

What is Scenario Planning?

Scenario planning provides a forum, process, set of tools and measurable outcomes for regions of all sizes to contemplate future possibilities. The process generally relies on empirical data, quantitative analysis, qualitative assessment and community engagement to visualize important choices ahead, and their impacts and trade-offs for meeting stated community goals and values. No two scenario planning initiatives are ever the same, and all require some level of innovation or flexibility to properly align the right processes and tools for decision-making with preferences, norms or protocols specific to the region.

Visualization of the interaction between land use, infrastructure, economic, environmental and government finance decisions, as well as the causal factors that explain the push-pull relationships between them, provides community leaders with the information needed to evaluate the consequences of potential actions. Thinking of the region as a whole, and as a series of interacting systems, also eliminates some of the traditional silo decision-making prevalent in regions across the United States (whether isolated by system category, service area or municipal limits).

Ultimately, the scenarios themselves are fictitious stories about the future. They are not forecasts or predictions, but possible futures that may come to pass based on what already exists, emerging trends or the region's desires to change course for the future. The essential requirement of any growth scenario is that it be plausible, within the realm of what exists or what could be. Well-developed growth scenarios encourage critical thinking about issues or events that might significantly impact a region's economy, built environment, natural environment or quality-of-life (either now or in the future).

Comparing alternative growth scenarios for a region strengthens the visioning process, and provides information (in the form of performance measures) to prioritize outcomes, set targets and monitor implementation. Data, documents and tools generated in the scenario planning process help local governments, service providers and advocacy groups in future projects, which provide the resources necessary to build upon the themes and ideas identified in the regional scenario planning initiative in local plans and studies.