

## **FEEDBACK FROM UNSM CRACKER BARREL SESSION ON YOUTH ENGAGEMENT**

Youth are often absent from municipal decision making although they are as affected by municipal planning and program delivery as any resident. This poses a problem for municipalities. How can we develop youth specific policies when youth are excluded from municipal decision making? The answer is that we cannot, but youth engagement can be challenging if you do not know where to begin. Several cracker barrel sessions were held on the topic of youth engagement during the 109<sup>th</sup> Annual UNSM Conference. The following will provide a brief overview of some key considerations that emerged from those sessions.

Connecting with youth can be challenging given the generational differences that separate the children of the internet age and those of the baby boom. Civic societies that emphasize leadership and community service such as: 4H, Kiwanis, Lions Club and Rotary Club are excellent resources that are already working with youth in your community. Your local high school, Nova Scotia Community College campus, community health centre, fire department and police detachment are also important resources that may already have established youth programs. It is important to recognize who the potential partners are in your community and to build relationships with NGOs and other organizations that are already working with youth.

How you communicate, engage and associate with youth are questions that must be answered at the community level. There are many Nova Scotia specific resources available that can assist in the development of your own strategy (see below). Grants for organizational and community capacity building are also available through the Nova Scotia Youth Secretariat. No matter what shape your strategy takes remember that youth are the experts on the issues that affect them and they should be viewed as resources, not objects. You may even wish to designate your local high school as a community of interest in order to include youth perspectives in community consultations. Youth engagement does not have a cookie cutter solution, so keep in mind that what works for one municipality may not work for yours.

It is important to identify possible barriers to youth engagement when considering the structure of your youth engagement strategy. For example, youth in rural regions are generally bused into town to attend regional high schools and quite often, the school bus is a youth's only means of returning home. A lack of transportation can restrict membership in youth town council or civic societies to youth living within close proximity of the host venue. The time of youth council or committee meetings can also pose a barrier. An afterschool or evening meeting may seem suitable, but these times could deter youth who are involved in organized sports or who work part-time jobs. Solutions to such problems could be as straightforward as organizing a ride share service or hosting noontime meetings.

Youth engagement should be a priority for all municipalities in Nova Scotia. The province is aging and youth out-migration has increased fourfold in the past five years. Youth perspectives must be incorporated within municipal planning and decision making if we are to make this province a more attractive place to live and work. You can start this process by approaching civic societies and schools in your community. Take the time to review the resources available to build your organizational and community capacity and be mindful of barriers that discourage youth engagement. Youth are a valuable resource that can better our communities and offer creative solutions to municipal issues. It is incumbent upon municipal leaders not to take our youth for granted.

## **Important Resources**

**HeartWood Centre for Community Youth Development**

<http://heartwood.ns.ca/>

**Nova Scotia Secondary School Student's Association**

<http://nsssa.ca/>

**Nova Scotia Youth Advisory Council**

<http://youth.ednet.ns.ca/>

**Nova Scotia Youth Secretariat**

<http://novascotia.ca/coms/families/youthsecretariat/index.html>

**The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement**

<http://www.engagementcentre.ca/>