Through Our Eyes: Students Bring Fresh Perspective to Community Vision

By Greg Wortham, Mayor, City of Sweetwater; and
Kayla Chowning, Chair, Mayor's Youth Task Force and Sweetwater High School Class of 2014

From Mayor Wortham

An example of community action in Michigan that was presented at a Texas Municipal League Annual Conference provided inspiration to Sweetwater and other Texas towns, and now participants from that initiative share their "how-to" guide.

Summary: Essentially, a group of students takes photos of what they "like" about the community and what they "dislike" about the community. There will be stages before and after that provide additional school, family, and community discussion about these liked or disliked community attributes, and the community and students can "act" on likes and dislikes to make a difference. The opportunities and variations on this youth initiative can be as dynamic as the Texas communities that take on the eye-opening experience.

Sweetwater's variation: In the initial Michigan example, third graders were given a disposable camera; of course, nowadays everyone has a camera in their phone. In Sweetwater's case, our teachers suggested working with certain local "advanced classes" in first-third grades, fifth grade, and seventh grade. These "gifted and talented" classes have more curriculum flexibility than most standard classes, and they also feature 100 percent motivated students (and 0 percent "problem" students) who are very articulate to discuss their thought processes, field research, findings, and opinions. Because we worked with pre-high school students, the students had to ask their parents to drive them around the community to take these pictures. This created a bonus situation involving more family discussion about the assignment, the community, the "why" certain community things are "good" or "bad," and so on. This was not a calculated decision about the project, but turned out to be very important. If we had worked only with high school students, there potentially would have been zero family discussion, and the project might have ended more like just another short-term "homework assignment" handled without as much thought and discussion.

As mayor, I met with the students only after they had completed their individual decisions and after their classes had made final decisions. I had the opportunity to discuss with each class certain opportunities/status/challenges about the items they had identified. Working with teachers and students, we scheduled a two-night community open house where parents, community leaders, and interested citizens could meet with and hear from the students.

In the Sweetwater project, our students' classes all featured certain intriguing results, such as the fact that the same community sites showed up in almost every class in both the "like" and the "dislike" categories. For example, students "liked" parks but "disliked" the lack of certain facilities in the parks; "liked" that we had a historic movie theater, but "disliked" that "historic" meant that it had been closed for a couple of years, and they could not watch movies there anymore.

The seventh-grade teacher supervising her students in the project challenged her students to "do something" about their choices, and they chose to focus on the Texas Theatre, a historic 1935 movie theater that had been closed two years. The 33 seventh graders chose to contribute $500 ($15 each) and to sell hamburgers to raise funds. Their 40-degree December 2008 Saturday project ended up raising $3,000 (including profits from burger sales, their $500, contributions other people dropped off, and so forth) and ultimately raised virtually all the funds for Texas Theatre to date ($100,000+ can be traced to the seventh graders). Their initiative jump-started a stalling fundraising campaign (what had started as an optimistic initiative in the summer of 2008 became obviously more challenging in the economy of the fall/winter of 2008). The adults raised about $30,000 toward the purchase and renovation of the theater. Next, the Sweetwater Industrial Foundation (SIF) matched with $30,000 (SIF leadership = some grandparents of some of the seventh graders and other students). Then the Sweetwater Chamber of Commerce (SCC) put in $50,000+ (SCC Board = some parents of some of the seventh graders and, of course, of other local students). Students were later featured on local Abilene news stations, as well as *BBC World News* from London and other media.

Those seventh graders are now juniors, the Sweetwater High School Class of 2014, and we are considering another run at the student photo project. Members of the Class of 2014 and their fellow students started watching first-run movies again at the Texas Theatre in spring 2009, thanks to their own efforts and to the independent Texas Theatre

non-profit community initiative formed to advance the entire renovation project.

Volunteers from Texas State Technical College and the Sweetwater Chamber of Commerce followed up on the 2008-2009 photo project by establishing the "Future Sweetwater" project, which involved 12-13 sophomore students in a year-long leadership development program. "Future Sweetwater" started in 2009-2010 and has continued in school years 2010-2011 and 2011-2012. "Future Sweetwater" is competitive to enter and has become very popular. The current "Future Sweetwater" class is completely composed of Class of 2014 students who were in the seventh grade group that saved the Texas Theatre.

Sweetwater also created the Mayor's Youth Task Force (led by high school students), which supervised the 2008 photo project. So we now have a multi-layered youth leadership initiative.

From Kayla Chowning

Kayla Chowning, current chair of the Sweetwater Mayor's Youth Task Force, was a part of the seventh grade "Through Our Eyes" photo project and Texas Theatre rescue team. She is also a graduate of the 2011-2012 Future Sweetwater program.

In the seventh grade, most students don't know too much about the history of the town they come from. The only thing they notice is the new buildings that look really nice and neat, and then they notice the places that look 100 years old, which they are afraid will come crashing to the ground any minute. Well, when I was in the seventh grade, my history teacher gave our class a project: go out and find the five most beautiful places in Sweetwater, take photos of the places, and put them on a poster board labeled "Good." After that, the assignment was to do the exact same thing, but to find five places in Sweetwater that looked unpleasant and not someplace you would want to go. After we took a picture of those places, we were to put them on a poster board labeled "Bad."

As we presented our projects, we all started to see a pattern: almost every one of us had nearly the same pictures on our "Bad" poster. Yet, one picture stood out to everyone. It was a picture of the Texas Theatre. A place every one of us used to go when we were younger to watch the newest movie releases. Somewhere we would meet almost every weekend to see all our friends and get away from our parents for an hour or two. To see that picture of a theatre we used to love and enjoy so much be on everyone's "Bad" poster really upset my seventh-grade class. The theatre had been shut down for

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a couple of years by this point and looked like it belonged in a scary movie! The windows of the front door were broken, the inside was being used for storage, and it looked very worn down.

My seventh grade class decided something that day: we wanted to reopen the Texas Theatre. Not only because it was a part of our younger childhood, but also because it was important to the city of Sweetwater. We organized fundraisers, we held workdays when we would go to clean it up, and we got community groups to get involved, too. We did everything we could do as 13- and 14-year-olds to open the Texas Theatre back up. My class and I realized that we might be young, but we could make a difference, no matter how small we were.

The Class of 2014 has stuck together through the years, and we have done a lot to help our community. Many of us just went through a program called Future Sweetwater, where we learned about the history of our hometown and how lucky we are to live in such a remarkable place. We are about to be juniors in high school now, and we are very proud to say that the Texas Theatre is open again. It may not be at its full potential, but no one has given up, and everyone will continue to work to restore it. ★

"How-to" General Steps Over a Semester:

1. Student levels/classes are chosen (via discussions with teachers and ISD officials for best results and to ensure permission from the ISD).

2. The mayor or another coordinating community leader meets with teachers (but probably not with students yet). It's definitely best to avoid any guidance to teachers or students concerning a defined "find-this" agenda (i.e., "Bring me pictures of the junk houses as 'dislike' and pictures of my new shoe store as 'like,'" etc.).

3. The teachers give generic guidance to students and discuss the context of the community project.

4. Students take on the photo assignment. This phase will bring in the family discussion, family participation in the community project search, etc.

5. Students bring their individual results to the classroom for compiling with classmates and for classroom discussions.

6. The teachers lead class discussions, and students in each class independently compile their results.

7. The mayor/community leader(s) meet with each class to see what their findings are.

8. The mayor/community leader(s) see where common themes are arising.

9. Some type of community display (evening event) can be held to bring together all the students from the various classes, so that each class can present their findings, all students can see what other students identified, and the community can see themes across the classes, as well as hear the students discuss the "why" of their findings.

10. There can be phases after the town hall event where students (and adults) are challenged to "do something" about either enhancing "likes" or solving "dislikes."