

# City of Burlington

## Youth on Boards Progress Report

### 2002-2003

#### **Background**

Beginning in 1999, the Burlington Legacy Project brought together diverse parts of the Burlington community to forge a vision for the city's future. The process was unique in many ways; one of the main features that distinguished Legacy's undertaking from other planning processes was the strength of youth voices in the community dialogue. Youth made up more than a quarter of those participating in the town meetings and forums out of which the Legacy Action Plan was developed. Among the 30-year goals for this plan is to empower youth to participate in decisions that affect their city and neighborhoods. A priority action for realizing this goal is to provide youth representation on City boards and commissions, with the representatives to be chosen by youths themselves. Acting on this input, Legacy has joined with Club Youth Speak Out to work on creating a place for youth on the City's boards and commissions.

An obstacle to creating a permanent place for Burlington's youth on boards and commissions has been a City Charter requirement that board members be of legal voting age. To address this barrier, Legacy asked City Council to consider an amendment to the charter that would eliminate this requirement and allow youth to serve as full voting members on any board or commission. Such a charter change would require the approval of city voters and the state legislature. In the winter of 2001, the City Council agreed to a one-year pilot program to examine the potential benefits and difficulties of placing youth on boards. Non-voting positions were created on three boards: the School Board, Library Commission and Parks and Recreation Commission. After the one-year trial was completed, the Council would reconsider an amendment to the City's charter that would affect all City commissions and allow youth to serve as full voting members.

Under the pilot program, the School Board agreed to add a youth representative as well as place youth on each of the board's three committees. The Library Commission and the Parks and Recreation Commission also volunteered places for youth members on their boards. The positions were advertised through youth agencies, the high-school and alternative high-school programs and the media. Interested youth between 15 and 17 years old were invited to submit a written application. Youth representatives were chosen to fill the Library and Parks and Recreation positions by a selection committee of their peers, with the Library Commission representative officially appointed by the mayor as a full voting member. The schools were responsible for selecting the school board representatives. All youth representatives underwent a half-day training session organized by Legacy and Club Youth Speak Out to prepare for their service. The representatives began their service in the summer of 2002.

The following report, prepared by Legacy staff for City Council's review, examines the first year of the Youth on Boards pilot. The report is based upon a survey of youth representatives and their adult committee chairs as well as several subsequent conversations with respondents. The first two sections present the perspectives of the youth representatives and board chairs (respectively), and the final section provides staff recommendations for the Youth on Boards pilot.

## **Feedback from Youth Representatives**

Legacy staff received feedback from four of the five youth serving on boards and commissions. Staff spoke with one youth who had discontinued his involvement on a board because of scheduling conflicts, and the response from the remaining three youth suggested varying levels of engagement in their respective boards and commissions. Overall, the feedback indicated that serving on a board was not always easy for the youth, but that it has been a good learning experience and has generally held their interest.

The youth board members who responded to the survey felt well accepted and supported on their boards but not always useful. Of the active youth board members who replied, only one believed that she was well listened to and useful on her board. Another felt only somewhat useful and said that he spoke out less frequently than the adult members. A third lamented that her voice was not heard often and that she did not feel that she made the same contribution as the adult members. The range of responses reflects not only the level of comfort each youth has in speaking out in an adult group but also the varying speed with which each has developed in his or her role. One of the youth explicitly acknowledged this need for development, explaining that he remained quiet for the time being so that he could learn and grow more effective in his role on the board.

Support from the boards has been an important factor in determining the quality of experience the youth have had. Several of the youth related that they were welcomed and helped by adult board members whom they knew before joining the board, while others received the support of specific board members who stepped forward and offered to guide them and explain issues with which the youth were not familiar. The youth who discontinued his involvement explained that he had never been able to connect with board members to get involved, suggesting that part of the trouble was lack of outreach and direction from adult members. Another youth reflected that though she often felt embarrassed when asking for clarification on issues being discussed, adult members often thanked her afterwards for asking questions that were on their minds. In addition to support from their adult peers, the youth members also said that the Burlington High student council was very engaged in and supportive of their work.

Despite differing levels of active engagement in the boards' business, the pilot has clearly been an important learning experience for all of the youth. The youth who responded said that the issues discussed at meetings ranged from somewhat to very interesting to them. Specifically, the youth were excited by opportunities to explore current political issues such as the Patriot Act, and they spoke of having learned a lot about Burlington, people in their community, and the breadth of opinion in the city. One youth member shared that her experience in dealing with divisive issues on the school board convinced her of the importance of being involved in local politics and spurred her to become more involved.

In assessing the pilot, the youth members cautioned that the experience would not be appropriate for every teenager. They suggested that it takes someone who cares about the board's issues and is willing to sit through some less interesting sessions for the opportunity to have a say in important and engaging discussions. Despite the challenges, the youth clearly supported having a youth voice on the boards. The youth members

reacted negatively to one commission's proposal to form a separate youth board to advise the commission on youth issues. While they did not oppose the idea of a youth advisory board, the youth members strongly maintained that a separate youth board should not take the place of a youth member on the commissions.

### **Feedback from Board Chairs**

Four out of five board chairs responded to the survey (two from the school board subcommittees and the committee chairs for the Library and Parks and Recreation commissions). In general, the response to the pilot was positive: 3 of 4 considered the youth a beneficial addition to their boards. All of the committee chairs reported that the youth members were fairly engaged in the business of the boards. Though some of the youth were not as verbal as the adult board members, one chair related that the youth representative's comments had changed other board members' votes on several occasions. Despite this positive experience, though, there was little support for a charter change allowing youth to take a full voting seat on all boards and commissions.

To help gauge how fully youth were accepted on their respective boards, Legacy asked chairs if they felt that the board had faced issues that were harder or inappropriate to discuss with the youth member present. Two of the chairs responded that they felt comfortable having the youth member present in all discussions. One chair indicated that he had asked the youth member to sit out on an executive session dealing with a personnel issue, and he made a general suggestion that occasions calling for executive session might not be appropriate for youth. The fourth chair was uncomfortable including the youth member in some discussions, feeling that the youth member's presence changed the tenor of the conversation and that his lack of experience was a burden to the commission.

Asked whether the youth were adequately prepared for their service, two chairs responded that they were very well prepared. Another replied that the youth member was engaged, likable, and smart, but that he would rather each commission member bring an adult, professional experience. The last chair thought that the youth member was well prepared but said that he would recommend at least a two-year term, suggesting that the first year was a learning period and that youth members would likely become more engaged in their second year.

The final question posed to the board chairs queried whether they would support a charter change allowing youth as full voting members on all boards and commissions. The overall response was not supportive of a charter change. Only one chair supported giving youth a full voting role on boards, with the stipulation that they not have a vote on executive session issues. The chair further qualified his support with two suggestions for making the charter change feasible: 1) adding two members to each board to keep an odd number of votes and 2) giving each board or commission the opportunity to go through a trial year to decide whether a youth representative would be a positive addition.

Those not in favor of a charter change cited various reasons for their opposition. Two chairs thought that it would be inappropriate for youths to have a vote on sensitive issues because they do not pay their own taxes. Several chairs were generally uncomfortable

with youth voting on budget, personnel and contract issues. One suggested that it might be difficult to find enough youth who were motivated and interested in serving on a board; the chair worried that the quality of the youth members might be diluted if there were one on each board. Significantly, the strongest opposition to creating a permanent place for youth on City boards and commissions came from the chair of the only commission or board that had a youth member in a voting position. The chair opined that giving a high-school student a full voting position on the commission was a misuse of a spot that should have gone to an adult. He was very clear that he personally respected the youth on the commission and that it had not been disruptive to provide the youth a place, but he held that the board did not have enough seats to afford the luxury of exchanging a valuable adult perspective for a less-experienced youth perspective.

### **Recommendations**

There are several questions that should guide the next step for the Youth on Boards initiative: Was the pilot a positive experience for the youth participants? Was the pilot beneficial for the participating boards and commissions? Has the pilot provided enough feedback to inform a decision on changing the City Charter to allow youth to serve as voting members on boards and commissions?

In answer to the first question, the experience clearly has been positive for the youth who stayed actively involved in their boards. Our hope going into the pilot was that it would educate youth about local governance, encourage youth to become more civically engaged, and provide an important youth perspective to the host boards. All of these goals have been met, though the degree to which they were fulfilled varied by board. While serving on a board may not be for every teenager, the pilot showed the opportunity to be beneficial for youth with enough motivation and interest in serving.

The pilot also demonstrated the importance of providing support for youth members, both to help ensure a positive experience for the youth and help them develop into active members of their boards. Organizing a training day for the youth members helped smooth their transition onto the board, but even more valuable was the ongoing guidance several of the youth received from adults on their boards. If the Youth on Boards initiative continues, it would be beneficial to formally recruit adult mentors from boards hosting youth members to help welcome and encourage youth members in their involvement.

The boards and commissions that have participated in the pilot also seem to have benefited from the experience. Though it is clear that the majority of boards are not yet comfortable with youth in voting roles, it is equally apparent that the youth perspective has been welcomed in an advisory role on most of the pilot boards and would be welcomed in future years. The board chairs offered some thoughtful suggestions for improving the initiative. A suggestion that came from several chairs was that youth sit out on executive sessions. Legacy staff agrees and suggests that it should be left up to the discretion of the board whether or not to include youth in executive sessions dealing with sensitive issues. A second suggestion that merits consideration was to provide youth with two-year terms so that they might grow into more active members on their boards.

This brings us to the last question: Was the pilot sufficient to inform City Council's decision on the charter change? Based upon the feedback collected for this progress report, we suggest that the pilot could benefit from another year's trial and expansion to other boards and commissions. An extra year would give the youth time to become comfortable in their roles and take a more active role. Comments from youth and board chairs suggested that the first year was a learning experience and that they expected youth members to become more outspoken and involved in the next year. The second year would also test whether board chairs' opinions on voting will change at all as they become more comfortable with youth participation. Expanding the initiative to include other city boards would provide a more comprehensive trial for the program with additional feedback from more diverse sources. We thus recommend that City Council extend the Youth on Boards pilot for a second year, with the understanding that Legacy staff will report back in one year's time so for City Council to review the possibility of a charter change, and that the pilot expand to other boards including, but not limited to, the Police Commission, Planning Commission, and Conservation Board.