

Urban Planning with the Future

By Petra Hurtado

Urban planning has always been about the future. Every comprehensive plan, transportation investment, climate strategy, and zoning decision is an attempt to answer a fundamental question:

What kind of future do we want to live in? Planners help communities navigate change, prepare for uncertainty, and shape better futures. Or at least, that is our intention.

HUMAN



A FUTURE DISMISSED

There is a growing paradox in planning though. We are trying to plan for futures that are increasingly uncertain using tools largely rooted in the past. Planners collect data that often reflects conditions that have already changed by the time it is analyzed.

Community engagement often centers on today's concerns and current conditions. We combine the past and present to create plans for the future – while often overlooking the emerging drivers of change that may fundamentally reshape communities in the future.

As a result, many plans tell us more about the time in which they were created than the future they were intended to shape.

A striking example emerged in the early 2000s. Communities were developing long-range transportation, housing, and land-use plans using the same methods they always had. Few planners, however, were paying attention to an emerging technological signal: the smartphone.

When the first iPhone was released in 2007, it quickly transformed urban life. Smartphones enabled ridesharing platforms, on-demand delivery systems, and entirely new mobility patterns, among other things. Cities suddenly faced disruptions to transportation systems, curb management, retail economies, and social life more generally – without having anticipated them.

The lesson is not that planners should have predicted the iPhone. Rather, greater awareness of emerging trends and signals could have helped create plans with more agility and adaptability. Foresight would not have predicted the exact outcome, but it could have improved communities' ability to respond to unexpected change.

Communities are increasingly shaped by such external drivers far beyond local control. And the pace of change is accelerating. Artificial intelligence is reshaping work and governance. Climate change is transforming where and how people live. Demographic shifts, economic restructuring, political polarization, and technological disruption are altering communities in ways few anticipated even a decade ago.

Traditional planning models that rely primarily on historical trends and linear forecasting are no longer sufficient. If planners are to help communities navigate uncertainty, they must move beyond planning for the future and begin planning *with* the future.

APA FORESIGHT

In 2020, we launched our [APA Foresight](#) program at the [American Planning Association](#) (APA) to address this challenge. The initiative focuses on three core pillars:

01

EXPLORING THE FUTURE OF PLANNING:

Using strategic foresight and [APA's annual Trend Report](#), developed in partnership with the [Lincoln Institute of Land Policy](#), to understand how emerging trends may shape the future of planning and ensure that APA equips planners for what lies ahead.

02

BUILDING CAPACITY:

Providing guidance, training, and education that help planners integrate foresight and futures thinking into their work.

03

FUTURE-PROOFING APA:

Applying foresight internally to inform APA's strategy and the priorities for the years ahead.

This article focuses on the first two pillars and explores how integrating foresight into planning practice can help make planning processes more inclusive and create more resilient and robust community plans that eventually result in more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

PLANNING FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Futures thinking and strategic foresight offer planners a way to navigate uncertainty while considering external drivers of change. Rather than planning for a single future, foresight explores multiple plausible futures and helps communities prepare for a range of possibilities.

The goal is not certainty. Plans may still be disrupted by unexpected events and emerging forces. Instead, the goal is to develop awareness of what may be on the horizon and build the capacity to adapt and pivot as conditions change.

At the same time, planners must recognize that foresight emerged in contexts very different from planning. Its roots lie in military scenario planning during the Cold War and, later, in corporate efforts to futureproof products and business strategies. The primary objectives in these settings were national security and profit making.

Planning, however, serves the common good. As a result, foresight methods must be adapted to support inclusive processes and equitable, sustainable outcomes.

One approach that we have been exploring at APA (and it is still a work in progress, involving lots of learning and listening) is the integration of Indigenous approaches to long-term thinking, such as the Seven Generations principle. Combining these perspectives, which emphasize future generations, stewardship, and the interconnectedness of people and nature, with established foresight methods may offer a more holistic approach to community planning.

PLANNING WITH THE FUTURE



Across planning systems in the United States and in other places around the world where community planning is practiced in one way or another, there are three key points where foresight can be readily integrated into existing planning processes.

01

HORIZON SCANNING AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Horizon scanning as the systematic identification of emerging trends, signals, and potential drivers of change is an important complement to traditional planning processes centered on data collection and forecasting.

To create robust plans, however, planners must combine **hindsight**, **insight**, and **foresight**. Hindsight helps us understand how we got to where we are today. Insight helps us understand current community needs and challenges. Foresight helps us explore what may lie ahead.



Effective horizon scanning requires diverse perspectives. Without them, important signals can easily be overlooked. Involving community members in the process creates opportunities for broader participation while generating valuable local insights. A community workshop in which its members (ranging from sanitation workers to business owners or youth to retirees) share observations about emerging changes can uncover signals that might otherwise go unnoticed.

For example, as part of its Resilience Calgary strategy, the City of Calgary launched Future-Focused Calgary, a foresight program designed to strengthen decision-making and integrate futures thinking into planning, policy, and strategy. Part of this initiative was the FYI Calgary Scan Club, through which the city identified 200 signals of change and developed 2035 future scenarios that stakeholders could use to stress-test policies and strategies, helping make them more resilient and future-ready.

At APA, we recruited a Trend Scouting Community, a diverse group of more than 60 participants from all around the world, including people from different professions (planners, engineers, psychologists, public health professionals, computer scientists, etc.) and all age groups (ranging from students to executives). The group meets regularly throughout the year to share observations about emerging shifts, identify weak signals, and discuss what these developments may mean for the future. Their insights help inform APA's annual Trend Report.



02

EXPLORATORY SCENARIO PLANNING AND COMMUNITY VISIONING

Many planners are familiar with normative scenario planning. In transportation planning, for example, practitioners often compare alternative routes or investment strategies designed to achieve the same objective. Exploratory scenario planning, however, is relatively new within planning practice.

Rather than comparing alternative pathways to a predetermined goal, exploratory scenarios examine multiple plausible futures based on existing trends and key uncertainties. Like horizon scanning, this process benefits from diverse participation.

Similar to horizon scanning, participants do not need to be experts. In fact, scenario-building can be a very engaging and creative form of community participation.

This approach can be integrated into and at the same time enhance existing public engagement processes. For example, instead of asking community members to react to plans that are already taking shape, planners can invite them to imagine a variety of plausible futures based on emerging trends and related uncertainties. Ultimately, this can lead to a discussion about what the desired future looks like, grounded in fact-based imaginings and inspired by a diversity of experiences, values, and community narratives.

Planners in Tuscany, Italy, have used participatory futures literacy labs to develop a shared riverside development framework for the Ombrone River. Historically, many community members viewed the river primarily through the lens of risk because of its history of destructive flooding. However, through the development of future scenarios and the collaborative creation of a long-term vision, participants began to shift their perspective. Rather than seeing the river solely as a threat, they identified new opportunities for recreation, economic development, and environmental stewardship.

Similarly, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is currently developing the Century Plan, a comprehensive regional plan for the Chicago metropolitan area. As part of this effort, CMAP has conducted a series of scenario-planning workshops to explore alternative futures and inform the development of the plan.

At APA, we have also incorporated futures scenarios into our annual Trend Report. Built from the trends and signals identified through our foresight work, these scenarios help planners explore how emerging changes might shape the future and provide a practical way to understand how to use the trends from the report in their planning practice. Together, these examples demonstrate how scenario planning can move communities beyond reacting to current challenges and toward proactively shaping their preferred futures.



03

BACKCASTING AND PLAN MAKING

Traditional planning processes often begin with current conditions and project forward. Planning typically starts with data about the past and present and uses those insights to envision a future. Futures thinking approaches the challenge differently. Foresight begins by exploring multiple plausible futures and then works backward to identify the actions needed to reach a preferred outcome.

The process, known as backcasting, can be a useful input to plan making and can help planners translate preferred futures or community visions into plans and the necessary steps for implementation.

When creating plans, planners should ask two critical questions:

What actions are needed today, in the medium term, and over the long term to reduce or avoid the negative outcomes identified in future scenarios?

What actions are needed to achieve and strengthen the positive outcomes associated with those scenarios?

By working backward from several different future scenarios, planners can identify more effective pathways for actions over several timeframes, that consider not just the desired future vision but also negative shifts that might be outside of their control but need to be addressed in their plans.

CIRCULARITY INSTEAD OF LINEARITY

A final challenge is that planning processes are often treated as linear exercises. Plans are developed, adopted, and then left mostly unchanged until the next update cycle. In a rapidly changing world, this approach is increasingly inadequate.

The foresight practices described above are not sequential steps to be completed once and forgotten. Rather, they should be viewed as components of a continuous and iterative process. Horizon scanning, scenario development, community engagement, and plan adjustment should occur regularly and inform one another. Planning needs to become more circular than linear. As new trends emerge and conditions evolve, communities should revisit assumptions, reassess priorities, and update plans accordingly. Given the pace of change today, revisiting these processes every two years would be ideal. Doing so would help ensure that plans remain relevant, resilient, and capable of guiding communities through an increasingly uncertain future.



LOOKING AHEAD

Over the past five years, APA has worked to advance foresight not only across the United States but also through collaborations and conversations with planners, futurists, and community leaders around the world. What we have learned is encouraging: this is not rocket science. In many ways, foresight is a natural extension of what planners already do. It provides practical tools for expanding our field of vision beyond current conditions and considering the forces that may shape communities in the years ahead.

Our goal is simple: to make foresight and futures thinking a standard part of planning practice. As uncertainty continues to grow and the pace of change accelerates, planners have a responsibility not only to respond to today's challenges but also to consider the long-term consequences of the decisions we make today. Planning has always been about shaping the future. By integrating foresight into our work, we can do so more intentionally, more inclusively, and with greater confidence in an increasingly uncertain world.



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