Town of Essex, Vermont

Keystone Trail Connectivity Project

Scenario Planning Summary

Scenario planning is a tool that helps communities and organizations explore different possible futures and the actions they might take in those futures. Scenario planning prompts conversations before crisis hits and challenges the common assumption that the future will be like the past. In a scenario planning workshop, participants identify key uncertainties affecting their community or organization and consider how different combinations of those futures might play out.
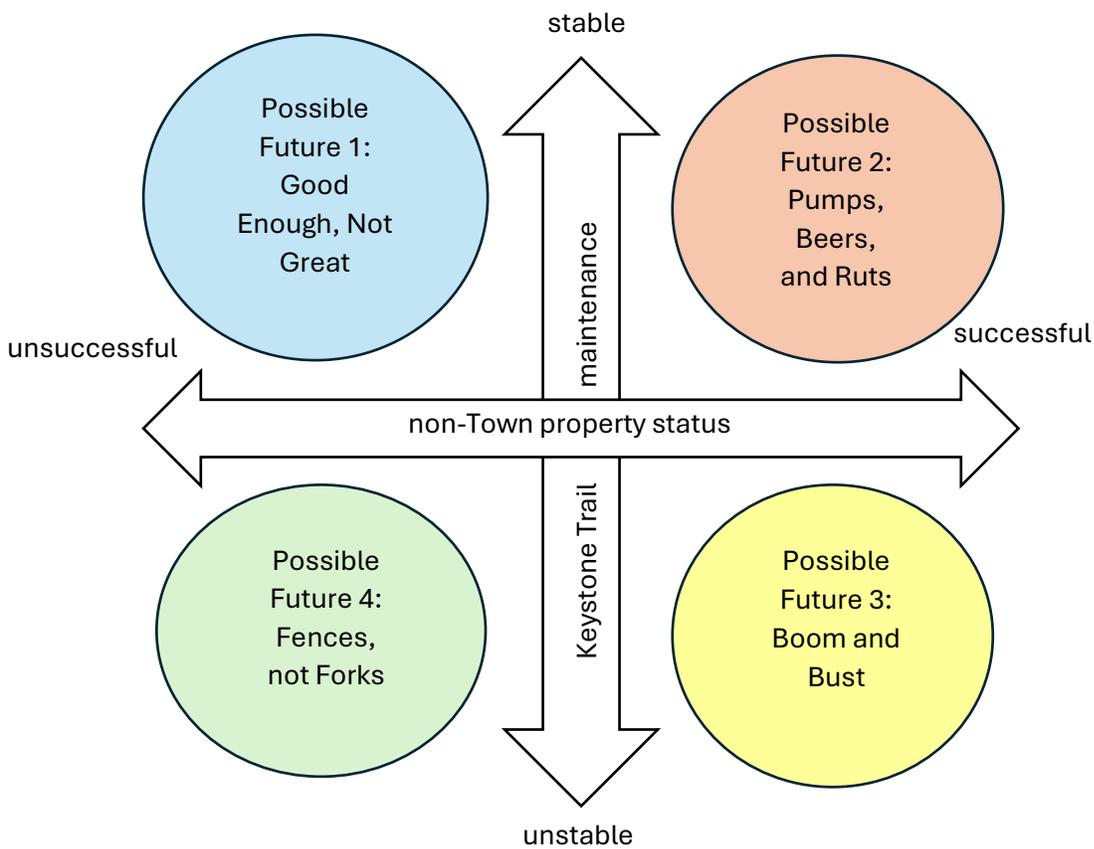
A scenario planning effort was included in the Town of Essex, Vermont, Keystone Trail Connectivity Project process to consider two critical uncertainties: (1) non-Town property status (i.e., there might be successful or unsuccessful outcomes with respect to non-Town properties in the project area) and (2) Keystone Trail maintenance (i.e., there might be stable or unstable maintenance of the trails in the future).

In March 2025, a group of twelve key stakeholders and community members explored four different possible futures based on those two critical uncertainties, and how the community might best prepare for, support, or avoid them. Workshop attendees explored and described what many aspects of four possible futures could look like, based on the above uncertainties. Memorable titles for each possible future are helpful to create a "mental picture" of each future, and hypothetical social media headlines provide a quick summary of what each future might hold.

- Future 1: Unsuccessful outcomes for non-Town properties and stable Keystone Trail maintenance
    - Title: "Good Enough, Not Great"
    - The latest headlines and social media read: "Connection plan stalled because private lands not secured," and "Wildlife populations decline because private lands were developed"

- Future 2: Successful outcomes for non-Town properties and stable Keystone Trail maintenance
    - Title: "Pumps, Beers, and Ruts"
    - The latest headlines and social media read: "Essex becomes the outdoor recreation destination of Vermont", and "Live like a local and experience the best of Vermont"

- Future 3: Successful outcomes for non-Town properties and unstable Keystone Trail maintenance
    - Title: "Boom and Bust"
    - The latest headlines and social media read: "Trail use boom, can't be maintained," and "After three broken ankles, school district asks parents and kids to avoid trails"

- Future 4: Unsuccessful outcomes for non-Town properties and unstable Keystone Trail maintenance
    - Title: "Fences, Not Forks"
    - The latest headlines and social media read: "Development degrades trail system," and "New trail connection plans set aside, again"

Workshop attendees identified key themes and action areas across four possible future scenarios to best prepare for various possibilities in the Keystone Trail area:

- ➢ a need for strong communication among all landowners and users
- ➢ a desire for accurate, usable data and maps across the project area
- ➢ a need to identify priority lands for Town ownership, trails, and amenities
- ➢ a clear, well-planned trail network that developers, nonprofits, municipal staff, and private businesses can rely on to predict future outcomes
- ➢ a commitment to protecting natural habitats and minimizing environmental impacts
- ➢ a reevaluation of fund sources and possible financial resources, especially for long-term operations and maintenance

stable

Possible Future 1: Good Enough, Not Great

Possible Future 2: Pumps, Beers, and Ruts

unsuccessful

maintenance

successful

non-Town property status

Keystone Trail

Possible Future 4: Fences, not Forks

Possible Future 3: Boom and Bust

unstable

Annual or regular review of the scenario planning futures can help elected officials, community members, partners, and staff assess where the community is with respect to the critical uncertainties. For example: what among these descriptors of the future are we seeing around us right now? How might that help us understand our current situation, and where we might be heading in the future? What actions could we take to plan for or ameliorate this possible future?

A scenario planning workshop creates four distinct futures based on two critical uncertainties. In reality, an organization or a community "bounces around" between different futures, perhaps spending time in one quadrat for a short while, then moving to another quadrat based on future conditions. Organizations and communities are best served by working on actions that keep themselves closer to the center of the matrix, rather than finding themselves at one extreme of one uncertainty or another.

Scenario Planning Workshop Attendees:

Greg Duggan, Town of Essex

Jack Evans, Local Motion

Brittany Garland, Fellowship of the Wheel

Kent Johnson, Town of Essex

Georgia Lavigne, Planning Commission

Carolyn Lawrence, CRO Planning and Design

Adam Morse, Fellowship of the Wheel

Drew Pollack-Bruce, CRO Planning & Design

Lea Sanguinetti, Town of Essex

Dan Selicaro, Conservation and Trails Committee

Ken Signorello, Conservation and Trails Committee

Harlan Smith, Town of Essex

Scenario Planning Workshop Design, Facilitation, and Analysis:

Larissa Read, Common Ground Consulting