

ABSTRACT
Old Dominion Innovation Approaches Award
Town of Warrenton - Student Postcard Project

As the Town of Warrenton began the process of updating its Comprehensive Plan, there was a desire to seek out new and innovative community involvement techniques. With a population of approximately 10,000 residents, a new Town Manager, and a new Town Council, the stage was set for a renewed commitment to public outreach, transparency, and enhancing the quality of life.

The April 2016 issue of the American Planning Association's Planning Magazine stated "*...young people sometimes fly under the radar even though they are a huge part of our communities and have very different needs, perspectives – and tech skills – than their parents and grandparents.*" However, Warrenton, serving as the county seat and home to large youth population, sought to engage its young people as a critical launch of the Comprehensive Plan update's public input process.

The Student Postcard Project employed a new multi-disciplinary approach to allow students to explore how they would communicate what makes their community special to them. Conducted in six schools (public and private) located within the Town of Warrenton boundaries, students were asked to communicate their favorite place or activity in 2016, as well as their desire for the Town in 2040. Over 1,000 students, ages 5-18, participated in March through April of 2016. Civic, art, and English teachers provided the historical context of souvenir picture postcards where tourists purchase images of a place that denote how it is unique. Then students were asked to consider what makes the Town unique; what are the Town's special attributes? Town staff met with teachers and participated in the classrooms to share the function the Comprehensive Plan plays in a community and communicate the importance each voice has in the visioning process. The results led to the Town capturing input from **over ten percent** of the population.

The project was based on the simple premise that the students of today are the community leaders of tomorrow. Thus, they need to have a voice in their community. They also need to recognize they have a right and a responsibility to have a seat at the decision making table. However, many children of today have never been asked what they value, much less what they envision for the future. In fact, many youth struggle to imagine their community in the future. In an age where students are taught to memorize facts and figures, many feel they lack the imagination to conjure up a future for their community. Teaching kids how to think critically, proactively contribute, and problem solve is essential to the health of all communities.

The project was presented to the community in multiple formats, including electronic presentations, six 4'x6' display boards, the Town's website, and newsletter. The local press and high school newspaper featured the project in their publications. Today, the display boards are integrated into Town events and public meetings to help keep the students' vision part of decision making conversations as the Comprehensive Plan update moves forward.