

## Youth Community Perceptions - Ellis

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Let's go to a city council meeting. City council members are listening to a presentation about perceptions of their community. Is this presentation being made by an expensive consultant from halfway across the country? No, this presentation is being made by a local group whose average age is 17 – and they might be thinking about their senior prom. This was part of an innovative program called Youth Community Perceptions which is designed to gain input from youth and engage them with their community. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Susan Schlichting is a 4-H youth development agent for the K-State Research and Extension Cottonwood District, serving Ellis and Barton Counties. Susan helped pilot this new program called Youth Community Perceptions.

The program originated from Kansas PRIDE Program discussions about how to get youth more engaged in their hometowns. The PRIDE Program is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2020 so this is another in our series of profiles highlighting PRIDE communities.

PRIDE program participants have often wanted to involve more youth in their communities. In 2018, the K-State Research and Extension Community Vitality team (of which Kansas PRIDE is a part) engaged in discussions with Kansas 4-H about launching an initiative to help.

With support from a grant from Epsilon Sigma Phi, the Extension professional organization, the Youth Community Perceptions program was developed. It was designed as a community evaluation and assessment program that would allow youth to discover the assets and needs of their communities and engage in community conversations.

An educational curriculum was created. The Ellis PRIDE program was approached about hosting a pilot test of the program in their community. Extension agent Susan Schlichting made inquiries around town. Ultimately, the Kansas Association for Youth organization at Ellis High School chose to participate.

The students learned about the community capitals model. Then they were provided a form which guided them in their assessment of the community. A team of youth drove around town and recorded their impressions of the signage, downtown, shopping, industrial areas, housing, health care, schools, child care, recreation, and more.

Then they presented the results to the city council. "The kids developed a power point of things they thought were really good and things that could be improved upon," Susan said. In April 2019, the youth made their presentation to the Ellis city council.

The presentation highlighted lots of things which the youth appreciated, such as the big painted sunflowers on Main Street, the medical offices, grocery store, walking trails, dock at the campground, the children's train, and the annual fish fry. "They had some good thoughts," Susan said. The youth also identified needs and suggested improvements.

Dave McDaniel is the long-time Mayor of Ellis. He was impressed with the students who made the presentation. “They did a very good job, and I didn’t want to let these ideas drop,” Dave said.

“For example, they said that our signs needed to be improved, and we’ve done that with the street signs and museum signs,” he said. “They wanted a place for youth to go, and some people who are opening up a downtown restaurant are going to open up the other half of their building for the youth,” he said. There was a need for more trash cans in Memorial Park where students congregate, and that is being addressed also.

“They pointed out there were no bike racks at the swimming pool,” Susan said. Ellis PRIDE applied to Kansas PRIDE Inc. and got a grant to install bike racks at the pool and other parks.

“This (program) is a good way to get the young people involved, and they’re seeing results,” Dave said.

For more information or to participate in the program, go to [www.ksre.k-state.edu/community/civic-engagement/youth-community-perceptions](http://www.ksre.k-state.edu/community/civic-engagement/youth-community-perceptions).

It’s time to leave this meeting of the city council, where community perceptions have been presented – not by an outside consultant, but by a team of local youth. We commend Susan Schlichting, Mayor Dave McDaniel, the volunteers of the Ellis PRIDE program, and the youth who are making a difference by engaging with their hometown in this way. It’s a better community when youth and adults can come together in unity.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.