

Maroochy 2025 Community Visioning & Action – A Case Study of Anticipatory Action Learning Practices in Use Within Maroochy Shire, Queensland, Australia*

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Abstract

This article provides a brief introduction to the Maroochy 2025 Community Visioning project, highlighting the benefits in using Anticipatory Action Learning approaches as a method of consultation. One of the many unique aspects of Maroochy 2025 has been the use of futures studies methods in conjunction with community and social planning approaches. The use of anticipatory action learning activities within Maroochy 2025 provided both new learning and opportunities for both communities and local government. This included reframing an understanding of future issues facing Maroochy Shire and discovering innovative and intuitive answers to future issues through the development of collective visions and actions.

Maroochy Shire is situated 100 kilometres north of Brisbane, within the South East Queensland Region. With South East Queensland rated as one of the fastest growing regions in Australia, growth management is a vital issue for Maroochy Shire. The Australian Bureau of Statistics forecasts South-East Queensland increasing in population from 2.46 million to 3.4 million by 2021. Of this, the Sunshine Coast is expected to experience one of the largest increases, estimated to double from 245,000 to 435,000 people¹ moving to the Sunshine Coast. Maroochy Shire is expected to absorb more than half of this population growth. This would equate to an increase of 237,000 Maroochy residents within 16 years (2021) compared with current population figures estimated at 130,000 in 2004.

* Maroochy 2025 officially commenced in January 2003. Between January and June 2003 a series of "priming and research" activities established the parameters of the project scope. Upon completion of these activities, paved the way for the commencement of Stage 1 of a 4 stage process. Stage 1 was officially signified with the recruitment of the community taskforce in September 2003. Maroochy 2025 is currently in stage 4 (Implementation & monitoring) and will remain in this stage for four x 5 year cycles until the year 2025

A Strategy Called Maroochy 2025

The impact of population growth is one of several issues affecting Maroochy Shire's future. Other issues include the changing nature and viability of traditional industries; increasing community requests for more direct involvement in decision making, concerns surrounding sustainable development and the provision of solid governance and leadership. These various factors made it clear that business as usual could not continue. These issues have all contributed as drivers, in developing a strategy for managing the future. The key question became The future is changing! Do the citizen of Maroochy want to be passive receivers of the future or active co-creators? The strategy that ensued was titled the "Maroochy 2025 Community Visioning Project."

As a means to determine the validity of the proposed *Maroochy 2025* strategy, Maroochy Shire Council undertook preliminary research through a review of existing strategic documentation pertaining to Maroochy's future. Results were presented and discussed at a *Maroochy 2025* priming summit. The summit included key public, private, and community stakeholders who had previously been active in planning for the region's future. It was within this early consultation period that it was made clear that the *Maroochy 2025* strategy would be much better equipped to address future issues, if a deeper understanding of the nature of the Shire's community was acquired. This deeper understanding included emergent issues and how communities define their futures. Stakeholders had already perceived from early evidence that the community desired to sustain its unique environment, character, culture, and social dynamics. Additionally the community desired to provide support and information, and to partner in assisting local planning and policy-making decisions.²

Mapping Maroochy Shire's Future

These early priming sessions resulted in the development of *Maroochy 2025* project deliverables based upon broad based, futures

studies orientated, planning and visioning concepts. Firstly, in order for the *Maroochy 2025* Project Team to best meet the project deliverables, they researched local and international planning frameworks. This research resulted in the decision to use the *Hillsboro 2020* model that had a proven track record of success in several cities of the United States and Australia.³ Basing *Maroochy 2025* on the *Hillsboro 2020* meant the project was provided with a foundational framework that had the flexibility to explore alternative methodologies in which to evolve visioning processes.

Secondly, Maroochy Shire Council derived its planning process from the emerging discipline of Futures Studies, to best meet the project deliverables. The decision to use Futures Studies emerged from of a Seminar in 2001 that Sohail Inayatullah⁴ conducted for Maroochy Shire Council. Through various Maroochy Shire Council futures workshops and planning sessions, Sohail Inayatullah assisted in developing the capacity of the council to anticipate the future and develop alternative visions and plans. Through discussions with Maroochy Shire Council's Chief Executive Officer, insights were gained regarding Maroochy's potentiality to embark upon a more extensive application of futures studies. These insights related to choosing a different future than either the "business as usual model" or the "growth mania model" (e.g. a fragmented and unplanned city). This led to efforts by internal change agents to embed futures studies within the *Maroochy 2025* Community Visioning methodology. Maroochy Shire Council directly applied future studies concepts and practices adapted from the works of Professor Sohail Inayatullah.⁵ These concepts included:

- Emerging Issues Analysis
- Futures Triangle
- Causal Layered Analysis
- Scenario planning
- Creative visualisation
- Backcasting
- Anticipatory action learning

Utilising these concept methods was made possible through the engagement of facilitators who were undertaking futures studies at the

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University of the Sunshine Coast.

Thirdly, it was decided to use Anticipatory Action Learning (AAL) because it was seen as a pivotal methodology. This methodology used the inherent capacity of the community to create alternatives in terms of issues definition, images or visions, and solutions for Maroochy Shire.

Scope and Size of The Maroochy 2025 Project

The scope of *Maroochy 2025* was to reach a targeted audience of up to 4% of the population in order to be representative and statistically significant. Therefore community engagement was the cornerstone of *Maroochy 2025*. The *Maroochy 2025* process sought not just to engage community opinion, but to *involve* the community in activities through which they would best articulate their preferred visions for the future of their region. *Maroochy 2025* processes were specifically designed to collect and utilize as many varied contributions as possible. To maximize public participation, many different methods of collecting and informing public opinion were applied.⁶ These methods included:

- A Pre-consultation workshop
- The "Maroochy 2025 Background Paper"
- A website
- Stakeholder consultation and questionnaires
- Community workshops
- School summits
- Youth Council ("Youth Voice") visioning sessions
- Maroochy Shire Council staff workshops
- Community summits and summit pre-polling
- Creation of a Community Task Force
- Action planning groups
- An Action Planning "Integration Night"
- Document and literature reviews
- Community surveys
- *Maroochy 2025* Community Newsletters
- Articles in Maroochy Council newsletters, local newspapers and other media

This ensured an unprecedented level of involvement from residents, making *Maroochy 2025* a thoroughly representative community plan. In the end, it embodied:

- Input from more than 3,840 people who directly participated in the visioning and action planning stages
- More than 40,208 public responses (written, emailed, phoned, etc.)
- More than 32,514 hours of community representatives' time
- More than 3,368 community vision ideas/goals (from which the community vision statement was created)
- More than 60 community strategies and 200 community actions - crafted from the above ideas/goals, during some 1,728 hours of prioritising, organising and summarising by community members

Participants included representatives from a range of special interest bodies and stakeholders, including:

- State and Local Government
- Local academics and professionals
- Business representatives
- Community groups
- Schools and youth groups
- Local ethnic groups
- Indigenous communities
- Persons with disabilities
- The general public

This broad mix of representatives was especially active in the development of the action planning stage of *Maroochy 2025*.

Application of Anticipatory Action Learning

The application of Anticipatory Action Learning (AAL) methods within the *Maroochy 2025* Project was applied in two ways. Initially the AAL methodology was utilised with a thirty-two-member community taskforce. The purpose of the taskforce was to reflect the community's voices and write the 2025 vision. The taskforce engaged in the following AAL methodology processes:

- Reflective questioning,
- Sharing and expressing the Community Taskforce's existing knowledge of the Shire,
- Finding the innovative and intuitive answers to Maroochy's future issues and problems,
- Defining, creating, and analysing possible trends, issues, and scenarios for Maroochy Shire.

This enabled specific focus by the facilitators in exploring the community taskforce's ways and means of knowing; questioning their assumptions at different levels; and creating alternative perspectives. The community taskforce was able to scan the future more broadly than any previous visioning methods utilised throughout the shire. As a result the Community Taskforce were able to establish six key focus areas as parameters for the visioning process and develop a sound "possible scenario" paper as a precursor to the main community consultation activities.

The second way Anticipatory Action Learning was applied was within the design of the community workshop. These workshops, utilising AAL practices, consisted of engaging the community in learning how to solve the real world problems currently facing Maroochy Shire. This was achieved through firstly informing the community of the future issues and problems as identified by the community taskforce and secondly by stimulation of all the intelligences including emotional, spiritual, intellectual and cognitive, to develop fresh perspectives on existing knowledge. Learning occurred among the community groups as they could individually recognise that it was they who shared the problems, and therefore they could contribute to the solutions and provide mutual support, advice, and criticism on the proposed solutions in reaching Maroochy's visions.

During November 2004, an extensive qualitative survey was undertaken to evaluate a particular consultation phase of *Maroochy 2025*, this included an evaluation of all methods undertaken. The results stated that over 60%⁷ of the Maroochy Community rated Anticipatory

Action Learning as the most effective method utilised.

Lessons Learned from Maroochy 2025

In summary there are five key areas of learning that are reflective of the *Maroochy 2025* experience and Anticipatory Action Learning. This learning is in the context of what worked well, what didn't, learning outcomes, unexpected outcomes, and tensions.

What Worked Well

The community was open to the notion of having their assumptions being challenged, and this was able to be achieved exceptionally well through the use of Anticipatory Action Learning methods. Their ability to reframe their understanding of what they think and feel about the issues driving their future, provided a more insightful assessment of past, current and emerging issues and the solutions required to resolve such issues. *Maroochy 2025* enabled Local Government an advanced ability to engage much of the community with creative and alternative methods relating to the creation of a 20 year community plan.

Inclusive and participatory long term planning methods that use futures studies methods (especially Anticipatory Action Learning) can become a transformative approach to community planning, as this prevents the reinscribing of the present into the future. Another key aspect of *Maroochy 2025* that worked exceptionally well, was the use of Community Taskforces and Community Action Planning Teams. This practice enabled and enhanced community capacities to be actively engaged and build competencies in the community planning process, whilst meeting their need to be involved with planning decisions that will affect the future of Maroochy Shire. Finally, what has been a successful outcome for *Maroochy 2025* Project Team, was to have Maroochy 2025 : Stage 4 (Implementation and Monitoring) included as a project in the next Maroochy Shire Council 2005 -2009 Corporate Plan.

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What didn't Work So Well

What was not done so well was the issue of not consistently involving key opinion holders and stakeholders throughout the entirety of the whole process. This mistake was caused a belief that the initial commitment from key opinion holders and stakeholders at the beginning would suffice and be enough to sustain the level of political support for the entirety of the project. (For example, there was an unexpected and abnormal amount of change in numbers of new Councillors for Maroochy Shire Council during the middle of the *Maroochy 2025* project and the new incumbents did not necessarily agree with the purpose and outcomes being derived from the project.)

Thus the politics communicating a consistent message regarding the purpose and outcomes required from *Maroochy 2025* to key opinion holders is paramount. The aspect of securing future funding by stakeholders to implement actions to make the visions a reality still remains a challenge. The adoption into planning schemes has had limited success to date, with *Maroochy 2025* being considered as a resource to assist Local Government planners undertaking planning schemes amendments with vision ideas desired by the community in the future.

Finally, at the *Maroochy 2025* Community Visioning Summit what didn't work well was the acceptance of pre-developed scenarios, as these were seen as pre-ordained or manipulating the acceptance of these scenarios by key stakeholders. It is believed that developing the scenarios on the day would have created greater ownership of the scenarios for *Maroochy's* future.

What People Learnt

The future does not need to be anticipatory, or perceived as a foregone conclusion. Communities realised that they do have the capacity to create or influence decisions, which can create alternative futures. (*During a community workshop, a sugar cane farmer had an epiphany when he realised that it is possible to think in terms of alternative futures and not the*

reinscribed present into an anticipated future. This discovery of this new capacity within him was enough to provide new hope and new motivations for a farmer who was facing great uncertainty in a collapsing industry.) Communities today, already contain immense "capacity in leadership and foresight". Projects like *Maroochy 2025* can and did create the spaces for this capacity to be seen and valued.

Unexpected Outcomes

What was totally unexpected was that individuals valued the opportunity to have their assumptions challenged and questioned. What was amazing was to see an increase in community capacity levels in the areas of demonstrated motivations, capacities, leadership within communities, taskforces, and action planning teams, all who displayed so much passion to be engaged in such a process. What was observed as an outcome was the rise of community localism, advocacy and a desire to become involved in dialogue pertaining to alternative futures. It was concluded that a region/shire/community can agree upon one collective vision for their future.

Tensions

With any future orientated process, there will be a clash of worldviews. What was interesting in *Maroochy 2025*, was that this occurred both within the individual and between individuals. The creation of a deeper and inner awareness of predominant and alternative worldviews aided the *Maroochy 2025* Community Taskforce's ability in creating alternatives to the future. Hence, they changed their future by first challenging their thinking.

Conclusion

In essence, *Maroochy 2025* is about creating long-term, future-orientated policy options and consultation frameworks for emergent communities and Government planners. *Maroochy 2025* aimed to be a means of empowering the many while creating energy and space to consider the alternatives for

Maroochy Shire. *Maroochy 2025* has given the Maroochy community a way of recognising significant actions or milestones along the way to its preferred future. As a result of community visioning summit, the current Mayor has committed to including the outcomes of the Maroochy vision into the current Council's Corporate Plan.

Maroochy 2025 is currently lauded as one of the "best-practice case studies" in the arena of community planning by the Queensland Department of Local Government & Planning.⁸ One of the many pivotal events of *Maroochy 2025* was the ability to bring over 400 residents together and reach consensus on a preferred scenario for their future. This was a landmark event in anticipatory democracy, which highlighted the inherent potential and existing capacity and leadership that communities have in articulating common futures.

Using methods from Futures Studies in community planning and consultation can provide greater opportunity for active participation by all types of stakeholders or opinion holders. Engaging the full community in the identification of issues, trends, change drivers, probable scenarios and visions, can create a more representative articulation of preferred images for the future. A community can actively influence the planning and policy-making decisions that directly affect it.

In the long term, insights, and perspectives gained by undertaking community visioning actions, especially through Anticipatory Action Learning methods are expected to provide local governments with a framework for transformational change. However, there are many who are still sceptical as to whether *Maroochy 2025* will change Local Government Planning and Policy, yet recognise that the *Maroochy 2025* experience has left a positive personal impact in terms of the development of critical thinking, changed attitudes and empowerment.

The *Maroochy 2025* Community Visioning Project has happened as a result of a growing and emerging localization of planning and governance processes within Australian communities. The need to own the decisions that determine a community's future and to share the

responsibility for creating such a future highlights the arrival of sophisticated, intellectually savvy, and cohesive communities who are no longer prepared to be recipients of a faceless, professionalised bureaucratic society. The effectiveness of "community taskforces" model, as seen in *Maroochy 2025*, indicates a growth in residential communities and associations who are eager and willing to engage in sub-local communities or projects that offer participatory opportunities.

The results of projects like *Maroochy 2025* are a wake up call to planners, governments, and business alike. Evidence gained from statistical evaluation of the *Maroochy 2025* project clearly demonstrates that communities value the opportunity to engage in deconstructive thinking are prepared to take up the challenge of questioning their own assumptions and those who make the decisions on our behalf...

Correspondence

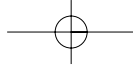
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Notes

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics Basic *Community Profile: LGAs*. (Catalogue No. 2001.0), Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2002.
2. Survey conducted as part of the Maroochy 2025 Visioning Workshop, 17th April 2003.
3. Maroochy 2025 was based upon a 4-step model used by Steven Ames in Hillsboro Oregon USA; this plan was called Hillsboro 2020. Steve Ames is a world-renowned community planner, and has an outstanding track record in community visioning in both the United States and Australia.
4. Dr Sohail Inayatullah is world-renowned in the field of Futures Studies and future oriented policy-making.
5. Inayatullah, S. (2002). *Questioning the Future: Future Studies, Action Learning and Organisational Transformation*. Taipei: Tamkang University.

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6. Gould, S. (2005) *Maroochy 2025 Book: Philosophy & Methodologies: – Future Studies Applied and Public Participation Methods*. Maroochy Shire Council. Nambour. Australia. Pp. 10–35.
 7. Maroochy 2025 Evaluation Survey No 4 December 2004.
 8. David Grogan, *Best Practice Guidelines: Corporate and Operational Planning Draft Version 1.0630* Brisbane: Queensland Govt. Dept. of Local Govt., Planning, Sport & Recreation, June 2004, p. 39.
- Inayatullah, S. (2002). *Questioning the Future: Future Studies, Action Learning and Organisational Transformation*. Taipei: Tamkang University.
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