WAYS TO THINK ABOUT
PLANNING
IN BUFFALO NIAGARA

Approaches, Tools and Resources

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PLANNING
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LEARNING FROM ONE REGION FORWARD

Learning is fundamental to planning. It helps us ground our work in what is most important to the community, bases it on sound information and data, and can make our actions smarter and better situated for success.

This brief guidebook summarizes some of what was learned through the three years of planning, research, and engagement for One Region Forward and suggests ways to think about planning at various geographic scales (our region, municipality, block, parcel, etc.). As a tool, this resource can be used by citizens, local planners, community leaders, nonprofit staff, and others who are looking to leverage planning to create change in a community.
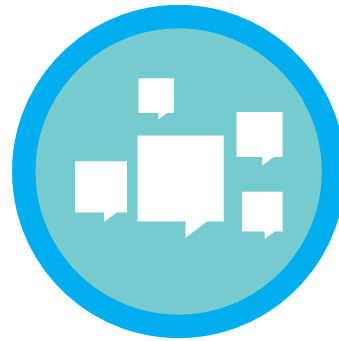
Within this guidebook, users will find some key concepts to consider in community-level planning. Those concepts are supported with information on resources gathered, created or launched through One Region Forward.

The featured concepts and examples are not intended to be exhaustive, nor are they designed to be read as part of a linear, step-by-step process. Rather, users of this guidebook may want to think about the concepts as general items to consider when planning and aligning local work with One Region Forward.

LEARN WHAT THE COMMUNITY VALUES

Community values are a set of widely-shared beliefs about what a community thinks is important.

Why values are important

A solid understanding of community values reminds us why we are engaged in planning, who the work is intended to serve, and what are the desired outcomes of a given planning or development process. Understanding community values is not about promoting an individual or single group's vision for the future, but rather understanding broadly shared beliefs that are important to diverse individuals and perspectives within a community.

Ways to discover and identify what the community values

Look to current and past planning in the community

Planning rarely starts from scratch. A careful content analysis of a community's previous plans – their goals, objectives, vision statements, etc. - can reveal a concern for a range of pressing issues related to what a community values. Researching what past plans say can be a good starting point to understand what a community values. It likely won't close the book on what a community values, but can be a familiar place from which to start a conversation.

Start a dialogue with the community

Direct interaction with a community through meetings, charettes, or other types of interactive forums can be a good way to get a contemporary check on what is important to a community. One approach is to meet with people in person to test a series of value statements derived from past plans and see how much they reflect a community's current views on what is important.

Regional Vision and Values

One Region Forward has framed a set of values for the Buffalo Niagara region, grounded in local plans and tested with the community and civic/business leaders throughout the planning process. These statements can be useful to your community planning process as a way to see how your planning aligns with the regional initiative and/or to start a conversation with your local community on local values.

oneregionforward.org/regional-vision-values
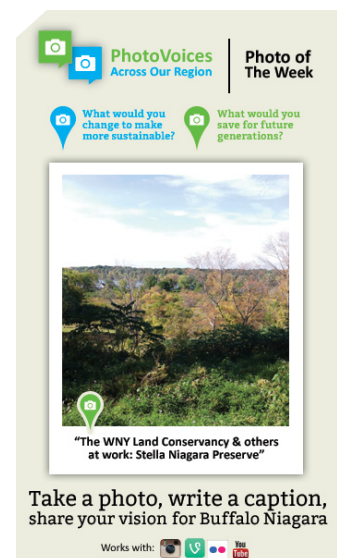
Buffalo Niagara Plan Library

An exhaustive online repository of more than 160 plans ranging from municipal and comprehensive plans to brownfield, waterfront and economic development plans and everything in between. Made for communities in Erie and Niagara counties, the Plan Library is a great place to start when researching local values.

oneregionforward.org/plan-library

Photovoices Across Our Region

An interactive tool on One Region Forward's website, Photovoice highlights places in the region that people would like to see preserved or changed. Take a look to see images people have identified in your community, or point your community members to use the One Region Forward PhotoVoice tool.

oneregionforward.org/photovoices-across-the-region

Meet the community where they are

Reaching people where they live and places they visit offers a comfortable, low-key way for community members to provide feedback and engage in conversations about issues that are important to them. This approach can reach individuals or groups whose perspectives and feedback are vital to include for a variety of factors. It can help expand the reach to populations not typically enagaged in planning efforts to ensure a range of perspectives and voices are included in the process.

Get innovative and interactive with your audience through online tools and technologies

Social media, web-based and text surveys, and interactive feedback tools can open up additional avenues for engaging the public. Leveraging these resources can broaden and diversify engagement efforts and help get younger audiences involved in your process.

UNDERSTAND WHERE THE COMMUNITY IS NOW AND WHERE IT'S GOING

NOW → **FUTURE**

Informed decision-making is the bedrock of responsible public action.

Why looking at data is important

When we ground our planning in objective data and information, it helps us focus our work on the realities of what is happening – to our economy, our environment, our society, our climate and more. It involves looking to objective data to examine trends, talking to the community about what they see and experience, and recognizing what this information may suggest about a community's future. Ultimately, it allows us to use that base of information in a way that builds a strong sense of what our planning needs to accomplish and why we are doing it.

Ways to understand your community through data

Understand the key issues by learning what the community says is important and what the data says is important

To understand what the community thinks is important, look to past or ongoing studies, secondary sources like newspaper articles, or engage the community and/or key stakeholders to learn what issues they think are high-priority.
To understand what the data says, we look at objective data available about our community. While data availability can vary based upon the questions being asked and the geography being studied, looking to familiar data sources like the US Census American Community Survey, parcel data and online Geographic Information Systems sites can be a good place to find data about places in our region.

Communicate your findings in useful and understandable ways that fit your community

A solid understanding of a community's issues or areas of concerns can be most effective when they are used to tell a story about what these issues mean for the community and its residents. This can be a tricky and nuanced task, but can bring your data to life and influence decision-making and support for a plan or initiative.
Data and information can be a useful conversation starter when engaging the public. Presenting data and asking citizens to reflect on it can be a way to help inform citizens as they consider what is most important to them and the process.

Mapping Metrics for Buffalo Niagara

A wealth of significant geographic data on Buffalo Niagara and its communities can be viewed and analyzed on this web-based interactive mapping portal. Find data regarding demographics, transportation systems, land uses, economic activity, food systems, and more that can help uncover what the data says about your community.

oneregionforward.org/mappingmetrics

Citizen Planning School Learning Sessions Resources & Materials
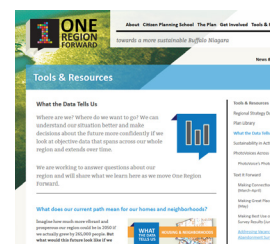
Videos and handouts of One Region Forward's Citizen Planning School Learning Sessions feature a range of online tools, planning documents, and other resources that can be helpful in looking at a community and the issues it faces.

oneregionforward.org/2014-learning-sessions-workshops

What the Data Tells Us

A series of data-driven questions are offered on the OneRegionForward.org website that tackle key issues facing our region. While the findings are at the regional scale, they may be useful in situating your issue within the regional dialogue.

oneregionforward.org/what-the-data-tells-us

One Region Forward Performance Base

One Region Forward has produced a series of indicators intended to measure the collective progress of the initiative. You may want to measure similar metrics or consider how your planning can contribute to the positive movement of the indicators.

One Region Forward Plan and Strategy Documents

A wide range of data findings regarding housing, food, transportation, land use, climate, and more can be found in the One Region Forward plan as well as its accompanying strategy documents.

oneregionforward.org/the-plan

Discover what the current path means for the community's future

Projecting what trends could look like into the future can be effective in understanding the direction a community is going. It can be as complicated as building a spatial regression model to project how the future may look if trends of the past were to continue, or as simple as framing a conversation around a series of "if, then" logic statements where we make logical assumptions about what the future holds if things stay on the current path (i.e. if we continue to convert farmland into other uses at the current rate, then we will change the agricultural character of our community and lessen our ability to grow food locally."
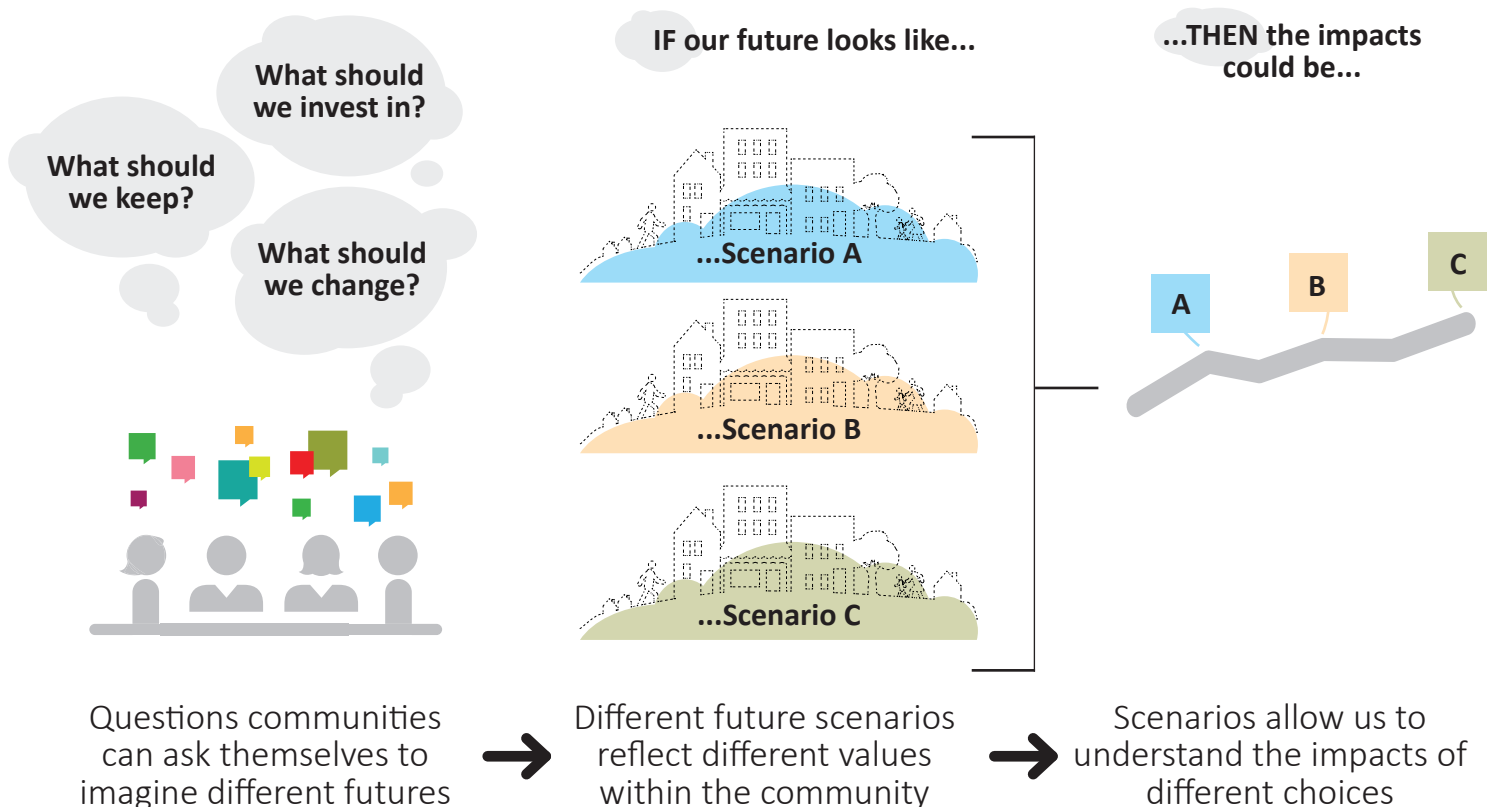
IMAGINE ALTERNATIVE FUTURES AND THEIR IMPACTS

IF...
...THEN

Ask relevant questions and use community feedback to shape future scenarios and evaluate the impacts of those different scenarios.

Why exploring different futures is important

Planning is a forward looking enterprise. It enables citizens and community leaders to envision their future and play meaningful roles in setting the policies and shaping the investments that can advance that vision. Increasingly, planners are turning to the activity of scenario planning, where the community provides input to create a series of potential options to pursue, and then evaluates the impacts of each.

What should we invest in?

What should we keep?

What should we change?

IF our future looks like...

...THEN the impacts could be...

...Scenario A

...Scenario B

...Scenario C

A

B

C

Questions communities can ask themselves to imagine different futures → Different future scenarios reflect different values within the community → Scenarios allow us to understand the impacts of different choices

Ways to imagine scenarios and evaluate their potential impacts

While the process can rely on advanced techniques and tools to build scenarios and evaluate their potential impacts, the concepts can be applied with varying levels of technical capacity.

Ask relevant questions

Start by asking key questions that can help community members envision what they would like to see for the study area. You may want to bound it by time (i.e. what should the community look like in 20 years), and your questions may be specific to the circumstances. That said, two major guiding questions can be used as a starting point. What about the place would you like to see preserved for the future? What do you think should change and what should that change look like?

Collect input from the community

A wide range of tools can be leveraged to collect responses from the community to the visioning questions. Sometimes it may be appropriate to use surveys, or ask people to give brief responses to open-ended questions. Particularly with processes that involve land use, a hands-on mapping exercise can be a very effective way to collect input. The important thing is to collect information that is clearly decipherable and directly related to the prompt questions.

Paint scenarios to evaluate

Constructing scenarios, or snapshot visions of the future based upon a series of assumptions, can be a good way to show comparisons about what things may look like in the future and how well various approaches help us build a community that reflects broadly shared values. Methods for evaluating the impacts of scenarios can vary. There are publicly available software packages like Envision Tomorrow or Urban Footprint that can project impacts for various building or community types across a series of indicators. If one lacks the technical proficiency to evaluate at that scale, crafting "if... then..." statements around key community values can help frame an understanding of what might be the likely impacts of an approach related to community values.

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TOOLS FOR LEARNING FROM **ONE REGION FORWARD**

One Region Forward Planning Process

The approach, process, and results of One Region Forward's scenario planning process are "open source" and are well documented on the OneRegionForward.org website. And the documentation to how we developed the scenarios – the participatory mapping, scenario construction, and testing of impacts – can all be used for reference in your local community process.

oneregionforward.org/scenario-planning-workshops
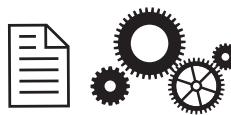
One Region Forward Alternative Scenarios

The scenarios constructed in 2014 for One Region Forward tell stories at the regional scale. However, we can also look to them to understand the impacts of general approaches to land use. The business as usual scenario helps tell a story of the impacts and cost of continuing to sprawl out as a region like we have in past decades. We can see the cost to government finances of this approach, but also what it would mean for our ecosystems, vacancy trends, downtown vibrancy, transit-friendliness, as well as a host of other indicators related to our regional vision and values. The three alternative scenarios show different approaches to land use coordination. These help us understand what the relative costs and impacts could be if we were to develop our region differently than in the past.

oneregionforward.org/scenarios

MOVE PLANNING INTO ACTION

IT HELPS TO FOCUS ON...

...RECOGNIZING THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO GET THE WORK DONE

...THE OUTCOMES THE PLAN SEEKS TO ACHIEVE.

It's a truism that plans are only as good as their implementation.

What matters in the implementation phase

At the end of the day, we plan to effectuate change. In order to be effective, our plans need to have traction to get implemented. Community plans are rarely step-by-step instruction booklets that outline how each component gets done. They can suggest these things, but in reality, they rarely outline this level of specificity. In many instances, plans need to approach implementation more broadly and focus on the outcomes they seek to create, while recognizing there may be numerous ways to get the work done.

Ways to move planning and change forward

Implementation can come in many forms and supported via numerous ways. It often requires us to think about promoting the conditions and building a structure to ensure implementation can move forward in an effective and timely manner. Below are some best practice ways that communities can look to move a plan forward toward implementation.

Track progress

In many instances, implementation starts with keeping an eye on how well we are meeting a plan's stated goals and desired outcomes. That process can involve tracking physical projects, monitoring the advancement of specific policy changes, or evaluating quantitative metrics, or indicators, designed to gauge overall success. Regardless of what is measured, it is important that we commit to evaluating our plans and create the process to do so. This allows us to gauge progress and make necessary course corrections.

Leverage Resources

Many of the items in our plans will require funding or some sort of financial investment. Understanding the landscape of funding is important. This includes getting a grasp of the

Citizen Planning School

Cultivating an engaged and informed citizenry to become agents for change at the local level is a central component to implementing One Region Forward. The program offers learning sessions free and open to the public on key issues in planning and sustainable development, networking opportunities, workshops on funding considerations, as well as a list of resources pertinent to planning at the community level.

One Region Forward Performance Base

To help gauge how well our collective regional actions match what we say we value, a series of indicators were developed for One Region Forward and will be measured over time. Local communities can look to these metrics, what they are intended to evaluate, and consider adopting them for their own process.

Capacity Support

One Region Forward will continue to identify ways to build capacity for local communities – municipalities, neighborhood groups, entrepreneurs, and others – to become better at their work.

public, private, and nonprofit funding programs and considering how your work helps support their criteria. It also includes thinking about resources within your community that can be leveraged effectively.

Form partnerships

Realizing a collective community vision often relies on the involvement of all sorts of stakeholders and groups. This is why it can be critically important to form cross-sectional partnerships with relevant actors around a given planning effort.

Promote learning around the issues

Community understanding around a plan can help build support for its implementation while also opening opportunities for continued dialogue with the people a plan is intended to serve.

Build capacity to get it done

Varying expertise may exist in a given community to track progress, build coalitions, secure funding, manage projects, etc. Capacity building, or the idea of investing in community members or organizations to get support done is an important consideration for implementation.

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oneregionforward.org

Project leadership providing program administration, management, and governance oversight.

Greater Buffalo-Niagara Regional Transportation Council
Project leadership providing program administration, management, and governance oversight.

Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority
Fiscal administrator ensuring project meets the fiscal and administrative requirements of the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning program.

School of Architecture and Planning, University at Buffalo
Regional Sustainability Team conducting the research, planning, community engagement, writing and technical analysis for One Region Forward.

Buffalo Niagara Partnership
Overseeing private sector engagement programming to bring business stakeholders into the planning process.