

Envisioning New Futures: Scenario Planning for MPOs

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One of the new elements of SAFETEA-LU is a provision that encourages MPOs to use visioning and scenario planning tools to support metropolitan transportation plans (MTPs). This idea builds upon planning policies dating back as far as the 1991 ISTEA bill that require MPOs to integrate transportation plans with local and regional goals such as land use, economic development, and environmental preservation.

Over the past decade, FHWA has developed a rich array of technical support programs and demonstration projects that can provide MPOs with useful information and tools to combine the science of scenario planning with the art of visioning. More and more MPOs, large and small, are trying out these approaches and have found them to be both practical and inspiring. Here are some of the key elements common to successful visioning projects.

What is a Vision?

A vision is a clear expression of a community's hopes and dreams, shaped in a way that inspires and enables local leaders and residents to work together toward its fulfillment. A well-designed vision, crafted through an inclusive process that includes the evaluation of alternative growth scenarios, can provide an MPO with clear direction on strategic transportation investments that will support the community's desired future.

A vision is not a plan, a regulation, or a funding program. It instead sets the context for all of them. Supported by a solid, well-supported vision, MPOs can set priorities and coordinate decisions with decision-makers working across the spectrum of civic life, from transportation to education, public utilities to public health, and economic development to environmental preservation.

The principles and conceptual maps developed through a visioning process can help MPOs work with local officials, public agencies and private sector groups to articulate and implement shared goals. All participants involved in creating a successful vision know how it benefits them, and what they can do in order to make it a reality.

It is critical to connect specific goals to the values articulated in the vision. A vision statement that consists of a simple list of "motherhood and apple pie" principles will probably fall apart as soon as it is tested. The visioning process must reveal – and resolve – conflicting values that will affect the development of the community. For example, most visions will list environmental protection, economic vitality, and community character as core principles. Without a clearly demonstrated consideration of how these values could be achieved across the landscape, decision-makers will not have clear direction about how to deal with the tradeoffs that may arise as specific policies and projects are developed. If big-box stores and suburban office parks are necessary to generate much-needed commercial tax revenues, can they be accommodated without destroying farmland and adding even more vehicle trips to congested arterials? Visioning and scenario planning have helped many communities design creative solutions to these sorts of knotty problems.

The Scenario Planning Process


Stories are effective ways to weave ideas and information together into a coherent whole. Scenarios provide different "storyboards"

for people to envision real-world opportunities to achieve their ultimate goals.


Scenario planning processes can – and should – be tailored to address unique contexts. Some involve extensive technical analysis, which helps to guide detailed plans for growth management and public infrastructure. Others are simpler, focused on establishing a few guiding principles and on building relationships among people and organizations that can help to keep the process moving forward. Regardless of their scale and complexity, successful visioning processes usually follow a structure built around four fundamental questions, originally articulated in the mid 1990's by Oregon planning expert Steven Ames:

- **Where are we now?** What is the history of this place? What drew people to this place in the past and continues to draw people here today? What makes this place unique? What is of value to the people of this place and what can be left behind? How much land is developed and how much land must be protected for environmental or other reasons? How many people and jobs are there and what kinds of people and jobs are they?
- **Where are we going?** How are past trends likely to shape the future without any changes in current plans and policies? How many new jobs and residents are expected? How much land is needed for these residents and jobs at current development densities? How much infrastructure is needed if current levels continue?
- **Where do we want to be?** What are the possible outcomes for this place? How do those other outcomes compare with the trend scenario and with each other? Which outcomes are best for this place and the values of the people who live and work here? How can we crystallize the preferred outcome in a vision statement that will resonate broadly and provide a clear sense of direction?
- **How do we get there?** What specific steps are needed to move towards the vision? How does this place update its current plans? How are existing development review and infrastructure building processes modified to lead to the vision? What new processes and tools are needed to achieve the vision?

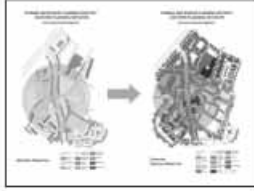
"To build consensus and confidence in the vision, the process should help people explore and understand the consequences of possible future scenarios."



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JEFFERSON AREA EASTERN PLANNING INITIATIVE
A community-based 50-year vision for the Thomas Jefferson Planning District Commission (TJPD) in Charlottesville, Virginia, the Eastern Planning Initiative was funded by a Federal Highway Administration Transportation & Community & System Preservation (TCSP) grant included the City of Charlottesville and the Counties of Albemarle, Louisa, Fluvanna and Greene.



For the project, Renaissance Planning Group developed the Community Oriented Regional Planning (CorPlan) model, now available from FHWA for use by communities nationwide. CorPlan uses community prototypes that define the land use composition, building densities and socioeconomic characteristics of communities. These community elements become the "building blocks" for regional scenarios and plans. Using CorPlan, planners can model the influence of community design over walking and bicycle trips, and thus refine transit and auto travel projections.

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Through a process of visioning and scenario evaluation with the public, community leaders and elected officials, the TJPD developed a 50-year plan for regional development and transportation improvements needed to support a sustainable land use pattern. Results of the study are now being incorporated into local and regional land use and transportation plans. The CorPlan model and the Charlottesville study have been frequently cited by the FHWA as a success story for the TCSP program.

This understanding becomes meaningful if the scenario illustrates how alternative futures affect the daily lives of people and activities of businesses, in ways that matter to them. For example, if a community has decided that the needs of children and seniors are paramount, its evaluation criteria for alternative scenarios may include the number of people that live within walking distance of schools, parks, grocery stores, health centers, and transit stops. If it is important to revitalize core cities by attracting young professionals, criteria can center around the interest of the "creative class" documented by researchers such as economist Richard Florida: a walkable, bike-friendly environment, access to outdoor recreation, and a vibrant mix of downtown housing and activities. Or perhaps rural preservation is an issue – how many acres of greenfields will have to be used in order to accommodate new housing and jobs?

Well-designed scenarios allow participants in the visioning process to compare answers to these questions and many more. In order to be effective, scenarios should substantially differ so that the community can clearly contrast the pros and cons of each possibility. For instance, the single objective of one scenario may be environmental protection while another may be maximum property development. These two scenarios may end up being very different, but in what ways? There may be a surprising number of similarities between the two, pointing a way toward building consensus among competing values. Without appreciable differences between the scenarios, it is difficult to understand the trade-offs among choices that the community must make.

In sum, scenarios should enlighten and inform the visioning process, but are not, in and of themselves, plans. By developing consensus on a preferred scenario, the community can craft a vision that provides guidance for the many types of plans and actions needed to achieve it. By using scenario planning tools, MPOs can help their regions develop strong, clear visions that will provide invaluable guidance for years to come. **M**