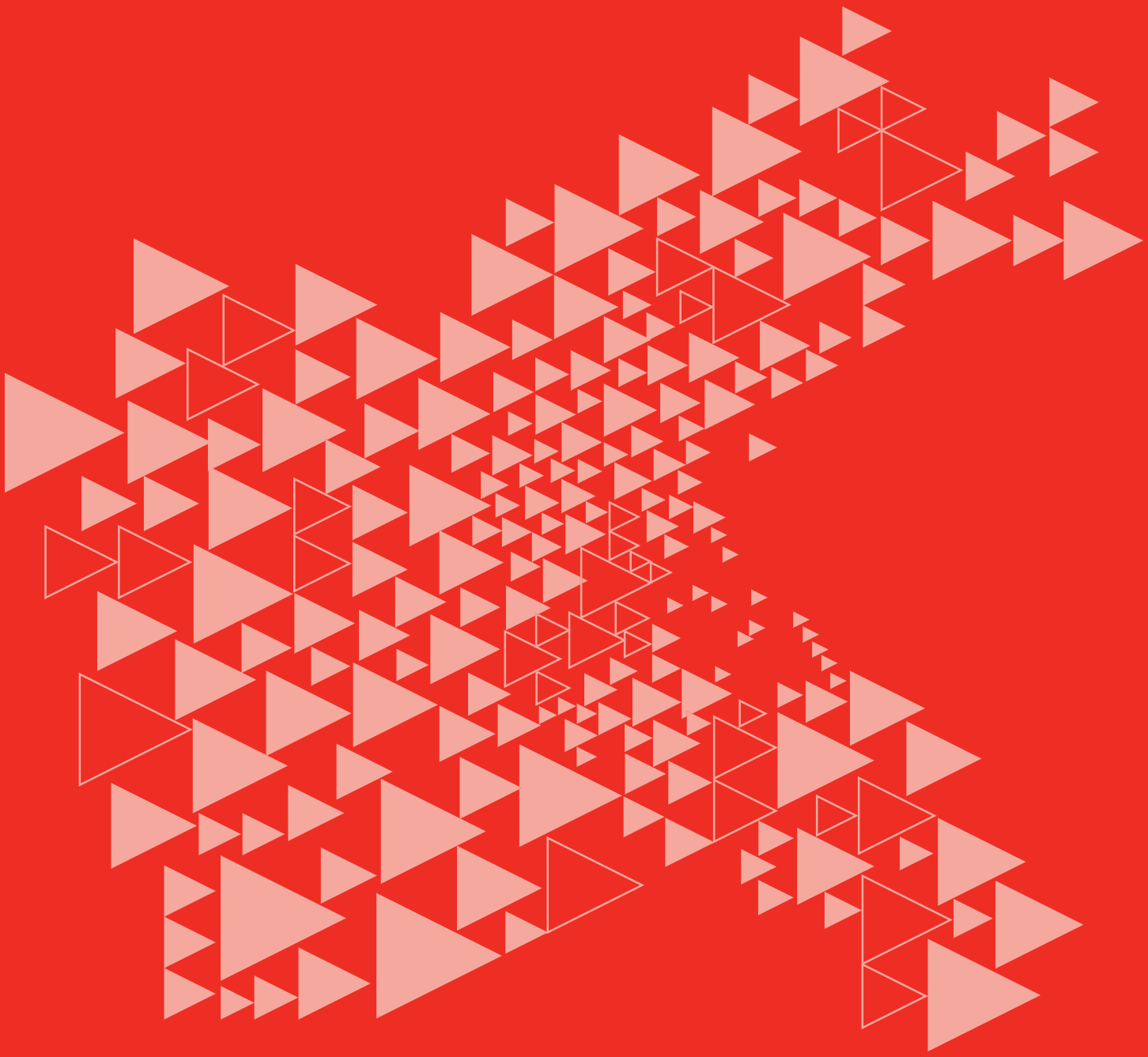
MetroCommon 2050 × Community Engagement

Listening to the Region



MAPC

Listening to the Region

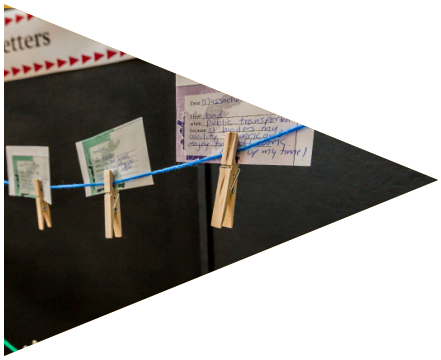
Community engagement is a core practice at MAPC. We have five full-time engagement staff members and many planners trained in effective engagement techniques. Every year, we manage over 100 projects throughout Greater Boston. These projects include soliciting residents' opinions and incorporating them into recommendations for our partners to pursue. And because our recommendations are based on our previous regional plan, we've been consistently engaging the region on these topics since (and before!) 2008.

MetroCommon 2050 has provided the opportunity to confirm and challenge what we think we know about what the residents and workers of Metro Boston want for our future and the steps that are needed to achieve that vision.

Throughout the MetroCommon process, we used pre-established criteria to decide where to focus engagement efforts and how to decide on final perspectives. One of the first things we did was to establish the MetroCommon 2050 values.[1] We used the values, especially equity, to guide our external engagement strategy and to ensure that our writers were creating content from a common, shared perspective. Our content creation was also guided by MAPC's 2015 Strategic Priorities.[2] Those priorities are smart growth, regional collaboration, equity, and climate change.

A primary goal for engagement was to connect with potential implementers of the regional plan – municipal and state officials, community leaders, and subject matter experts. Engaging these "grasstops leaders" provided a diverse array of viewpoints on the plan's content.

The other guiding principle for engagement was to involve people who represent and are part of communities the planning industry has historically left out of planning processes, as well communities likely to be most impacted by the plan's recommendations. This population includes, for example, people of color, low-income residents and workers, and people living with disabilities. Members of these groups provided expertise gained from personal experience in addition to their professional expertise. These perspectives added to and tested what we heard from "grasstops" throughout the planning process.



1 Values
2 Strategic priorities

MetroCommon 2050 Committees

We convened multiple advisory committees to guide and advise us on our process and content.

- **Process Design Committee**
  Made up of external partners and advised us on how to design an inclusive process that will produce a compelling and worthwhile plan for the region.
- **Staff Advisory Committee (STAC)**
  Consisted of MAPC staff members from a variety of departments. The STAC helped design the approach for developing the plan.
- **External Advisory Committee[3]**
  Composed of more than 40 local experts, practitioners, and advocates that provided guidance and feedback on our process and content. The EAC was organized after a public call for participation. Each potential EAC member completed an application expressing their interest and the background and experience they would bring to the planning process. We used the MetroCommon 2050 values to vet the candidates, and we sought a balance of gender, racial, expertise, and geographic diversity.
- **Community Engagement Advisory Committee[4] (CEAC)**
  Support us in designing equitable and impactful engagement strategies.
- **Scenario Planning Advisory Committee (SPAC)**
  Made up of local experts who assisted with the difficult task of identifying future uncertainties and scenarios.

As advisory committee members began regularly attending meetings, we noted that the diversity of our committees varied. The EAC, while it had representation of most of the characteristics cited above, had greater representation of White people and residents of the Inner Core communities. CEAC members however, were majority female and of color. Because of this inconsistency in committee representation, we redoubled our efforts to include organizations that represent populations who've been historically marginalized.[5]

Throughout the process, we engaged MAPC's eight Subregional Committees. These are the organizations, each coordinated by an MAPC staff member, to which each municipality in our region belongs, and through which MAPC works with its cities and towns. Each subregion includes municipal officials and regional and community stakeholders. The Subregional Committees are **The Inner Core Committee (ICC)**, **The North Shore Task Force (NSTF)**, **North Suburban Planning Council (NSPC)**, **Minuteman Advisory Group on Interlocal Coordination (MAGIC)**, **MetroWest Regional Collaborative (MWRC)**, **SouthWest Advisory Planning Committee (SWAP)**, **Three Rivers Interlocal Council (TRIC)**, and the **South Shore Coalition (SSC)**.

We are immensely grateful to all of our committee members that lent their time, passion, expertise, and good counsel to MetroCommon 2050.

3 Link to list of EAC members

4 Link to list of CEAC members

5 Please see here for a list of organizations

MetroCommon 2050 Engagement Strategies

Our engagement strategies took many forms. These included human-centered design interviews, open house events, pop-up tabling at events, workshops, focus groups, presentations followed by breakout groups, surveys, and one-on-one meetings.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, we were forced to pivot to remote engagement. We believe we were able to engage more people because of this shift.

We committed to a comprehensive branding strategy for MetroCommon2050, including an interactive, stand-alone website, which serves as a digital hub, hosting all of the research, goals, action areas and recommendations in development for people to weigh in on. We translated the goals and the draft recommendations into Spanish, Portuguese, Simplified Chinese, and Haitian Creole. We also developed videos early on in the process to communicate the purpose of the long-range regional plan and to introduce MAPC. The MetroCommon video was shared on social media, at events, and at meetings.

As previously mentioned, one of our two target populations were groups of people who are often left out of planning processes, including people of color and those who have confronted barriers because of racist and biased systems. Accordingly, we developed a geographic equity analysis of the communities on which we wanted to focus our efforts. We funded community partners with mini-grants to help us with outreach, focus groups, and collecting input in these specific communities – and we ensured that what we heard from these communities was crucial in developing the plan content.

Not only did we want to hear from people in the community, we wanted to ensure there were accessible ways for people new to some of the issues we discuss to get interested. We commissioned creative artwork – film, comic books, a graphic art short story, and illustrations – for storytelling supporting the vision of MetroCommon and to communicate the complex systems surrounding the five Action Areas. These pieces are also tools that municipalities and other partners can use in their work to educate their constituencies and implement MetroCommon.

Non-Profit Organization Grantees

Union Capital Boston

Wayside Family Services

Wellspring Multi-Service Center

Teen Empowerment

Commonwealth Seminar

Artists

Ludgy Jean-Baptiste: Equity of Health & Wealth action area comic book and Dynamic Government action area comic book

Ben Batchelder: Climate Mitigation & Resilience action area illustrations

Anna Christine: Inclusive Growth & Mobility action area graphic art story

Mariona Lloreta: MetroCommon short film and Housing for Everyone action area short film

Nicholas Vandenberg: MetroCommon introductory video (editor and sound). Script and camera work by MAPC staff.

Over the three years of engagement we heard from more than 1,900 people through over 60 events. Through that process, we've received over 3,600 comments. To review the comments we received, please visit our Feedback Database.

Summary of MetroCommon 2050 Planning Phases

Our engagement strategy supported the five phases of MetroCommon 2050. During our **design phase**, we sought assistance in designing the planning process. We asked MAPC staff, the MAPC Executive Committee [link], and an external committee composed of practitioners to advise us on designing a process to develop the plan. In our **visioning phase** we engaged residents and municipal staff around what they wanted the region to look like in 2050. We used that information to inform the MetroCommon 2050 vision for 2050, which includes MetroCommon 2050 goals. Next, we engaged specific groups of people around various elements of the plan. Our **action area phase** built the themes of the plan. We built the action areas from the feedback we received during the visioning phase and organized focus groups to review draft action areas. In the **scenario planning phase**, we convened a group of external exports to explore a number of possible futures. We also created activities for the MAPC Council [link] and the region's residents to assess the impact and effectiveness of various policy actions depending on future uncertainties. Our **policy recommendation phase** was the final phase of plan development. With the results of our engagement to date, MAPC staff developed policy and programmatic recommendations that we believe will put the region on the path towards achieving MetroCommon 2050 goals. Once we drafted these policies, they were vetted by MetroCommon 2050 external advisors and other key stakeholders and mini-grant partners, sent via online survey for comments, and presented for feedback to various focus groups and subregional members.

Turning Feedback into Content

Creating a regional plan requires the authors to make decisions on what feedback to incorporate. We acknowledge that most of the authors are White and work in and/or learned from institutions and disciplines that have not succeeded in making the region equitable, especially for people of color. As previously mentioned, we used the plan's goals and values, as well as an enormous amount of feedback, to decide what content and recommendations to include in the plan. We will continue to engage residents after we publish MetroCommon 2050 and when we identify actions that more accurately meet our goals and values, we will update and incorporate them.

What Effect did Feedback Have on Plan Design?

Our Human Centered Design interviews and analyses guided us to build and prominently feature tools planners could use to influence their constituents. Among those tools are the action area art pieces we commissioned from local artists, which make the basics of the issues we face more engaging and accessible.

MetroCommon 2050 Phases and Engagement Tactics

Design Phase

From May 2017 to May 2018, we designed the process by which we would develop MetroCommon 2050. We planned the process on the basis of institutional knowledge, our Human Centered Design interviews and analyses, a survey of recent regional planning processes across the country, and inspiration and feedback from the STAC, EAC, and CEAC committees. We decided the planning process would consist of the following five phases:

- **Phase 1:** Groundwork and Visioning
- **Phase 2:** Action Areas – Strategic Challenges/Opportunities and Driving Forces
- **Phase 3:** Scenario Modeling
- **Phase 4:** Recommendation Selection
- **Phase 5:** Plan Assembly and Public Release

The MetroCommon process design was approved by our committees and in June of 2018 by the MAPC Executive Council. Read more here.

Visioning Phase

Our intention for the visioning phase was to engage residents and leaders around the question "what do you want the region to be like in 2050?" We hosted five listening sessions across the region, and more than 200 people attended. We convened municipal, state, and subregional leaders for focus groups. We put the questions online and took them to organizations and groups whose constituents we thought might be less likely to get involved. We paid specific attention to getting feedback from historically marginalized populations. Details about our events are here. [link]

We used what we heard to create the vision and goals for MetroCommon 2050. We started with MetroFuture, the previous regional plan, and evolved its vision and goals to square with what we heard from residents during our outreach.

The goals are intended to be bold, yet achievable. They are the destination to which the plan points the way.

The Goals

Getting Around the Region

Traveling around Metro Boston is safe, affordable, convenient, and enjoyable.

Homes for All

All residents of Metro Boston have places to live that meet their needs, and that they can afford.

A Climate-Resilient Region

Metro Boston is prepared for – and resilient to – the impacts of climate change.

A Net Zero Carbon Region

The Metro Boston region is highly energy efficient and has reduced its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to net zero.

Dynamic and Representative Governments

Local governments and regional agencies have the capacity and resources to deliver the services and supports our residents deserve, and to maintain and invest in our built and natural environments.

A Healthy Environment

Greater Boston's air, water, land, and other natural resources are clean and protected – for us and for the rest of the ecosystem.

Economic Security

Everyone has the financial resources to meet their needs and to live fulfilling lives.

Economic Prosperity

Greater Boston's economy benefits all in the region.

Healthy and Safe Neighborhoods

We are safe, healthy, and connected to one another.

Thriving Arts, Culture, and Heritage

Greater Boston is full of unique places and experiences that bring joy and foster diversity and social cohesion.

What Effect did Feedback have on the Vision of the Plan?

- Strengthened the emphasis on public sector design and the role of the arts in placemaking
- Specified where specific populations should be prioritized for support and investments
- Added more emphasis on creating better access to homeownership and deeply affordable housing
- Elevated some of the challenges with water quality and availability

Action Area Phase

MetroCommon 2050 uses Action Areas to frame our thinking about how to get to our goals over the next 30 years. Action Areas consist of connected issues, or systems.

The **Action Areas** for MetroCommon 2050 are:

- Homes for Everyone
- Climate Change Adaptation & Mitigation
- Inclusive Growth & Mobility
- Dynamic and Representative Government
- Equity of Wealth and Health

We drafted the Action Area descriptions internally, relying on the multidisciplinary expertise of MAPC staff. We sent drafts to experts and interviewed them to gather their feedback. We adopted the provisional Action Areas during the design process. Great debate occurred over whether to separate climate mitigation from adaptation, but the argument for keeping them as a unified topic carried the day.

Each Action Area description includes a history of how the status quo came to be, our understanding of the systems that influence the area, major challenges and opportunities, and a focus on where interventions are likely to be most effective. The plan's recommendations nest within the Action Areas as well.

We spent the bulk of 2020 developing the Action Area content and then vetting this content with the public. Staff started the process by using driver diagrams to explore the systems at play within each Action Area. We then built out the content described above, testing it with the EAC and MAPC Council members. For each Action Area, we conducted multiple focus groups with subject matter experts to better understand the intersectional nature of these systems and to identify gaps in our content. We also hosted workshops with our mini-grant partners. At these events, attendees completed exercises to affirm, challenge, and strengthen the action areas. We asked constituents, municipal staff, community leaders, and field experts about the challenges and opportunities they saw within their work, homes, and the region as a whole. (List of engagement activities)

What Effect did Feedback Have on Action Areas?

- Reduced the emphasis on making changes to the structure of local governments and instead focusing on making it easier to collaborate, incentivizing multi-municipal partnerships, devolving some state decision-making to smaller geographies, and continuing to provide remote opportunities for residents to engage and participate in local government business.
- Reinforced that local government customer service needs to be improved to make sure everyone feels respected and able to be heard
- Led us to emphasize that state and local investment and development decisions need to focus much more on smart growth consistent locations, improve the jobs/housing balance; and build and preserve much more affordable housing, especially in transit-served areas.
- Lent urgency to the work of addressing root causes. Many comments focused on the need to improve economic and housing security and stability for the lowest income residents and workers in order to achieve the long-term goals outlined in MetroCommon.

Scenario Planning Phase

In scenario planning, we explored a handful of possible futures, and we assessed the impact and effectiveness of various policy actions within them. We used this technique to gauge if our policy recommendations were robust enough to withstand the surprises the future may hold and to build the case for how the recommendations might be adapted as future conditions unfold.

The discussion of future uncertainties went through an extensive engagement process involving an external advisory committee, an internal advisory committee, and MAPC staff input. The advisory committees were comprised of people who understood the complexities of the region and current trends in data and who could think creatively about the future. Members came from industries such as research organizations, private sector companies, non-profit agencies, and government agencies.

After exploring a variety of future uncertainties, the advisory committees determined to highlight three for closer examination. These were were largely independent, likely to happen, and bound to have high impact on the region. The advisory groups helped think through what the impacts of these forces might be, what areas of life they would influence, and how they should be combined into scenarios.

Once we developed the scenarios and correlated them with potential policy recommendations, we held three workshops and asked the MAPC Council and constituents to weigh in on each scenario. These events, “Planning for the Unknown,” included a brief presentation on the developed content, then dove into the question of whether participants felt the identified policies would address the potential scenarios we envisioned playing a role in the future of the

region. In January 2020, this work was publicized at the Massachusetts Municipal Association's Annual Meeting and feedback was collected on the MetroCommon 2050 website.

What Effect did Feedback have on Scenario Planning?

- Convinced us to talk about future travel both in terms of the way we move around and the amount we move around.
- Convinced us to treat the federal response to climate change as an uncertainty – as opposed to the level of climate change itself.
- Produced the content of the report "Our Main Takeaways to Better Plan for Policy and Action Going Forward" [link to section of plan]

Policy Recommendation Phase

The final phase of the development of the plan was to create actionable recommendations that would get the region on the path to meet the 2050 goals. To begin, we crafted a table of contents, which was a list of 20 policy areas to prioritize. We then assigned MAPC staff with topical expertise to draft the recommendations. Staff were encouraged to review research, interview external practitioners and policy experts, and study previous work conducted at the agency.

We made each recommendation available for staff feedback. To ensure feedback helped move the recommendations in a more equitable direction, we asked staff to consider the following questions when providing their input:

- To what extent does this policy align with the MetroCommon 2050 goals?
- To what extent does this policy explicitly benefit communities of color?
- In what way could this policy negatively impact historically disadvantages groups and what can be done to mitigate that from happening?
- If this feedback is incorporated, could the recommendation reasonably be implemented on a 2030 timeline? A 2050 timeline?

While staff engaged a group of external stakeholders in their networks throughout the initial drafting process, deeper and widespread engagement began with the draft recommendation outlines in January 2021. We sent drafts of the policies and practices around the region for feedback. We sent them directly to policy experts, practitioners, and advocates. We held events, presented to groups that were involved in the Visioning Phase, such as the Massachusetts Association of Planning Directors, and convened 27 focus groups with subject matter experts and with mini-grant participants over the course of the winter and spring to get deeper feedback on the draft recommendations. All of the drafts were then updated and posted online along with a survey that allowed members of the public to provide comments on specific strategies and actions presented.

Engagement Activities

MAPC hosted a virtual municipal leadership "breakfast" with over 100 municipal leaders in the region to present and gather feedback on the Dynamic and Representative Government recommendations.

MAPC staff presented draft recommendations of interest at each of the eight subregions to gather feedback from municipal staff and board members.

The focus groups were also issue specific, each featuring one to three recommendations, to get more thorough input from policy experts, practitioners, and advocates.

Additionally, through the mini-grant program, we identified non-profit organizations that could convene their stakeholders and broaden MAPC's outreach to people most impacted by the policies to ensure we incorporated the perspectives of young people, people of color, and people who've faced barriers to accruing wealth. Fourteen focus groups were co-led with five community-based organizations throughout the region. Four were held in different languages: Spanish and Portuguese. As with the other focus groups, these discussions featured a presentation of a small subset of the recommendations, followed by a discussion about whether the ideas presented would make a demonstrable positive impact on their lives. Some of the most thoughtful, thorough input received during the engagement process came from these conversations.

After some updates and iterations based on initial feedback from these meetings, the draft recommendations were posted online along with a survey that allowed members of the public to provide comments on specific strategies and actions presented. The draft policy recommendations were translated into four languages.

What Effect did Feedback Have on the Plan's Recommendations?

The recommendations went through a number of iterations as feedback was collected and incorporated. Some of the more significant changes included:

- Modified recommendations to more directly target root causes as opposed to the symptoms of the problem.
- We heard that we need to be more explicit about how ideas were cross-cutting, and so we made sure that our recommendations could take the cross cutting approach (impacting both housing and climate priorities, for example).
- Attempted to be more explicit about identifying who the actor that can take the action is and how implementation could work.
- In response to concerns that there were too many new entities with controversial powers called for throughout the recommendations, we modified a number of recommendations to be more collaborative and incentive-based. We revised the idea of a regional land use board that could intercede in development permitting. We also turned the idea of a broadly-focused infrastructure coordinating committee into a regional climate infrastructure bank.

- In the wake of extensive feedback on the public safety recommendations, redrafted this recommendation to focus more on reducing the need for police intervention and the likelihood of violence in those situations.
- Scaled back the integrated watershed management recommendation to begin with a pilot in one or two watersheds before being deployed statewide.
- Recast the idea of a regional park ownership and management system to be a regional park collaboration to identify maintenance, investment, and expansion priorities.

  Significantly changed the recommendations about potential reforms to the Community Preservation Act to be less prescriptive on municipalities and reduced the state funding target to a 50% match, which would still be a significant infusion of new resources.

  Having heard the need for more focus on older adults in our public health recommendation, added specific actions for age-friendly living.

Many of the recommendations include actions the Massachusetts Legislature must take. To gather legislative input, MAPC first hosted a virtual State House briefing on the future of work, which included a preview of some of the recommendations that are most tied to advancing an equitable and resilient recovery. During the following week, MAPC held two smaller legislative focus groups on different subsets of recommendations that support economic recovery. One focused on small business support and workforce development, and another on aligning our climate, housing, and transportation policy with our economic goals.

The largest push of engagement was during the month of May. During "MetroCommon May," an all-hands effort was employed to promote the recommendations and further collect feedback through the survey. There was a kick-off event that featured the short film, Living Together, to draw attention to MetroCommon and share stories of people in the region.

At the end of this planning process, the recommendations will remain posted on the digital hub with an interactive feature to continue to collect comment. MetroCommon is intended to serve as a living document. As the needs of the region evolve, MAPC will continue to consider and incorporate feedback after the plan's official release.