

# A Visioning Statement for the Merced Youth Council

## ***Why a Thriving Merced Youth Council Matters***

Merced is a young city, with nearly 45% of our population comprised of children, youth and young adults under the age of 24. And with plans for UC Merced to add 4,000 students in the coming four years, the Merced community is growing younger. These young people are community assets who should be nurtured and whose talents should be tapped. Cities across the nation have learned that when young people are involved in local decision-making, they help elected officials identify and implement new strategies to address community problems.

Merced faces some serious problems impacting youth including high rates of child poverty, youth homicides, and disconnected youth. Seeking youth participation to address these issues offers new insights and options for strengthening our community. Youth should not be seen as problems or victims, but embraced as key resources to addressing the City's challenges.

As the *Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement* has noted:

*Youth civic engagement is critical to our democracy. Young people benefit personally by participating and communities need their voices and their energies to address problems. The future of our democracy depends on each new generation developing the skills, values and habits of participation. (CIRCLE, 2012)*

Youth Councils are one key strategy to support such engagement. In 2014, the Merced City Council re-established the Merced Youth Council to "promote youth involvement, their general welfare and to improve the overall quality of life." The Youth Council was envisioned as a sustainable structure to represent the voice of youth by communicating their wants, needs, and ideas to the City Council, and to advise them on City policy affecting youth. To date, however, limited investment in the development of the Youth Council has resulted in limited returns.

To assure that the Youth Council will become "one of the state's strongest ever," the Building Healthy Communities Neighborhoods Action Team led a four-month process to build a shared vision for its future, and to identify the supports and resources needed for the Council's long-term success. This visioning statement summarizes what we learned about what makes for a successful youth council, and what can be done locally to specifically strengthen the Merced Youth Council.

## ***A Vision for Merced***

*We reviewed research and experiences with a focus on effective California youth councils. Building on prior efforts, we contacted more than 50 councils and assessed the practices of two dozen active councils. Reports from the National League of Cities and the Institute for Local Government, among others, were consulted and follow-up interviews conducted with their lead staff. We learned that effective youth councils are reliant on a firm commitment to youth inclusion from all levels of staff and leadership, and are developed by building the capacity of adults, youth, and institutions. Growth takes time and expertise, but the benefits to local government, youth, and the community as a whole are substantial.*

*We facilitated dialogue* among more than 60 adult community members, leaders from local youth-serving organizations, and representatives of successful youth councils around the state to explore core principals and best practices and identify ways to embrace them in Merced. We spoke with city staff and elected officials to clarify their goals for the Merced Youth Council, and to assess barriers to its success. *We learned* there is strong local support for further investing in the Youth Council, and a shared vision for a council built on youth autonomy and adult mentorship.

*We engaged in conversations* with community youth through youth-focused activities produced by youth-serving organizations. More than 120 youth people attended sessions covering the functions of local government and civic engagement including the privilege and power of voting. *We learned* youth want to understand impact of public policy on their lives, families, and community. They are enthusiastic about getting involved and their interests range from connecting with diverse peers, to promoting positive recreation opportunities, to identifying policy options that will result in safer neighborhoods, economic opportunity, and a healthier community.

### ***From Vision to Reality: Steps to Strengthen the Merced Youth Council***

During the process we heard loud and clear from experts, residents, and youth that a robust youth council does not just happen “on its own.” A deliberate and strategic plan is needed that includes strong leadership and institutional commitment, community collaborations, and a real investment of resources. The following principles and practices would enable us to realize our shared vision for the Merced Youth Council.

***1. Effective youth councils reflect the commitment of elected officials to authentic youth civic engagement.*** Young people are seen as valuable participants in the work of local government, and are included through partnerships with adults who listen to and support them.

***For a thriving Merced Youth Council, we envision that:***

- The City Council embraces intergenerational collaboration, ensuring that their operations are welcoming to and respectful of young people so their participation is meaningful and their contributions benefit the entire community.

***2. Effective youth councils have official standing and are sustainable.*** The respective roles and functions of Youth Council members, City Council members, and city staff are codified, providing clarity, accountability and continuity through changes in youth council members, council members, and city staff; and, the Youth Council activities are guided by a clear Action Plan, supported with appropriate resources for success.

***For a thriving Merced Youth Council, we envision that the City Council:***

- Formally establishes the Merced Youth Council and its advisory role to the City Council through an ordinance reflecting a clear vision, goals and objectives.
- Adopts a Youth Council-developed mission statement and by-laws that articulate the principles and practices that will serve as the basis of the Youth Council’s work.
- Develops and regularly assesses progress toward objectives clearly delineated in an annual action plan.
- Supports Youth Council work with funding and resources necessary to enable its success.

**3. Effective youth councils have a diverse membership.** Youth Council members reflect the demographics of the community and include interested youth outside traditional leadership roles such as student government.

***For a thriving Merced Youth Council, we envision that:***

- It adopts recruitment and retention practices that create connections to all community youth, including those experiencing limited opportunity for input and involvement.
- Youth themselves play a central role in educating their peers about the role of the Youth Council, the responsibilities and rewards of serving, and how to become involved.

**4. Effective youth councils empower youth with genuine decision-making power.** Youth Council members are given responsibilities that respect their curiosity, commitment and energy and reflect a belief that young people can make substantive contributions to public decision-making.

***For a thriving Merced Youth Council, we envision that:***

- The structure and practices of the Youth Council allow for frequent interaction between Youth Council members and City Council members to communicate and see how their input is making a difference. Youth Council members are consulted on a wide range of issues that impact their current and future quality of life and make formal presentations to the City Council at least quarterly.

**5. Effective youth councils prepare youth and adults for their respective roles.** Youth Council members are supported by adults with the skills to develop authentic youth-adult partnerships.

***For a thriving Merced Youth Council, we envision that:***

- Youth Council members receive on-going training, and are mentored in the development of new skills. Topics should include the core functions of local government, working with adults, policy and 'root cause' analysis, and action research, among others.
- City Council members and key city staff work with youth development and civic engagement experts to develop skills in building effective intergenerational partnerships.
- Youth Council members, accompanied by city staff, have opportunities to meet with and learn from youth in other communities in California and nationally.

**6. Effective youth councils have dedicated staff that assist and mentor Youth Council members.** An adult coordinator supports Youth Council members in carrying out their duties.

***For a thriving Merced Youth Council, we envision that:***

- Staff assists with recruitment and retention activities; preparations for commissioner study sessions and routine meetings; development of materials for regular communications with the City Council; and coordination of community youth input sessions and other Youth Council-driven activities.

**7. Effective youth councils regularly obtain input from community youth.** Youth Council members use a variety of approaches to learn about the interests, concerns, and priorities of their peers in order to integrate this understanding into Youth Council and City decisions.

***For a thriving Merced Youth Council, we envision that:***

- Youth Council members plan and implement a wide range of activities, including an annual conference and quarterly forums, with the purpose of engaging and learning from community youth.

***8. Effective youth councils are supported by community stakeholders.*** Youth-serving organizations and other adults vested in the well being of young people support the Youth Council members' efforts.

***For a thriving Merced Youth Council, we envision that:***

- Community stakeholders participate in skill-building trainings to strengthen their capacity for youth-adult partnerships, collaborate in opportunities to connect the Youth Council with community youth, and otherwise help advance the Youth Council's goals.

As Merced grows, so should the involvement of our young people. Given adequate support, the Merced Youth Council can amplify the voice and contributions of young people, improving our community for the benefit of all.

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***Selected Resources:***

CIRCLE, The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (August 2012).

*That's not democracy: How out-of-school youth engage in civic life & what stands in their way.*

<http://civicyouth.org>

Forum for Youth Investment. (July 2007). *Building effective youth councils: A practical guide to engaging youth in policy making.* <http://forumfyi.org>

Institute for Local Government. <http://www.ca-ilg.org>

National League of Cities, Institute for Youth, Education and Families. (2010). *Authentic youth civic engagement: A guide for municipal leaders.* <http://www.nlc.org>

Youth Leadership Institute (2015). *What makes a youth commission work.* <http://yli.org>

