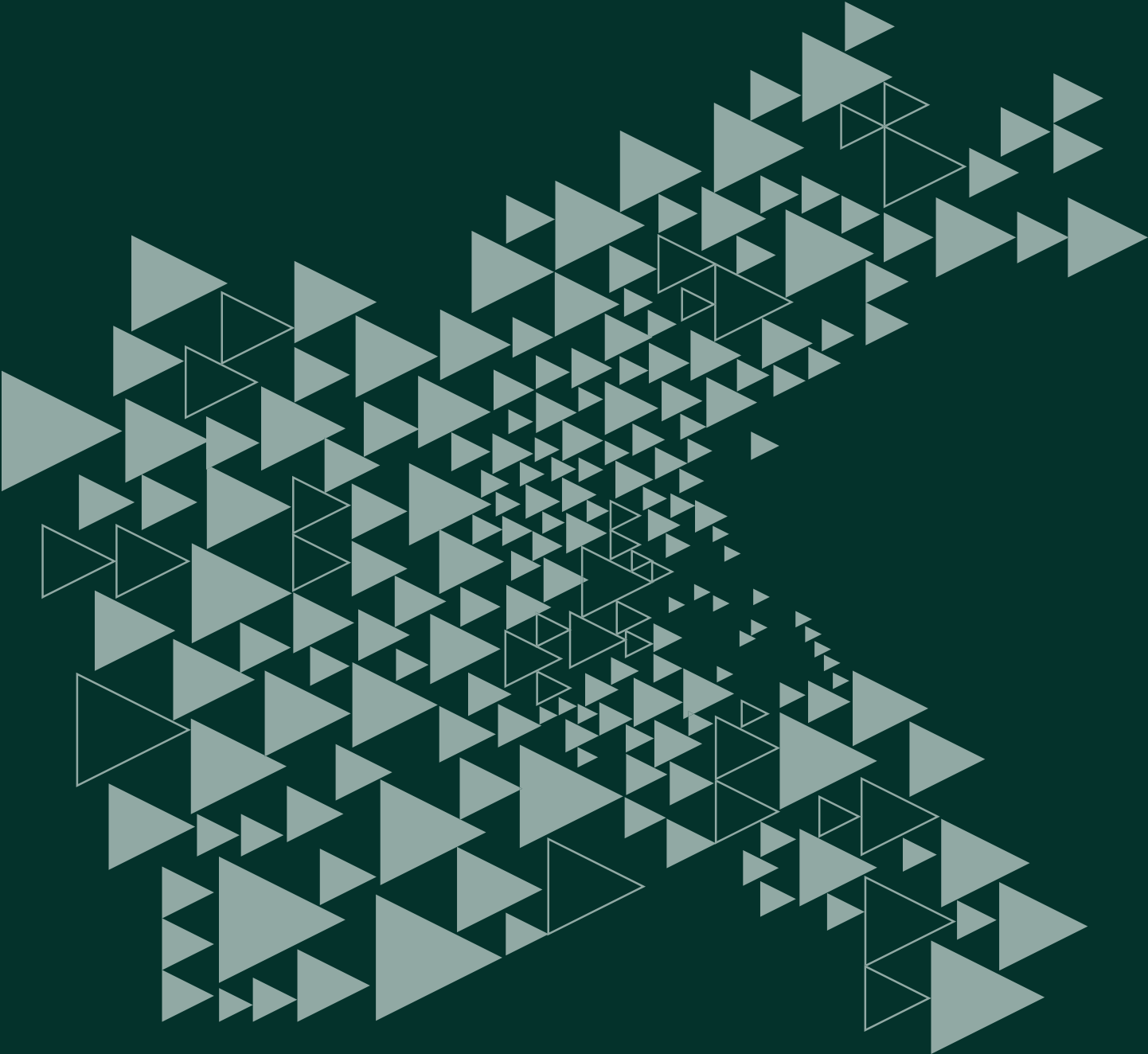


MetroCommon 2050 × Scenario Planning
Planning for an Uncertain Future



MetroCommon 2050 is Greater Boston’s long-term land use and policy plan. It looks out nearly three decades to the year 2050. It’s a long time away, but even as we focus on the needs of today and tomorrow, we need to think about how our present-day actions will set us up for a sustainable, equitable, and prosperous region 30 years from now.

Introduction to scenario planning

Three decades ago, our region looked very different than it does today. In 1990, cell phones were rare accessories for business executives, and a massive, elevated highway split downtown Boston. Now there’s a high-powered computer in nearly every pocket and a beautiful greenway stretching north to south across the city’s downtown. It’s hard to know what 2050 will look like, but we can be sure it will not look the same as today.

Some of the changes will be of our own choosing. Just as the region decided to tear down the Central Artery and build a park in its place, we can take the initiative to build new infrastructure, change development rules, or provide new services and supports to the region’s residents. Yet even as we take charge of our future, the world will be changing around us, and we will need to respond to conditions and constraints outside of our control.

Unfortunately, we don’t yet know what those changes will be. There could be new technologies or societal trends that make it easier to achieve our goals, or much harder. The COVID pandemic has shown us just how quickly the world can change and how little certainty we should have about things that seem fixed. MetroCommon acknowledges this unpredictability and seeks to create a framework for responsible long-term planning – even in the context of deep uncertainty.

Policies tailored to today’s needs may not work in the same way under radically different conditions. For example, it seems like a no-brainer to fix leaky natural gas pipelines that are contributing to climate change; but if technology, federal policy, and market conditions enable rapid electrification of home heating and cooking, those pipelines (and their leaks) may become obsolete by the year 2050. How should the region decide how much, and where, to spend resources on fixing pipes when we don’t know how long those investments will be useful? The way we tackle conundrums such as this one will determine whether the people of 2050 see the decisions of the next few years as prescient, short-sighted, or futile.

If we hope for prescience, we must be aware of the many uncertainties we face. What are the powerful societal, economic, and political trends that could shape the world? What emerging technologies and practices could have a major impact if they take root? What seemingly inevitable transformations might “fizzle out” leaving the world unchanged?

Once we have a good sense of key uncertainties, we can assess how those uncertainties might affect the urgency, efficacy, or relevance of potential policy interventions. Some policy ideas are “robust,” meaning they will be effective across a wide range of conditions. These policies can be pursued without much risk. Others may be contingent on external conditions – successful under some, while ineffective or even counterproductive under others. In these cases, it will be critical to track conditions and determine when those policies should be initiated, accelerated, adjusted, or discontinued, as conditions warrant.

Key Uncertainties

With the assistance of public participants, external advisors, and extensive research, MAPC identified four key uncertainties likely to have an outsized impact on the region’s future.

► **Regional Demographics**

Changes in our population will influence housing demand, tax revenue, and transportation needs. In this section we examine who might live in the region by 2050, what kinds of homes might they want, and what services they might need.

► **The Economy**

Changes in our key industries and the nature of work will have large impacts on the labor force needed in Metro Boston, what kinds of jobs may be available, and the training needed for the workers of the future.

► **The Future of Travel**

Technology and new forms of mobility will affect travel demand, traffic congestion, transit revenue, and the environment. We examine how autonomous vehicles and emerging transportation services might – or might not – radically change getting around; and we explore how the explosion of remote work, virtual communication, and delivery services could reduce the need for travel.

► **Federal Policy**

Metro Boston and Massachusetts operate within a federal context that expands or constrains what we can do, and the resources we have available. We look at how changes in federal healthcare policy could affect our residents, hospitals, and healthcare firms; how federal regulations could foster or impede economic opportunity; and the resources we may have available for transportation, social programs, and climate adaptation.

What We Learned

Over the course of the MetroCommon planning effort we engaged people in the region to better understand what it means to be ready for uncertainty. Our discussions led to four main takeaways to better plan for policy and action.

► **Centering equity is not only important to eliminate existing disparities, but it will also make the region stronger and more resilient in the long-run.**

We know that the fewer disparities that mark our population, the easier it is for us to adapt to uncertainty. Many participants noted that when the economy is doing well it should be harnessed to increase equity in the region, invest in public needs, and make us better able to withstand periods of economic decline.

Along the same lines, it's critical that we center the voices of those most disenfranchised in our planning efforts to better understand the needs of all residents. Without this framework, it's easy to think of certain future uncertainties "in aggregate," for example, "What happens if we all work from home in the future?" The truth is, working from home will never be possible for some front-line workers. Sanitation workers, childcare workers, health aids, and service workers all need to attend their jobs in-person and probably will need to do so for decades to come. It's critical that our policy conversations center the experiences of everyone, particularly those who will be most impacted by future changes, or who might be left behind when the rest of us see change.

► **We need bold action to get to our goals, so we must make the most sustainable, equitable choice the path of least resistance, even if it means deprioritizing short-term profit.**

Our MetroCommon goals are bold. They imagine a future where everyone is able to thrive and our region is able to withstand a variety of challenges. Doing this will require financial and regulatory incentives and disincentives that enlist the private sector as a partner in reaching our vision for 2050. Participants also noted that it is critical that desired choices, such as smart-growth development and low-emission travel, become the easiest path for investors and individuals to make.

► **We need new collaborative frameworks for decision-making that center residents' needs**

A number of participants noted the need for regional collaboration to address any major challenges that may come our way. In addition to collaboration, a recentering of power is needed. A government should be the working body for the people, so it is critical that all people are able to discern and detail their desires. If distrust of the federal government continues to increase, it is critical for local governments to distinguish themselves as an effective working system. Challenging the "status quo" can be difficult, but responding to future uncertainties may provide unique opportunities to change priorities incrementally over time and express our values in new ways.

► **We need to be both proactive and adaptive in the way we tackle and respond to the future.**

This insight stresses the need to create flexible systems and structures, but creating these systems ahead of time will help avoid the need to be reactionary. For example, if agencies switch to flexible online forms and database structures, they will be able to collect, organize, and analyze data in predictable ways – regardless of regulation need. In every workshop, participants noted that “how and where people live will change.” This stresses our need for flexibility in the systems and structures we create to respond to the new ways that people live and work. Participants also noted the need for government to adapt quickly to new technology and regulate for-profit companies before they use their powerful influence over policy to decide the rules for themselves.

The Action Areas explore the history and challenges of creating a more equitable, sustainable, and collaborative region. With this learning, we aimed to develop robust policy recommendations that can succeed regardless of how the future unfolds. Examples of these robust recommendations include reducing racial disparities in wealth and health outcomes, investing in climate-forward green infrastructure and design, protecting our critical natural resources, and improving the performance and decision-making of our local and regional governments. And we include many recommendations that modify the existing regulatory environment and create new incentives to spark the change we will need to reach our long-term goals.

What is MetroCommon 2050 and how does scenario planning fit in?

MetroCommon 2050 is Greater Boston’s long-term plan. It’s about ways the Boston region can become more equitable, more prosperous, and more sustainable. MetroCommon is built on goals – that is, what people have told us they want. It defines action areas that give today’s issues context, and that reveal systems that require intervention. It goes deeply into key topics, finding insight in the trends, patterns, and idiosyncrasies of the region: research. The plan thinks through key uncertainties, looking at how the world and region might change, and how those changes could affect us and what policy-makers should be taking into account. And it makes specific recommendations for policy changes that can get us to our goals. The part of the plan you’re looking at now is scenario planning.

How did MAPC get input on the MetroCommon 2050 scenario planning?

Community engagement is a core practice at MAPC. So is the practice of confirming and challenging what we think we know. We “ground-truthed” every component of MetroCommon 2050 with people too often left out of planning processes to make sure the plan was worth implementing. The MetroCommon 2050 scenario planning was shared for feedback in the following ways:

- ▶ Scenario planning **developed by diverse team of staff**
- ▶ **Scenario Planning Advisory Committee** [\[link\]](#) formed
- ▶ Scenario planning **vetted by Scenario Planning Advisory Committee**

Read more about our MetroCommon 2050 community engagement [\[link\]](#).