

How Do Youth *Want* to Participate in Planning Processes?

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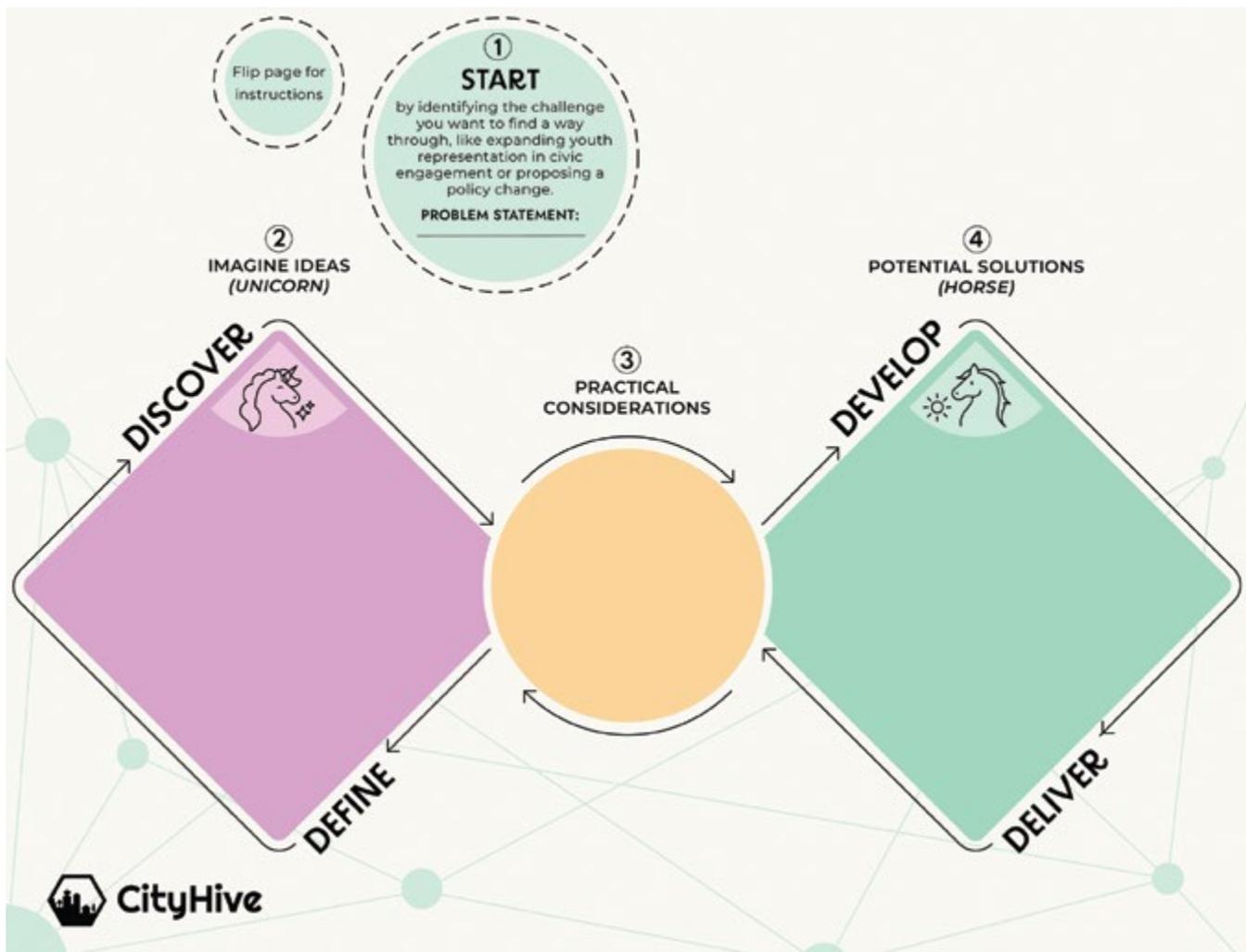
Changing climactic conditions, deepening inequality, and political polarization are rapidly reshaping communities across British Columbia. As youth prepare to inherit these crises, many want to intervene *now*, before these challenges become even more difficult to reconcile. Motivated by passion and creative thinking, youth have ideas about how planners and decision-makers can shape the future of our communities. But many of the young

people we work with do not feel welcomed or respected in decision-making spaces or find that their advocacy seldom informs action. As planners continue to innovate solutions to complex problems, we may also need to innovate our approaches to engaging with youth.

As a youth-led and youth-serving Metro Vancouver-based organization, CityHive responds to this challenge by bridging the gap between young people and municipal

decision-makers. In collaboration with partners at UBC, CityHive held a workshop series with 30 youth participants aged 18-28, *Expanding Youth Civic Engagement*. Here, we report on the recommendations participants generated that can support planners in creating youth-centered participatory planning processes. We have also produced a zine that further details youth-centered civic engagement methods (Maloney et al. 2025).

Figure 1: Double diamond design model handout used in CityHive workshops, adapted from the British Design Council, and designed by Lisa Besnier.



Youth Inclusion in Planning Processes

Planners have an uneven record of including youth in decision-making processes. Some planners assume youth do not have meaningful contributions to make to local decisions, believing youth lack content-specific and institutional knowledge. Consequently, planners may think youth perspectives can be assumed by “keeping kids in mind” (Checkoway et al. 1995). This is an inaccurate and dangerous assumption that homogenizes the perspectives of youth, who represent every social demographic beyond age, and perpetuates the problematic notion that planners hold the expertise to make decisions for others without needing to hear their opinions.

Youth desire and deserve agency over their collective future, as they will live with the impact of today’s decisions longer than any other demographic. When planners have

engaged youth, planners report that, given their stake in the future, young people tend to consider the long-range impact of decisions and develop more innovative and sustainable planning initiatives. Mobility and safety limitations often lead youth to focus on the community scale, generating interventions that also benefit lower-income and elder demographics (Chawla 2002). But planners have infrequently employed engagement approaches that enhance youth agency by partnering with or delegating power to youth, which can lead to disengagement and disenfranchisement from civic institutions (Botchwey et al. 2019). While there is an increasing trend among planners to engage with youth, planners may benefit from hearing how youth want to be meaningfully engaged in the planning process.

Expanding Youth Civic Engagement Workshop Series

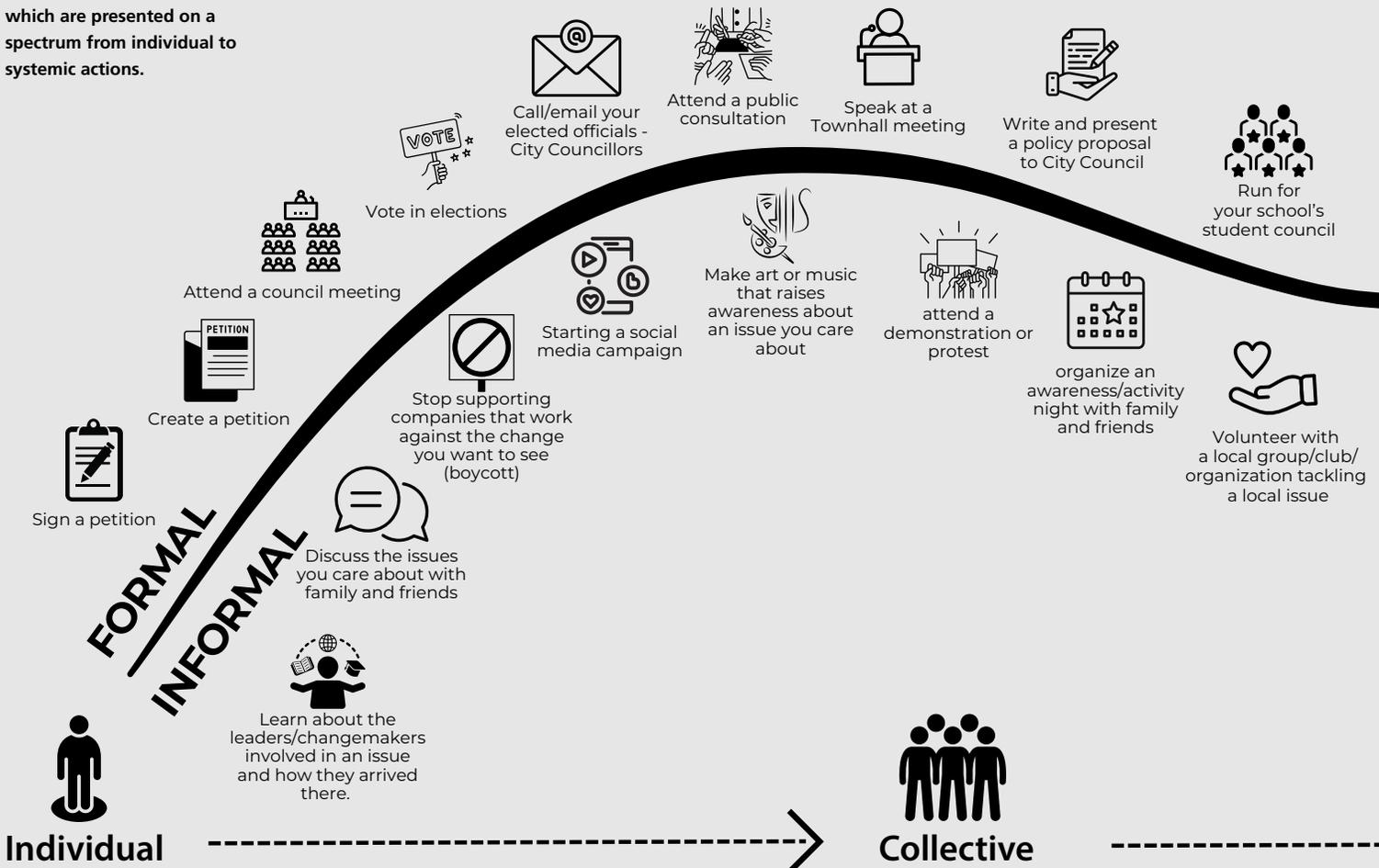
Our two-part workshop series empowered young people to articulate how they wish to engage in participatory planning spaces. To support youth in imagining alternative modes of civic engagement, we employed the double diamond model, which is a design thinking tool that provides a framework for generating a proposal that balances pie-in-the-sky visions against practical constraints (Figure 1). We see potential for this tool to be used in participatory planning spaces to support community members in devising actionable strategies to challenge the status quo.

The first workshop focused on CityHive’s ‘civic action continuum’ (Figure 2) to understand what calls youth to action and surface their experiences in civic engagement spaces. In the second workshop, we facilitated a

THE CIVIC ACTION CONTINUUM

ACTION can look like...

Figure 2: CityHive’s Civic Action Continuum details formal and informal modes of engagement, which are presented on a spectrum from individual to systemic actions.



collaborative visioning exercise based on the question, 'Imagining 20 years from today, how might we gather to participate in local governance?' After a reflective discussion on imagined alternatives, we invited participants to define their visions using the double diamond method.

Participant Reflections on Civic Engagement Spaces

Youth Engagement Experiences

We activated the civic engagement continuum with participants and asked them to use pink sticky notes to mark modes they've engaged with and blue sticky notes for modes they'd like to try but face barriers in accessing (Figure 3). This revealed that youth commonly engage in both formal and informal venues, but desire more formal,

systemic modes of engagement. Participants had complicated feelings about voting, which they felt was a necessary but insufficient mode of engagement, but ultimately decided that voting "is about the process, not the outcome." Participants commonly engage in extra-institutional activities such as creating and signing petitions, protesting, discussing urban issues with family and friends, and joining youth councils - spaces where they feel a sense of community and direct action. When participants discussed attending town halls or workshops, they consistently identified barriers in accessing and feeling respected in such spaces.

Barriers to Participation

Youth often encounter barriers when participating in formal modes of engagement. Participants, especially international students, commonly expressed that technical

and political jargon prevented their ability to understand and contribute to discussions. One participant commented that "it can be challenging to participate in municipal spaces because we might not speak the lingo, which makes it really intimidating." When youth do contribute, many feel that their voices and perspectives are not meaningfully valued, leading to disengagement from formal civic settings. This includes a perceived lack of proactive outreach and engagement from city staff and planners. Racialized youth expressed that they often face discrimination and feel dismissed when sharing their perspectives. These barriers impede youth agency and discourage future participation.

Opportunities for Youth Engagement

When asked about their desired modes of engagement, participants advocated for options that range from easy, low-barrier entry points

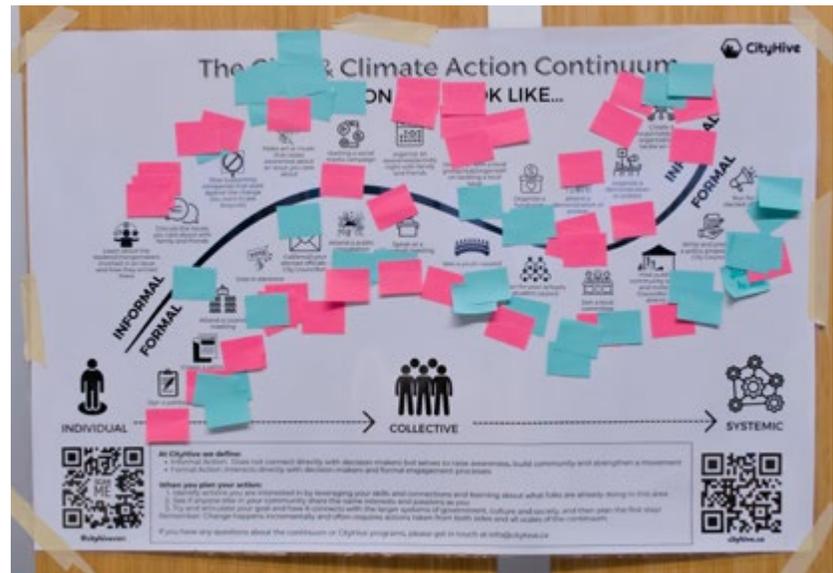
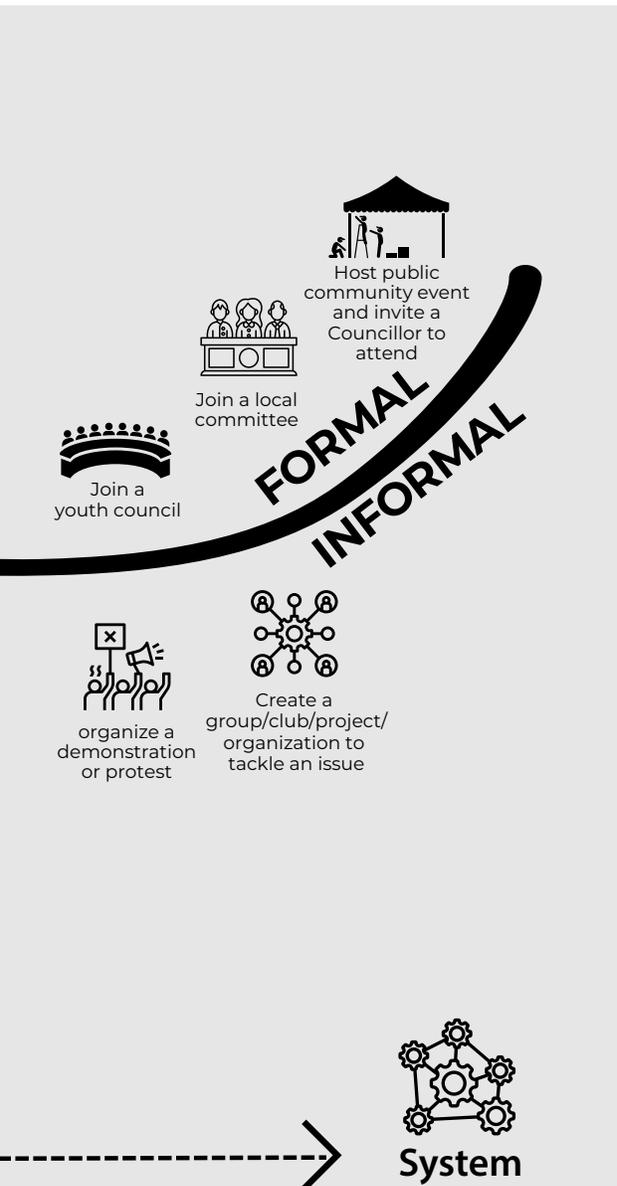


Figure 3: Distribution of participants' sticky notes, where pink represents modes of engagement youth have accessed, and blue represents modes they hope to access.

to fostering deep, reciprocal, and collaborative experiences. Quick, accessible modes offered online or through social media were seen as a powerful tool for collective organizing and knowledge mobilization. But participants also felt that deeper engagements that build connections among participants and co-generate knowledge can be transformative experiences. Examples included city-led youth councils and design-a-thons, where youth can critically explore topics, co-create solutions, and influence decision-making. This diverse engagement strategy, from simple advocacy to in-depth projects, is necessary for empowering youth to be proactive shapers of their communities.

Recommendations for Planners Engaging with Youth

1. Apply principles of reciprocity by treating engagement as an opportunity to collaborate on ideas.
2. Reduce anxiety and power differentials by bringing city staff and elected officials to youth spaces, including schools, and encourage open dialogue.
3. Address competing demands on youth time by offering accessible options (e.g. online) and tangible incentives (e.g. food, honoraria).
4. Support youth in refining their transformative ideas into feasible proposals, including with design thinking tools.
5. Value youth perspectives by using inclusive language, acknowledging power imbalances, and providing diverse avenues for engagement.
6. Communicate how participants' input is activated, and small milestones as they are met, to encourage sustained participation.

We encourage planners to activate these recommendations to create spaces where youth ideas can inform local decision-making. Youth have passionate, innovative visions for the future of their communities. Planners can leverage youth perspectives to address contemporary challenges and shape the future of the field. To do so, we need to design engagement spaces where youth feel that their presence and contributions are valued. The onus is on planners to create spaces where youth can exercise their agency in formal decision-making and create communities that youth are proud to inherit, continue taking care of, and pass down to future generations.

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