Traditional long-term planning uses a predict-and-plan approach. This process begins with predicting what your community will look like 20 to 30 years from now, based on projections and forecasts, and using that information to develop a plan for how to respond. However, what happens when an event that cannot be predicted—such as the 2007 housing crisis—has a significant impact on your community? Are the long-term plans and policies that you developed relevant under these new circumstances? Is there a way that planning can anticipate and adapt to become more resilient to uncertain events in the future?

Planning a community’s future has become increasingly challenging and complex. As the future becomes more uncertain, social, economic, and environmental systems are more interconnected and interdependent.

Enter scenario planning. The practice has been widely used in the business world since the late 1970s; however, today it is being used to address a variety of planning issues across a wide range of scales, from large-scale natural resource management to the evaluation of project site designs, as described in Open Access to Scenario Planning Tools, published by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy in 2012. Scenario planning can also encourage public engagement among groups and individuals that have ideologically divergent values on contentious issues.

Generally scenario planning can be divided into two types—exploratory and normative. Exploratory scenario planning describes how a future might unfold.
and the range of possibilities that could occur, while normative scenario planning describes a community’s ideal future or the future circumstances that would be most desirable. Both can be used in the planning process either separately or combined; however, exploratory scenario planning is most useful when there are a number of factors that make predicting the future of a community or outcome of policy difficult, if not impossible. Rather than trying to reduce uncertainty, exploratory scenario planning identifies a range of possible futures (scenarios) that may happen and can build more community resilience to uncertainty.

What is exploratory scenario planning?
Exploratory scenarios are created by anticipating the range of future uncertainties, including drivers of change, which are outside the community’s control but may have an impact. Using this anticipated range of possible future conditions, a set of plausible future scenarios is created. Scenarios are constructed by considering present circumstances and identifying the key drivers of change, the factors expected to remain constant, the critical uncertainties that may lead to divergent futures, and the key actors involved.

For example, one key driver is the rate of population growth. One future state is rapid population growth, while another is slow and steady population growth. Rapid growth would change the types of plans and policies needed, while a slow and steady growth would present different circumstances to consider. Depending on the type of events and trends unfolding in your community, each state is plausible.

Once you have constructed your future scenarios, policy decisions or actions are then assessed against these plausible futures to understand how they might affect the ability of the community to achieve its desired goals or visions. This assessment illustrates how strategies and actions address or affect threats and opportunities.

For example, policies and strategies that perform well across a range of scenarios are considered the “robust” policies that strengthen a community’s resiliency.

Strategies that have many other benefits or are low in cost even though they may only be effective for some futures are considered “no regret” and can be implemented as insurance against certain futures. Some futures (good or bad) may be contingent on some key future event—a trigger—and contingency plans can be made in advance to respond to such an event.

There are different ways to conduct an exploratory scenario planning process. One is a multistakeholder process that occurs when representatives of all stakeholder groups participate in the scenario building and assessment effort. In the multistakeholder setting, important secondary results are social learning, development of a common language for discussing the focus issue, and achieving alignment regarding the nature of the issue. A multistakeholder process is most common in local government planning. Another type of exploratory scenario planning is a more exclusive, expert-driven process. This process is used when the issues at hand are more focused on tactical operational decisions than on decisions about broad public policy.

Exploratory scenario planning in practice
Numerous communities have used scenario planning to help guide their planning. Below are two examples of on-the-ground exploratory scenario planning.

VISION NORTH TEXAS, DALLAS–FORT WORTH. Vision North Texas is a grassroots regional visioning effort organized in 2005 as a public-private-academic partnership of the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the North Texas District Council of the Urban Land Institute, and the University of Texas at Arlington. The intent of this effort is to move the region away from a business-as-usual model and toward a more sustainable future.

VNT conducted a number of workshops and exercises in different parts of the region. Collectively, the results of the workshops created a number of future scenarios. After the various scenarios were analyzed, it was clear that different areas of the region had different ideas about the future of urban form. In order to accommodate the different values, VNT developed four mutually inclusive visions that described the range of opinions and options on future urban form.

SONORAN PRESERVE MASTER PLAN, PHOENIX. The Sonoran Preserve plan, adopted in 1998, considered various options for acquiring lands identified for inclusion in a large north Phoenix desert and mountain preserve. The majority of targeted lands were state trust land, but significant areas of private lands were also targeted. The city of Phoenix was uncertain about the rate of growth that would occur in the area and also the effectiveness of different funding and acquisitions methods—such as transfer of development rights, leasing, or fee simple—and this created indecision.

To overcome this, Phoenix explored 65 different scenarios of growth, funding sources, and acquisition methods and from an assessment of these scenarios developed key guidelines for planning the Sonoran Preserve.

Exploratory scenario planning is a useful tool for communities facing an uncertain future. Communities can be prepared and more resilient through better anticipatory planning.

—Hannah Oliver
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