit.

Drivers are encouraged to park in underused areas and garages. Prices on the installed street meters are regularly adjusted to keep one or two spaces available on any block," (Pierce 1). This app's function is to show the public the parking rates and regulations. It also shows real time space availability and rates in parking garage.



The SFPark Application gave us an idea: we suggest that a mobile app and/or website be created for polling citizens on various topics. Topics could include transit routes, Clark County construction projects and social issues that affect the community. There is construction all over downtown Vancouver and nobody knows what they are actually doing, for example. This would increase citizen involvement with county government as well as providing government employees and officials with feedback, innovation, and data from the polls. This would be helpful so that they could make decisions based on community need. We believe it would be great to have both options of a website and an app to be more convenient for citizens to access, especially youth. Web based convenience can increase citizen engagement (Beyond Civility 5). We believe the integration of technology such as apps would help bridge communication between citizens of the county and their

local government.

### ***Meeting of the Minds Clark County***

A second recommendation we suggest is a “Meeting of the Minds Clark County”, which we read about in an article titled, “New City Rx: High-tech Innovation Merged with a Role for Citizens,” (Pierce 1). We think this type of meeting is perfect to help develop the perfect citizen voice app, but of course it could be used for other types of business. San Francisco does a “Meeting of the Minds” and this is a description of how they use it:

“For two days, participants from across all sectors – public, NGO, and private – engage in lively discussions focused on ‘connecting the dots’ linking building, energy, water resources, mobility, and finance. The Meeting will look at how urban/ regional decisions have become inextricably linked, and what elements of cross-sector partnership are critical for successful solutions. We’ll feature the innovators who are solving critical problems, especially those from organizations that are making smart investment choices (Pierce 1).”

*“An event that allows citizens to take a leadership role will create a positive feeling in the community and everyone will feel invested...”*

Clark County should do something similar to this but the focus would be to create a technology application to increase citizen voice. The “Meeting of the Minds Clark County”, would include Clark County elected officials, professionals in technology, youth that use technology, and college students that are studying technology. Organizations involved could be Clark College and WSU Vancouver. Attendees would then find ways to implement technology within the county government to benefit the community and improve citizen voice. We believe an event that allows citizens to take a leadership role will create a positive feeling in the community and everyone will feel invested and excited (Thompson 6).

## **Engagement Model to Increase Citizen Voice**

### **Recommendation: Diverse Voices Group**

We recommend that Clark County create a diverse group of leaders and residents across the community to work on community decisions. An example is in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where residents came together to devise and develop the city’s strategic master plan (Beyond Civility 6). This group of 450 people provided a diverse and continuing outlook on the community’s decisions. This would be an asset for our Clark County. A one-time event or meeting would deliver short-term results, but also solve the community’s long-term issues (Beyond Civility 6). It is imperative to have continuous activities, events, meetings, etc., in which the public can constantly be innovative and engaged in our county government.

If implemented, Clark County should create a large group of people of with varying ages,

backgrounds, gender, and perspectives. This group would have similarities to the Clark County Youth Commission in its diversity. Diversity is important because it would create an accurate representation of the county's population.

### **Recommendation: Retreat for Leaders**

Many city councils around the country hold retreats so they can spend time discussing important issues in a more casual setting than the council chambers (Beyond Civility 2). These work sessions often are led by a professional facilitator, who can help city leaders establish ground rules and explore areas of consensus while learning more about their colleagues' interests and priorities.

### **Recommendation: Continuous Training on Civic Engagement**

The Youth Commission was surprised to read that, "In a recent NLC survey, about half of all city officials and top staff said that neither they nor their constituents have the skills and experience needed to carry out effective public engagement," (Beyond Civility 2). Our recommendation is that Clark County provides continuous training and education for county staff, community leaders and elected officials on increasing civic engagement in every department in the county. These should be professionally developed and facilitated.

### **Recommendation: Study Circles**

Study Circles empower communities to problem solve and discuss important issues together by bringing large numbers of people into dialogue. "Study Circles combine dialogue, deliberation, and community organizing techniques, enabling public talk to build understanding, explore a range of solutions, and serve as a catalyst for social, political, and policy change," (Engagement Streams 6). We recommend the county test out Study Circles.

Study Circles would allow people with a variety of viewpoints to state their piece and strengthen the community (Engagement Streams 6). The Study Circle would have to be diverse in age, race, and political viewpoints. The most important piece is that it would have a culture where new ideas, learning, good/bad questions, and learning are completely accepted and encouraged. It would also be a place where active listening is completely practiced. A third party and unbiased facilitator would need to lead the group to ensure this safety and value is created. A group of people would be gathered to discuss issues pertaining to the county and their respective solutions. The findings would be reported to the county leaders for delegation.

### **Recommendation: Sustained Dialogue**

To resolve conflicts we suggest: agree to disagree, build trust, feel comfortable, issues can only be resolved when you change your behavior/ attitude, or expand your perspective.

"Sustained dialogue is a process for transforming the relationships that are essential to democratic political and economic practice. Sustained Dialogue is not a problem solving workshop; it is a sustained interaction to transform and build relationships among members of deeply conflicted groups so that they may effectively deal with practical problems. As a process that



develops over time through a sequence of meetings, SD seems to move through a series of recognizable phases including a deliberative ‘scenario-based’ stage and an ‘acting together’ stage,” (Engagement Streams 6).

In our view, developing relationships and maintaining an open dialog with the individuals you work closely with will allow for the most efficient and effective problem solving. Open dialog between coworkers is not something to be taught in a workshop, but rather developed through continual interaction (Engagement Streams 6). Essentially, make sure that people who work together are comfortable communicating with each other. People may work more effectively if they establish personal relationships.

### **Recommendation: Have More Groups like Youth Commission**

We recommend that Clark County should have more groups like the Youth Commission because as the research states, Research suggests citizens understand and follow rules better if they have a part in making them (Lowndes 67). We should have more groups like the Youth Commission because it impacts the community in a positive way.

With more youth groups, there would be more youth voice from the soon to be leaders, and that input would make Clark County a more well-rounded and represented society (Promoting Youth 6). In turn, youth become connected to the community and as an outcome want to strive to make it a better place. We as citizens will be more attentive in community matters when we are involved! One article we examined reaffirms our claim:

“Where citizens are part of the rule-making their awareness of and allegiance to the rules increases and considerable attention is given to communicating rules and debating rule changes. Where citizens are not part of the rule-making their allegiance to them is limited and their engagement with rule changes may be minimal (Lowndes 67).”

We believe more Youth Commission or type groups would involve citizens in the rule making process and they would further engage in the government.

### **Recommendation: Actively Promote Diversity**

Promoting diversity is an important factor in creating a successful and happy community (Lowndes 54). This means encouraging the fact that people are all different by nature; in order to create a “local fit” in a community; acceptance of those differences is the key support system for that idea.

*“Changing the views of a community’s youth will change the outcome of that community’s future...”*

We suggest diversity parades and celebrations to embrace our differences and include the entire community. Also, nights at schools dedicated to the uniqueness of the students would impact youth in particular, as well as “diversity clubs.” Changing the views of a community’s youth will change the outcome of that community’s future, creating a more accepting and diverse society.

### **Recommendation: Leaders Welcome Dissenting Opinions**

Too many leaders shut down opinions they don’t agree with or that don’t sit well with them

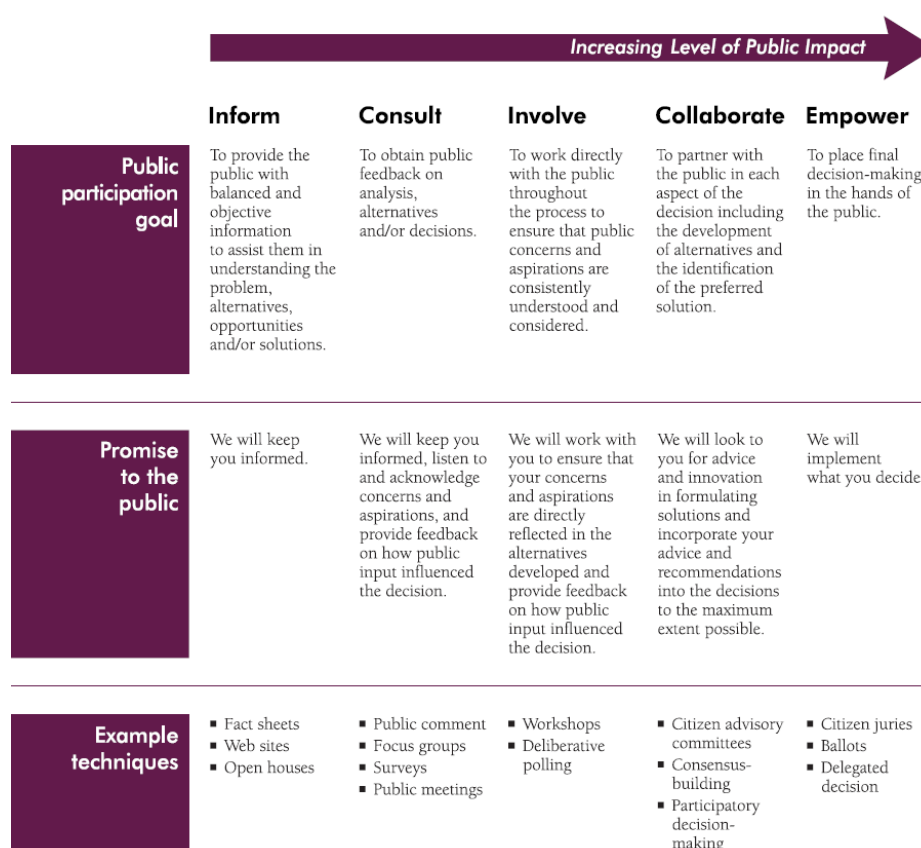
(Lowndes 61). We should have more leaders or have people encourage people to speak up because their voices are important (Thompson 6). This could even be as simple as instructing the heads of companies to encourage their employees and make sure that if someone has a voice, that voice is heard.

Every person in a community has an opinion; if those opinions are brought out into the light by leaders, or even through simple encouragement from a friend, the community would become a much more open place. The Youth Commission seeing our work making a difference motivates us even more to help our community become better. Therefore, public participation needs to be designed-into local partnerships, not assumed in. We need to make a county plan.

## Methods of Engagement

For our research project we looked at several different techniques that engage citizens in the community, many of which are provided in an article titled, “Effective Engagement: A Guide to Principle & Practice,” (Russell 19-32) as well as utilized theories from the Sparc BC *Spectrum of Public Engagement* (pictured below) during youth led discussions and workshops.

We found that different methods of citizen engagement each had their own positives and negatives. We found that using a diverse group of citizens allows the government to understand the public opinion of community issues. This allows citizens to be actively engaged in the community.





### ***Open Space Method***

Open space is a large community event where citizens put their issues relating to the community on a matrix and sign up for workshops to help solve those issues on a signup sheet (Russell 20). If implemented correctly they can be very powerful tools.

In order to hold such an event, the group must be diverse and their opinions must be received as equal. It is to run like a formal meeting; issues are raised, and causations and solutions to those issues are debated and discussed until an action plan has been created and voted upon. This method of gathering feedback allows large and diverse groups of people to be able to voice their concerns and opinions in a way where they are perceived as equal as well as coming up with solutions and recommendations as a community.

### ***Depth Interviews Method***

Depth interviews are one-on-one interviews that last one to two hours long. This method of interviewing was developed after the realization was reached that many people do not feel safe speaking on certain issues and topics in public surveys, for various reasons including backlash, comfort levels and safety concerns (Russell 23). They encourage the people being interviewed to open up as well as to direct the conversations, answer specific and complex questions, as well as address issues the interviewers may not have even thought of.

For example, a committee that dealt with issues affecting the population of the community who were homeless found using depth interviews as a method to gain feedback, after realizing they were not getting feedback from their traditional surveys as those being interviewed feared their honesty would have negative repercussions (Russell 23). Doing the depth interviews allowed the committee to be directed to issues the people were facing within the community and what they felt the committee could do to address those issues.

Having a program with depth interviews allows more detailed feedback to be collected while simultaneously gaining information on sensitive, complex, and controversial issues that people might not be comfortable discussing in a regular survey setting. It allows the surveyors to gain feedback from specific groups and communities of people.

### ***Citizen Panel Method***

A citizen panel is, “a group of about 500-2000 citizens who agree to take part in regular surveys. The panel is selected to be representative of the population. Approximately one-third of the panel is replaced every year to ensure it remains representative. Surveys are usually carried out by post or by telephone and sometimes by convening focus groups of panel members,” (Russell 25). A citizen panel of this degree would be very doable in Clark County. We believe this would be an excellent alternative for engaging citizens in their own homes.

### ***Community Fora Method***

In this method of engagement, community groups are established for consultation and participation focusing on a particular topic. Meetings, events and workshops can all be used to unite citizens around specific topics.

We recommend Clark County allow residents to have their voice heard in settings such as monthly meetings, annual events, seminars or workshops, all under the Community Fora method (Russell 31). Spread the local awareness through social media, or contact individuals through phone and email.

### ***'Imagine' Method***

The Imagine method is newly researched and developed. Essentially, people come together to share past experiences of success regarding a certain topic (Russell 27). Imagine involves community consultation based on appreciative inquiry. This particular form asks people to tell stories of what works, in their personal experience. Some pros to this type are shared viewpoints, storytelling, flexibility of workspace and networking opportunities.

We recommend forming the first *Imagine Clark County* where citizens get to come together and positively reflect on their experiences here.

### ***Collaboration Strategies***

“Effective collaborations are able to generate positive outcomes for the audience they serve. Collaboration is defined as ‘a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible,’” (Borden 1).

We read an article titled, “Assessing Your Collaboration: A Self-Evaluation Tool”. The article discusses a self-evaluation tool that examines thirteen factors that can influence the collaboration process (*right*). We think this tool could work well in Clark County, upon adaption.

1. We recommend distributing a checklist/self-evaluation form to employees and enforce ways to improve collaboration/communication based on checklist scores. The self-evaluation is to ensure and remind employees to use collaboration.
2. We recommend developing a youth version of the Checklist and use it in schools to improve youth collaboration and communication. Start at a young age so it becomes a lifelong skill.

<b>A COLLABORATION PROGRESS CHECKLIST</b>					
Factors	Strongly Agree 1	Somewhat Agree 2	Neither Agree or Disagree 3	Somewhat Disagree 4	Strongly Disagree 5
Goals					
Communication					
Sustainability					
Research and Evaluation					
Political Climate					
Resources					
Catalysts					
Policies/Laws/Regulations					
History					
Connectedness					
Leadership					
Community Development					
Understanding Community					
Totals					
Grand Totals					

Being able to identify the factors that are challenging a group's functionality is very important. Once they realize what is going wrong strategies to develop solutions to those problems can be created. A way problem can be created. A way to pin-point the challenging factors is to use the challenging factors is to use the collaboration checklist. For a further explanation of the theory, visit the website in our [works cited](#) page.

## **Theory-Driven Recommendations**

As part of our research we studied different communication theories and applied them as a lens for community engagement.

### **Knowledge Gap Theory**

The knowledge gap is a rift in the society in which the wealth or higher income populations have information that the lower income populations don't have access to (Knowledge Gap 1). This is basically saying knowledge is powerful and when people have an increased amount of knowledge than others, a power gap in society forms. Pertaining to our county, we believe that youth need to stay informed and have proper representation. Clark County has a very wide range of youth, all in different socioeconomic status. People/youth with less knowledge might not have equal opportunity (Knowledge 1).

The people who aren't participating may be unaware of subjects that may directly affect them. For example, people who have low income and the working homeless don't have the access to knowledge about opportunities to get involved. They might not have smart phones or wifi allowing them to get up-to-date information on community issues and events.

A few ways we thought of that Clark County can do to lessen the communication gap and increase information access for all citizens to become involved in local county issues are to provide contemporary news/issues classes, teach through social media, create teen news websites, provide local library exposure, target schools and other citizens for being outreach partners, teach about opportunities through radio stations, utilize email blasts or newsletters people could opt-in to, spread news door-to-door, and highlight events in the newspaper.

Access to stored information differs across groups according to Knowledge Gap Theory (Knowledge Gap 2). Not every school district has for example, iPads/Chromebooks in Clark County. Lower income citizens may not have the same resources access as higher income citizens, which hinders their ability to get information as easily. It is important to link and guide youth to world news, social media and web pages for the county. We also think it is important to create a common ground for everyone to share information. Ways to do this is to create blogs or have informational open houses.

### **Relevant Social Contact**

Relevant Social Contact is when a person with more education has more contact with different perspectives, thus understands public issues better (Knowledge Gap 3). One way this directly affects youth is that a parent's economic status has a lot to play in

understanding public issues. If your parents do not have access to resources this means their children most likely do not either. Youth could be more active in community if they had more social context. **We recommend that the county should have a user-friendly, youth oriented website for informational outreach purposes.**

We believe that Clark County could provide youth access to more “relevant social contact”. One way is to have information at schools about public issues. The county could create newsletters and collect responses. Clark County could also advertise volunteer opportunities at schools/youth groups to offer more community access. Additionally, the [County Connections program](#) discussed earlier would create greater sense of relevant social contact.

We believe that to have a significant voice everyone needs to stay informed and be motivated (Knowledge Gap 1). We think it is important for local government to help motivate citizens to get involved. Not with punishment but with *positive encouragement, opportunity, inclusiveness, and appreciation*. As a community it is important to showcase news that pertains to a variety of groups. Misinformed and uninformed citizens are detrimental to relevant social contact (Knowledge Gap 3).

### **Selective Exposure**

In essence, the Knowledge Gap Theory says selective exposure is being exposed to information because you have access to it, and being able to shut down someone else’s statement because you have more knowledge access than them (Knowledge Gap 4). A person with education is more likely to know what to do with the information they know, and they could use it to limit other people’s opportunities.

Selective exposure affects who is involved in Clark County issues and who isn’t (Knowledge Gap 4). Being a part of the Youth Commission, we are more educated than most of our peers in local government and issues in our community, how to get involved, and we learn about other programs that exist too. We get to understand our community while other youth don’t even know we exist.

Clark County can include the information and issues youth and other groups are exposed to by sharing it on social media, ask citizens about issues and address the issues that they see as important.

Clark County can reduce the impact of selective exposure by providing more community events that are open to the public. Inform everyone about issues and county events through email, flyers, mail, social media, posters, county-wide announcements. Also, the county can encourage more available school resources in regards to county government. Clark County can target groups that are underrepresented across the board. It might be important for the county to have data that shows which citizens are involved in county issues and which are being left behind or ignored. One possible example is assessing who attends community hearings. Then, once that information is analyzed, reach out the underrepresented population and encourage them to attend hearings.

Media target markets work according to Knowledge Gap Theory. This means since certain products are targeted to certain people, some sects of people are left unaware and therefore the knowledge gap continues to widen (Knowledge Gap 3). Clark County can target youth and other groups not currently as included in local issues with social media and talking to schools leaders, and educators. Clark County can go to youth because most youth don't have the chance to discover such things for themselves. Youth offer an interesting opinion on issues. They experience things every day that other age groups don't.

Clark County should make information about community issues more public-friendly or at least in a language that an average community member would understand. An example of this would be less 10 page PDF's with big words and more to-the-point social media posts. Twitter posts should be friendly announcements about what's going on. It might be a good idea to interview low income community members for better representation in the county policy. This will in turn decrease the knowledge gap.

*"A diverse community is good, and a community that provides opportunity for diverse voices to be heard is even better!"*

Local issues can excite and intrigue the community to stand up for their beliefs. The more people talk about local issues and successes the more it is known. A diverse community is good, and a community that provides opportunity for diverse voices to be heard is even better! Bringing different social groups together to make decisions that affect us all is key.

### **Spiral of Silence Theory**

This theory explains how if people may feel like they don't belong or aren't "at the top" of society, they won't speak up to something (Spiral 1). The article describes how people have fears of separating those around them and how they tend to keep their attitudes to themselves when they think they're in the minority. In other words, the spiral of silence theory is when people become silent due to public intimidation.

This theory manifests itself in many ways: when you hear an opinion in media it is going to be the one of the majority, or how some people have more "vocal space" than others in a community. Youth may not speak because they think adults don't take them serious because we don't have life experience. This theory is important because it helps encourage others in the community to speak up because we need their ideas!

The Youth Commission agreed that people are very concerned about their public image, so they stay silent if they feel as though speaking will degrade them. The minorities may feel like their opinions are unworthy or unimportant in discussion; they may feel "up against the army", so to speak. Minorities may not participate in local government because of the spiral (Spiral 1).

### **Recommendations:**

- Encourage disagreements. People can have varying viewpoints and still offer something to a discussion.

- Neighborhood meetings could be used to welcome youth and lower communication barriers. Have the people from each neighborhood make the decisions that impact their specific neighborhood.
- Seek out minority voices and ask how they are feeling and why. Help them understand that others might feel the same.
- Create workshops that draw minorities, encourage them to get involved and inform them on ways to get involved.

### **Communication Accommodation Theory**

The Communication Accommodation Theory explains how you change your communication style based on the way others are communicating. The article describes communication accommodation as “to elaborate the human tendency to adjust their behavior while interacting with others,” (Communication 1). People either want to stand in with the crowd, or stand out. People adapt to others formal speech and attitudes to fit in with the person they’re talking to.

Due to fear of rejection people change their behavior according to what they think will be better perceived (Communication 2). Being a part of a minority viewpoint or social status leads to lessened confidence, therefore they are less likely to voice their opinion. If people are put into a group setting with people with higher social status, their voice might be repressed.

### **Recommendation: Create Opportunities for Youth-to-Youth Discussion**

The Youth Commission recommends providing more opportunity for youth leaders to engage other youth so that the communication accommodation doesn’t drown out important youth voices.

There are many differences in peoples speaking style because they all have different backgrounds and experiences (Communication 2). People adapt to that conversation based on how others react. While having conversations, people feel the need to fit in. Youth Commissioners observed a social food chain and at the top are the higher social status and knowledgeable and educated people. People tend to be influenced by those with a high social status.

### ***Convergence and Divergence***

Convergence is when people change themselves to match the other person’s way of interacting/ interests to reduce social awkwardness (Communication 2). When you change the way you talk and act to reduce social conflict. Divergence is when people emphasize social differences and non-verbal communication (Communication 2). In other words, when you blow your thoughts and opinions way out of proportion to show a clear difference in social aspects.

Conflicting views can cause issues between communicating groups. People of higher socioeconomic status can intimidate those of lower socioeconomic status and fewer voices

will be heard. (Eg. If you were to talk to the mayor, you would voice your thoughts with a layer of respect.)

### Recommendations

- Higher ranked members of communities can apply convergence to appear more relatable and be more inclusive to the whole community. Talk to youth in a way that makes us feel included, appreciated, respected and understood.
- Finding people and connecting them by their relevant social group. For youth, seek them out in schools and social media.
- Some ways to attract youth to participating could include “Youth late night” to involve/ help youth gain knowledge on this. Have youth from all around the county attend so no one is left out as the only youth from their area. Also advertise at bus stops.

### Conclusion

The Youth Commission thanks Clark County for providing us with such a challenging and important topic. Not only have we been able to provide this report, but we have also gotten to learn a great deal ourselves that we will continue sharing with the people in our lives.

*“We believe citizen engagement should be a top priority for the county...”*

We believe citizen engagement should be a top priority for the county, and that the recommendations in this report are representative of the voices of youth all throughout Clark County in how to increase youth voice and engagement. Our ideas have been researched through youth-led discussions, focus groups, scholarly article analysis, and online web searches, and more.

Thank you for your continued support for youth programs.



For more information on the Clark County Youth Commission, please contact Elizabeth Hill at [Elizabeth.hill@clark.wa.gov](mailto:Elizabeth.hill@clark.wa.gov) or call (360) 397-2130 Ext. 5133. Additionally, you can visit us online at <https://www.clark.wa.gov/community-services/youth-commission>. This research project was sponsored by Clark County Department of Community Services and the Clark County Youth House.



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