

Learning from the Politics of Futures

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Abstract

The central intent of this essay is based on the author's master's thesis named 'Creating alternative community futures: A community futures tragedy.' This thesis explored the question "Can local governments empower their communities with the opportunity and capacity to create alternative futures?" Local governments in their role of managing issues and planning for the future have more recently embraced the concepts of community engagement and sustainable development. This essay presents the results from a community visioning project 'Maroochy 2025' and highlights a tragedy of lost opportunity to galvanise community momentum and capacity to create alternative futures. However, the learnings from Maroochy 2025 highlight the case for anticipatory democracy practices and participatory leadership. If the new purpose of local governments is to support the creation of sustainable communities, then local governments will need to engage their communities in more meaningful ways and re-define implementation models within the constraints of representative democracy.

Community engagement is a cornerstone to empowering communities to become sustainable. Empowerment methods can also support the rise of other emerging forms of democracy. This can be seen as a direct challenge to our existing representative system of government, specifically in how politicians enact their office and processes for decision making. Local government planning and foresight aims to move power back to citizens and local bureaucracies. Consequently, this has given rise to a litany of emergent issues and concerns for some elected representatives as to the value of community engagement, planning and foresight practices for local bureaucracies. These issues and concerns arise as a result of the assumptions held by elected representatives, who regard themselves as having the legitimate authority and power to determine future direction of their communities. From a critical perspective, some local government foresight efforts are seen as creating the one and only 'official version' of a community's future rather than considering alternative views expressed by their communities. The question then becomes "who is advantaged and/or disadvantaged by such official versions of the future?"

* This essay is based on a previous essay published in the Journal of Futures Studies, August 2005, 10(1), 125-132.

Maroochy 2025 Case Study

Between 2002 and 2005, Maroochy Shire Council in Queensland, Australia, completed an applied futures studies based project in community futures call 'Maroochy 2025.' This project was unique for three key reasons. It was the first long term community visioning project undertaken by a local government in Queensland. Secondly, the Maroochy 2025 project used an anticipatory action learning framework to guide processes and methods. Finally, the project incorporated a diverse and comprehensive use of applied futures studies on a large scale and in real world contexts. These elements make the Maroochy 2025 project one of the most extensive contemporary public consultation projects ever undertaken by a local government in Queensland.

The local council drivers for the visioning project was the recognised need to respond to pressures including increasing effects of rapid population growth, urban sprawl and community concerns regarding a sustainable future. Based on a desire by the local bureaucracy to adopt strategies to manage uncertainties for Maroochy Shire's future, the then Maroochy Shire Council sought to engage the community in a new dialogue in order to co-create a preferred image and vision for Maroochy Shire's future.

However, there were several consequences, contradictions and implications that arose from the Maroochy 2025 community futures project, specifically in terms of representative democracy. Some of these issues centred on the consequences and dangers for local government that fail to implement community visioning expectations. Other findings provoked and challenged local government planning assumptions, specifically the assumption by planners that community visioning and town planning approaches are one and the same. Nevertheless, there were also successes and benefits to the Maroochy 2025 project for both council and the community, specifically the value of outcomes achieved through the use of anticipatory democracy approaches and applied futures studies. One significant outcome was the project's ability to create a sense of empowerment for the majority of participants of Maroochy 2025 resulting in a sense of agency regarding their future. Learnings highlighted that the project team acquired increased meta level awareness on the value of selecting methods that empower communities. Using futures studies approaches, including anticipatory action learning and multiple engagement methods that stimulate a range of intelligences, led to meaningful engagement. These methods offer local governments a process in which to become a key driver of social change that can redefine the meaning of community and create new processes by which communities choose sustainable and alternative community futures.

Opportunity for Applied Futures Research

Maroochy 2025 presented the author with an opportunity to apply and record the use of applied futures in real world settings. This recording would be completed by way of masters thesis, which aimed to produce an academic contribution to the field of futures studies. The thesis was titled 'Creating alternative community futures: A community futures tragedy', and was centred on the question "Can local governments

empower their communities with the opportunity and capacity to create alternative futures?" The research contained an associated three sub-questions as follows:

1. Does the use of applied futures studies shift community attitudes and increase the community's level of confidence to create alternative ways of learning, knowing and uses of the future?
2. Can local government politicians and planners improve community planning approaches to enhance the concept of anticipatory democracy?
3. Does foresight and community planning shift the power away from local politicians towards communities and planners?

To contextualise the thesis hypothesis, the author explored five thematic areas, these were:

- Sustainability and communities;
- Local government and sustainable communities;
- Types of democracy, power and decision making;
- Challenges for local government planners; and
- Community engagement approaches.

The intent of the research was to explore the use of applied futures studies methods, within three academic frameworks including interpretive, critical and action learning, in a local government community planning context. This exploration would determine whether a futures studies approach, shifts community attitudes to the future and contributes to increased community capacity to create alternative community futures. By recording, analysing and discussing the results from the Maroochy 2025 project, the author highlights the effects of engaging the community regarding the future.

The aims of the research were to:

- Expand futures studies discourses;
- Challenge the implicit assumptions held by local government planners and politicians on the merits of community visioning processes;
- Discuss the effects from the application of anticipated action learning methods in community visioning;
- Measure the attitudinal effects from participation in applied futures studies processes and methods;
- Present research evidence as to the results of using futures studies methods; and
- Discuss the merits of using applied futures studies methods with community visioning approaches.
- Additional aims of the research were to explore whether, by the use of applied futures studies methods, communities would be able to influence local government policy, planning and decision making processes and empower themselves to create preferred futures.

This research provided insight into approaches to futures discourse, approaches to engaging with and responding to sustainable communities, alternative types of democracy, power, decision making, community engagement and local government planning.

Maroochy 2025 was unique for two reasons. It was undertaken by a local government authority experiencing high growth and it utilised applied futures studies meth-

ods in real world settings. This research is relevant to local government planners, politicians, policy makers and communities in challenging their own assumptions about how to imagine and create visions for their communities. It provides methods for local government in which to engage their communities in planning a future the community prefers.

Summary of Learning from Maroochy 2025

These Maroochy 2025 learnings has been summarised into six key areas of learning. These are:

- What the Project Team learned;
- What did not work so well;
- What the community learned;
- What were the tensions;
- What were some of the unexpected outcomes; and

Each of these six key areas of learning is summarised in the following sections based on the author's personal observations, causal layered analysis and survey results throughout Maroochy 2025 and post the project.

What the Project Team Learned

The first key learning is that the community is highly responsive to anticipatory action learning (AAL) practices. This was demonstrated by the results from the Maroochy 2025 Community Survey No. 4 which highlights that AAL workshops were the most effective method of community engagement for the Maroochy 2025 project. The community was very responsive to this method of engagement and valued the notion of being challenged with methods that aligned with Inayatullah (2006) core aims of anticipatory action learning. These aims are:

- Questioned their assumptions at every level, the mission the goals, the product, core competencies;
- Built capacity for scanning the future by using all their ways of knowing, all their senses; and
- Enabled them to be involved in a process the was inclusive, including the opportunity to mix with others who normally would not be consulted, and being able to recognise and acknowledge that non-inclusion of one variable can change the outcomes in unanticipated ways.

The AAL workshops involved the use of applied futures studies methods and these methods greatly assisted with the community's ability to reframe their understanding of what they think and feel about the issues driving their future. There was also a positive personal impact of Maroochy 2025 for respondents in terms of critical thinking, changed attitudes towards the future and increased sense of empowerment regarding their future. What this mean in terms of community empowerment, as Tonn (1999, p.349) has noted, is that individuals need to be given the opportunity to:

"develop a heightened state of consciousness about [their] community based responsibilities and a substantial broadening of [their] concept of community and

sustainability that encompasses all people and life into the very distant future"

A second key learning is that there are gaps in the intent of the current local government policies that supported or affirmed the use of foresight or community visioning and resolution of sustainability issues. Local governments require a paradigm shift from their inherently conflict-focussed, regulatory based response to the future to a more participatory and partnered response if they are to avoid the consequences of past, current and future decisions that result in community non-sustainability. This learning is further supported by Elgin (2000), who argues that using futures studies as a means to develop foresight based policies has never been so vital, given the need to discover sustainable solutions to pending local and global issues. Hence, there is a pressing need to develop futures orientated policies for local government. Policies or strategies that support the use of community visioning as a means to inform the planning and decision making processes will greatly increase the emergence of anticipatory democracy.

A third key learning is that there is potential to be creative with methods of engagement. Although it is recognised in the results from Community Survey No. 4 that information sessions delivered by local government are still very much valued, what this research highlighted was that the issue with information received from local government was that it was often short term focussed (on recent or emerging events) and did not necessarily align with community aspirations for the future. The development of future orientated information was highlighted from Maroochy 2025 participants who valued the idea of local government keeping the community informed on matters that have the potential to dramatically impact on the future.

A fourth key learning was that the Maroochy 2025 participants wanted the opportunity to participate in inclusive and participatory long term planning processes. The success of the Maroochy 2025 project, Community Task Force and Community Action Planning Teams was highlighted by the level of community participation, number of responses generated and quality of material produced.

A final key learning was that the use of futures studies methods can facilitate improved community planning approaches as these methods assist with changing the assumptions made by planners, thus increasing anticipatory democracy opportunities. This was apparent in their transformational effect on the local government planners who were involved as Maroochy 2025 project leaders. The planner's design of the Maroochy 2025 project is indicative and reflective of an anticipatory democracy based project. The ability of the Project Team planners to progress through the futures studies method of anticipatory action learning highlighted the value of such methods and their ability to encourage the planner to challenge their own worldviews.

At the beginning of the project, many planning assumptions were based on the idea that local government planners and politicians had to be the experts and that there can only be one master plan or vision for the future. The Maroochy 2025 project highlighted that this does not have to be the case. The design of the Maroochy 2025 processes is indicative of how local government planners can transform themselves and their planning process by creating opportunities for anticipatory democracy. In other words as Toffler (1978, p.7) stated, anticipatory democracy is 'a process that combines citizen participation with future consciousness that supports the fusion of

freedom and futures'. Maroochy 2025 aligns with the main aims of an anticipatory democracy. These aims, according to Glenn (1978, p.252), were to create processes or opportunities that are:

- future orientated;
- purposeful;
- contextual;
- participatory;
- include depth of study; and
- integrity based.

Foresight and community visioning/planning does have the ability to change the planner's worldviews by providing the freedom to create alternatives.

What Didn't Work So Well

From an alternative perspective there were a number of failures in the Maroochy 2025 project. These failures tended to arise from issues surrounding the level of engagement, and from local government decision making processes, the use of power and the concept of representative democracy.

Firstly, the Maroochy 2025 Project Team did not consistently involve key opinion holders or decision makers throughout the process. The reason for this was overconfidence by the Project Team that the project did not need further ratification from the project sponsors (Maroochy Shire Council), and it was assumed that after the initial support and commitment had been secured this would ensure ongoing support. This assumption eventually became problematic for the Project Team, as there was a large and abnormal amount of change in the makeup of the Shire Council in the middle of the Maroochy 2025 project and the new Councillors did not necessarily agree with the outcomes or purpose of the project.

Instead, the new Council incumbents believed that the role of the community was to advise Council only and that the idea of an empowered community was a threat to the process of representative democracy. This issue became even more problematic as the Maroochy 2025 project was engaging the community at an empowerment level and the delivery methods designed for the Maroochy 2025 project re-enforced the initial promise from Council to the community that they were to be empowered in the development of, and the final decision on, the community vision.

A second failing was the Project Team's inability to manage the politics of communicating a consistent message to the bureaucracy regarding the project design and action learning updates. As the Project Team adapted the initial design and planned processes, these changes were not communicated to the project sponsors (being Councillors) and bureaucracy. Consequently, when presentation of the results from each stage in the Maroochy 2025 project took place, the project sponsors and bureaucracy were surprised, as the results did not match expected outcomes.

A third failing is linked to the second failing of the Project Team. The initial project plan for Maroochy 2025 did not elaborate sufficiently on the implications from the selected level of community engagement and the implications of using applied futures studies methods. The decision by the Project Team to select an engagement strategy

that would actively empower the community resulted from an intuitive and values driven process via Project Team discussions on social planning and foresight planning. However, what the Project Team failed to confirm with the Maroochy Shire Council Councillors was whether they understood the implications of situating the Maroochy 2025 project in a context of empowerment. What would eventually become a major issue for the project in the later stages, was that the Councillors assumed the project was being managed and the community engaged at the consultation level and not the collaborate/empower level. In this, the Project Team failed to satisfactorily manage the key stakeholders.

The project sponsors were quick to interpret the results from the Maroochy 2025 project as pre-ordained or fanciful outcomes determined by others; the results were seen as a significant threat to their own rights and legitimate power to determine the official images of the future. This interpretation was initially identified when the four alternative scenarios were present to the community and sponsors at the Community Visioning Summit. On reflection, the author and the Project Team identified that it was a mistake to develop the alternative scenarios without including the project sponsors and bureaucracy. Ironically, the Project Team had aimed at ensuring that all anticipatory action learning processes would be inclusive of the community, yet failed to extend this courtesy to the project sponsors and bureaucracy who were such a significant part of the process. This error would prove a key point in creating future disharmony between the community and Maroochy Shire Council after the project was completed and eventually led to the withdrawal of support and funding for the project.

A fourth failing of the project was the failure to establish a Maroochy 2025 Visioning Implementation Committee (MVIC). In a meeting with Council, it was made clear to the author, who at the time was still the Maroochy 2025 project manager, that the Councillors were not in favour of the MVIC model and that final decisions about the future of the Shire from a local government perspective would be made by the Councillors and not the community. This policy position suggests that in the context of representative democracy, community engagement and the creation of preferred futures, the role of the community would remain in the position of giving advice to Council and would not be given the opportunity to develop a stronger sense of agency to own and create their preferred futures. Hence, the new Councillors voted not to support or further fund the Maroochy 2025 project or the establishment of an MVIC.

However, this decision had several impacts on the bureaucracy and the Sunshine Coast community. Initially, there was disappointment and a loss of community goodwill to Council from those who participated, as evidenced by informal feedback to the author. Secondly, it affected the intent and application of Council policies associated with community engagement and Council's own engagement framework. The new policy position was that engagement would take place at information and consulting levels and funding for empowering engagements was subsequently not approved. The policy position of Council would also slow down Council's prior commitment to progress processes of sustainability education, sustainable development strategies and capacity building for civic leadership.

Thirdly, it represented a lost opportunity for other regional stakeholders to secure alternative funding to support Council with implementation of the visioning strategies and actions. Hence, Council would miss out on developing partnered and funded solutions with the private sectors to address sustainability issues from a regional perspective.

Finally, probably the most significant mistake for the Maroochy 2025 project was the lack of formal implementation. The consequences of the non-establishment of an MVIC and a formal implementation process are multiple and consequentially have the potential to create major issues of mistrust and increase levels of activism across the Sunshine Coast long into the future.

Maroochy 2025 project Community Survey No. 4 highlighted that there was generally a high level of awareness and confidence in the Maroochy 2025 participants (over 60%) with the implementation of the strategies and action plans. The Survey also found that there was recognition by the Maroochy 2025 participants that it would be crucial that they become involved in the implementation; that the level of positive personal impact in terms of increased critical thinking had improved (69%); that attitudes towards the future changed (57%); and that participants felt empowered about their future (50%). Perhaps of most lasting benefit, 60 percent of Maroochy 2025 participants believed that their community had become more cohesive as a result of M2025.

All these results reflect the level of expectation, hope and opportunity for Council and community to work together in creating alternative community futures. Council's decision to not meet community expectations for the future has squandered the high degree of optimism (83%) among participants, who believed that Maroochy 2025 would influence the future of local government planning and policy making. This will make it very difficult to re-engage and secure the community's enthusiasm for Council's attempts to create collaborative responsibility for the sustainability of the region.

What the Community Learnt

There were individual learnings for the many community participants in Maroochy 2025. (Detailed comments of the learning can be found in the Maroochy 2025 Community Survey No. 4 on the Maroochy 2025 website, www.maroochy2025.net.)

However, for the purpose of this research, there were four significant areas of learning. Firstly, applied futures studies can significantly enhance and compliment the principles and concepts behind capacity building, social planning and community development. Secondly, futures studies can greatly assist the community to learn that the future does not need to be feared, or perceived as a foregone conclusion; alternatively futures studies can create opportunities for understanding that there are many futures and that communities can create a collective sense of agency to co-create preferred futures.

Thirdly, community participants in Maroochy 2025 realised that they did possess the capacity to create or influence local government decisions. They were not empow-

ered at the necessary levels and recognised that levels of engagement from an information and consultation perspective had a contextual purpose and specific limitations. This learning was highlighted in a conversation between a participant in an anticipatory action learning workshop and the author. During the workshop, a sugar cane farmer who was facing the collapse of his industry was overjoyed and hopeful after a paradigm shift that highlighted his capacity to think in terms of alternative futures and that the 'business as usual' future was only one option for his community. The discovery of this new capacity within him was enough to provide new hope and new motivation for sharing the futures studies concepts.

Finally, communities today already contain immense capacity, civic leadership and foresight. Projects like Maroochy 2025 can and did create the spaces for this capacity to be observed, valued and utilised.

Tensions

The Maroochy 2025 project evoked many tensions for stakeholders. This was initially observed by the author as a facilitator of the Community Task Force (CTF). As the author took the CTF through the concepts of applied futures studies, the emerging awareness of moving beyond the concept of anticipated futures and creating alternative futures created significant angst among the CTF; it challenged their own assumptions on the future. It was apparent, as futurists have long recognised that there are many barriers that prevent people from adopting alternatives to the future. These barriers, as noted earlier, are recognised as:

- *People tend to follow patterns;*
- *Routines are stronger than laws and reason;*
- *So few legislations dare challenge established patterns;*
- *Routine is stronger than reason;*
- *Education changes patterns slowly;*
- *People and their routines make the present and the future; and*
- *Futurists collude with patterns by the avoidance of making recommendations that put people in conflict with their routines (Amara, 1981, p.67).*

To overcome the barriers, the author and the Maroochy 2025 Project Team would need to design a visioning process that was innovative and provocative. By situating the futures studies discourse in frameworks of critical futures and action learning, there was an opportunity for the community and the CTF to become innovative with their development of vision ideas and the crafting of the Maroochy 2025 Vision Statement.

A second tension observed by the author was the increasing display of advocacy and leadership from the CTF, the action team planners and ultimately the community itself. These behaviours were displayed when opportunities arose throughout Maroochy 2025 to interact with Council planners and experts and with Councillors. As clarity surrounding the choice of an alternative worldview and future for Maroochy Shire grew, these stakeholders displayed increased confidence to question, challenge and debate the merits of the versions of the future offered by the key opinion holders, decision makers and advantaged stakeholders.

Finally, there was a high degree of tension between the Maroochy Shire Council bureaucracy and the Councillors around the adoption of the Maroochy 2025 project results into the local government planning scheme. A local government planning scheme is the main instrument for local government to manage and control sustainable development issues. The Maroochy Shire Council bureaucracy recognised the value of the project results to improve and add innovation to council's planning policies. Yet the later withdrawal of Councillor financial and political support for Maroochy 2025 project meant that the Maroochy Shire Council bureaucracy was left with few options to integrate the results into the planning scheme, since all planning scheme amendments are approved by the Councillors. As a consolation, the author was given permission by the Maroochy Shire Council bureaucracy to act as a consultant, providing the Council Corporate Planning Team with information and advice on the Maroochy 2025 project results. The aim of this consultation was for the author to align – where possible – the Maroochy 2025 project results into the wording of the outcomes and strategies in the 2005°V2009 Maroochy Shire Council Corporate Plan.

Unexpected Outcomes

There were many surprises and unexpected outcomes for the Project Team during and after Maroochy 2025. These outcomes provided an opportunity for the Project Team to use action learning processes to shift their own worldviews. It was initially assumed that the many community participants in Maroochy 2025 would not value or accept easily the challenging of their worldviews. What was observed by the author was quite the opposite: many individuals valued the opportunity to be challenged and questioned when it came to their assumptions about the future. This effect can be attributed to the design of the anticipatory action learning workshops. These workshops included the provision of contextual background to futures studies, followed by an exercise in creative visualisation, facilitated discussion and stimulation and utilisation of all their ways of knowing the future.

A second unexpected outcome observed by the author was the demonstrated high levels of motivation, capacity, passion, intensity and leadership from the community, the task forces, and the action planning teams. Further, a rise in community localism, advocacy and a desire to become involved in dialogue pertaining to alternative futures has also been observed by the author and Maroochy 2025 participants.

These behaviours may be attributed to the fact that Maroochy 2025 was designed using the principles and standards of anticipatory democracy. We are reminded that the simplest definition of anticipatory democracy according to Toffler (1978, p.7) is: 'a process for combining citizen participation with future consciousness ... anticipatory democracy is, to put it another way, the fusion of freedom and futures.' Maroochy 2025 was a project and a process that combined community participation with future consciousness and was very much about an empowered community who had been given the freedom to experience the affects of an applied futures studies process.

A final unexpected outcome observed by the author was how easily a region /shire /community could agree upon one collectively preferred scenario (74% at the visioning summit) for their future. The results from the Maroochy 2025 Visioning

Summit in relation to how readily the community was able to select their preferred scenario was astounding. The four scenarios had been developed using community input with the identification of the four major uncertainties (although these scenarios were developed by the Maroochy 2025 Project Team, the foundational data used to construct the scenarios came directly from Community Survey No. 2). It was striking to observe how the community's collective consciousness was able to make a clear and decisive decision on their preferred scenario.

Causal Layered Analysis of Maroochy 2025

The author conducted further analysis of Maroochy 2025 through the use of Inayatullah (2007) causal layered analysis method. The analysis is displayed in the following table (Table 1).

From the author's personal observations and a post structural toolbox perspective, the following assumptions were considered. It seems that the elected officials are privileged by a level of knowledge and decision making powers which provide them with the power to determine much about the future. The elected officials are therefore influencing the future based on their set agendas and assumptions, creating the official and preferred version of the future.

From a genealogy perspective, it seems that the discourse of representative democracy has been responsible for the present structures of deciding upon the future. Given the prevalence and emphasise on representative democracy, other forms of democracy – for example, anticipatory, participatory, and e-democracy – struggle to have a presence in contemporary discourse.

From a distance perspective, the Maroochy 2025 preferred scenario was developed with a future orientated intent, whereby unfamiliar and new assumptions, new metaphors and possibilities were redefined. This perspective provides new ways of thinking about the future. Distance perspectives differ from the deconstructive and genealogy perspectives in that those perspectives are situated in the present and influenced by the assumptions of the past and present. Hence, any scenarios or images of the future developed within these contexts are designed using assumptions which have not been challenged and thus will tend to reinscribe the past and present into the future. From an alternative, past and futures perspective, Maroochy 2025 highlighted that it is the elected officials' version of the future that is used to maintain the present and the future.

Finally, from a reordering of knowledge perspective, Maroochy 2025 provided an opportunity for the roles of – and relationships between – elected officials, bureaucracy and the community to be redefined. The redefining could reorder the knowledge by diffusing it from the bureaucratic domain into a collective community domain. Unfortunately, the Maroochy 2025 project has not achieved this at the time of writing this essay.

Table 1.
Maroochy 2025 CLA

| Levels of Analysis | Citizens | Elected Officials | Bureaucracy | Researcher |
|-------------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Litany | They ask me for a vote every 4 years. | I am equipped with the right knowledge, power and expertise to create the vision for the people. Ask me and I will tell you what the future will be....! | We have a great town plan; See how successful we have been or how much we have failed from our outcomes. | This is an opportunity to demonstrate our improved strategic planning processes with supporting tools to address sustainability issues. |
| Social/Systemic Causes | I want to influence the future through being involved in the planning and decision making process. | I am following the legislative framework. | We are following the planning and policies set down for us. | Creating systemic changes so that anticipatory democracy is possible, i.e., e-democracy, futures visioning |
| Worldview | I think as a citizen that I should be able to contribute to decisions of the future through new democratic processes that involve the people not just elected officials. Worldview — Inclusion | Feudal structure with elected representatives at the top, and people at the bottom. | We are the experts and know what we are doing. Hierarchy and expertise. | People need to be equally empowered. Peer networks. |
| Myth/Metaphor | I matter, I count Include me in conversations about my future. | It's my empire and I rule the people. | We can solve the problems of tomorrow, today. | Shifting the power to the people. |

This research intended to identify past, current and emerging discourses pertaining to sustainability, sustainable development and the creation of sustainable communities. The results achieved from the Maroochy 2025 Community Visioning project have highlighted that there are many barriers, politics and limitations associated with current Queensland local government approaches to solving the sustainability issues especially through community visioning and the use of applied futures. A significant point can be made from the results of the Maroochy 2025 project. Being that there is a high degree of politics surrounding who has the right to determine a community's future and whose interests are served by such a future.

The very nature of visioning a future, can elicit many varied and contradicting images, the politics in visioning is deciding whose image should be valorised and whose should be excluded. The question that needs asking is 'how should individuals, communities and governments make such arbitrary decisions?' The author believes that the purpose of futures studies is to disrupt the official anticipated version of the future to examine and explore alternative and preferred futures. Futures methodologies become problematic when they create expectations and a belief that the results from such methods will be adopted by those in a system of governance that by its very nature limits the capacity for communities to choose their future. Governments today seem to have a genuine desire to make better future orientated policies; however, governments are yet to explore how this can be achieved in a system of representative democracy, a system that seems to exclude those who are directly affected by such policy decisions. Current political structures seem to favour anticipation methods over methods that create alternatives. The nature of this breakdown could be attributed to that anticipation seems to serve the interest of the present and those in a position to define the official version of the future. What community visioning and the use of applied futures studies seem to do, is challenge the official version through the creation of alternatives. It then becomes a power struggle as to who finally gets to define and approve the official version for the future, the government or the community.

As the Maroochy 2025 project has shown, communities who are invited to disrupt the official version of the future, and then asked to vision an alternative future only to have their choices rejected, is an example of how visioning projects can become political. Still, Maroochy 2025 was an invaluable opportunity for local government. As an example of how to create sustainable and preferred futures, it achieved a significant level of community buy-in and commitment to the creation of a sustainable future in partnership with the local government. Sadly, this opportunity was squandered for what the author assumes are the consequences of critical mass in:

- representative democracy as a political system;
- the weight of the past in terms of limited community agency;
- anticipatory assumptions about the future held by the community and elected officials; and
- a belief that it is the government's responsibility to plan the future and make it happen.

Thus, the opportunity to empower the community to create alternative community futures was lost.

The newly legislated local government entity in the region, the Sunshine Coast Regional Council, will find it hard to recover lost levels of trust, perceived integrity and respect from the community. However, memories can be short, and in the long term some of the project's learnings may have impact. Insights and perspectives gained by undertaking community visioning actions, the significance of this research and lessons learnt – especially through applied futures studies and anticipatory action learning methods – could provide local governments with a framework for transformational change in an era in which it has become imperative to create sustainable community futures.

The Value of Futures Studies Methods

By comparing and contrasting the findings from the author's applied futures studies survey and the Maroochy 2025 project evaluations, it is clear that – through the use of applied futures studies methods – community visioning that includes these methods has the potential to have a significant positive personal and community impact in terms of:

- improving the levels of critical thinking in communities;
- shifting attitudes towards the concept of the future ;
- enhancing levels of community cohesion; and
- increasing levels of agency and a sense of empowerment for the communities preferred futures.

Therefore, projects like Maroochy 2025 can greatly assist in the creation of sustainable communities if the community is given responsibility and empowered with appropriate tools and skills. In discussing the beneficial concepts of community visioning and applied futures studies, several key learnings for local governments have been identified. The use of applied futures studies as a means for creating a sense of agency within community individuals, elected officials, and local government bureaucracies is recommended. It can enable fruitful challenging of the discourses of planning and create new spaces in planning conversations for alternatives. Communities that are engaged and empowered become a key driver of social change, redefine the meaning of community and create new processes by which we arrive at our choice for sustainable futures.

The author's personal observations highlight that there is still a great deal of resistance to community visioning amongst local government planners and councillors. There is scope for greater investigation and opportunities for further research by local government planners, futurists and other social science authors. The CLA maps the perspectives and helps local governments understand why there is a problem, and what can be done.

Action Learning Reflections

The author's personal observations also identify a number of major points from an action learning perspective that require special mention and consideration by other future local government community visioning practitioners. These are:

1. Be sensitive to the environmental and physical settings of visioning and futures studies workshops or there may be a risk of unwittingly contributing to the myth that Council is controlling and directing the solutions.
2. Know how to deal with the anxiety from participants when challenging assumptions and questioning the official versions of the future. Endeavour to improve the visioning process using an anticipatory action learning perspective and methods, as these methods will greatly assist with the recognition of barriers. Resistance needs to be named, understood and transformed for the visioning process to move ahead.
3. If the visioning project is being sponsored by a local government and facilitated by Council employees, anticipate that community members will see this as an opportunity to raise general grievances with Council. Establish systems and processes to manage this effect at the visioning workshops.
4. To avoid the loss of community leadership, goodwill, and innovation, ensure that there are levels commitment, funding and strategies to support the implementation process. Manage the anticipated reactions to the visioning results and identify the potential saboteurs to the implementation process or there will be a need to manage the consequences of a disenfranchised community and increased activism against the council in the future. These implementation dangers can be minimised through:
5. Ensure that there is continued engagement of all stakeholders during and after the community visioning project; especially in the development and implementation of the preferred scenario;
6. Find those groups that have disengaged and challenge their assumptions about past patterns (e.g. that their Council is never going to change and consultation is seen as tokenistic with decisions already made);
7. Ensure that Council policies and planning that are significant and future orientated utilise processes that compliment anticipatory, participatory and inclusive community engagement approaches;
8. Invite the community to participate with the implementation of local government foresight projects. As a means of developing a stronger sense of agency within and across communities, collaborative and participative opportunities increase the capacity for communities to influence their future as it pertains to Council decisions;
9. Accept and communicate that the elected officials' versions of the future can compliment and co-exist along side the community's preferred vision as both is equally legitimate;
10. Challenge the 'them and us' scenario; i.e., finding new stories and myths;
11. Ensure that the major issues impacting on the community which are best dealt with through partnerships, are embraced as part of Council's philosophical and policy position for community engagement; and
12. Develop new models of community governance / engagement that support the mutual concepts of anticipatory and representative democracy accordingly.

A Legacy for the Future

The author believes that the Maroochy 2025 project has left an indelible mark on the thinking patterns of the Maroochy Shire community about their futures and a confidence that individuals are not as powerless as they may have believed. From a personal observation perspective, Maroochy 2025 was highly successful as a model of social change for communities and for other local governments to learn and adapt to their own community visioning applications. However, it was also a significant failure from a participatory democracy perspective. This was simply due to the fact that the project did not remain true to its foundational principles and philosophies. These were situated in a context of inclusive and participatory processes. This failure was highlighted in the author's comments regarding the issue of not keeping the key decision makers involved with the action learning results from each stage of the project.

As previously highlighted, a significant failure was the Project Team's ignorance and consequent decision to leave Councillors out of the scenario development process; this is a key point considering that they are the key democratic decision makers. It was at this moment that the Project Team lost all support buy-in opportunities and the chance to achieve a collective success in a system of representative democracy. Ironically, the author did flag this issue with the Project Team early in the project; however, his late entry into the Project Team meant he lacked the level of influence needed to persuade the other Project Team members.

This research has evoked many thoughts for the author about further areas of possible futures studies research. There is, of course, a requirement for time to pass to see how much of the vision for Maroochy is implemented indirectly and to investigate why and how this occurs. There is also a need to explore applications of futures studies other than community visioning within local government planning.

Another avenue for future investigation is to compare and contrast the success or failure of the myriad community visioning projects that are already complete or currently being completed in Queensland. This research could compare the assumptions, methods and consequences and evaluate if and how the results of these community visioning projects will be imbedded or enshrined into local government planning legislation.

Conclusion

The Maroochy 2025 Community Visioning project was a worthwhile undertaking as it achieved a significant level of community buy-in with to the creation of a sustainable future in partnership with the local government. However, the ongoing value of this opportunity was sadly lost through lack of implementation. Representative democracy and the weight of the past assumption by the community and some local councillors that it is the government's responsibility to plan the future and make it happen, meant a vital opportunity for the community to become empowered and create alternative futures was missed. The newly formed Sunshine Coast Regional Council will find it hard to recover lost levels of trust, perceptions of integrity and respect by the community. However, memories can be short, and in the long term the insights and

perspectives gained by undertaking community visioning actions, the significance of this research and lessons learnt – especially through applied futures studies and anticipatory action learning methods – are expected to provide local governments with a framework for transformational change. This could be invaluable in an era in which the creation of sustainable community futures is imperative.

Author's end note

Post the 2008 local government elections, the Maroochy Shire Council councillors who were the main antagonists and critics of the Maroochy 2025 project either did not seek re-election or were defeated at the polls. The reason the authors thesis was titled 'a community futures tragedy', because, initially it created explicit hope in the participants, that they could allay their fears about the future and influence planning and policy decisions to create alternative futures. Hope that Council would work in collaboration with the community. The tragedy was that the council did not explicitly take on board the input developed by the community in a representative capacity, thus reverting back to the status quo of tokenistic representative democracy.

On the up-side however, the observations of the author, three years post completion of the Maroochy 2025 project, suggest many of the strategies and actions identified in Maroochy 2025 are taking place or being implemented, even if by the default of others. The meta learning from community participation in the project and the publication of the book has shifted the mindset, language and capability of both the community and the council in challenging their own worldviews of representative democracy and anticipated futures. The research believes that Maroochy 2025 has contributed to this effect. Consequently, futures language, methods and approaches are increasingly being sought after, used more frequently and integrated in main stream dialogue across the Sunshine Coast. The author believes that futures studies are either back in vogue or simply that the Sunshine Coast community and council have embodied the learning and experience from being introduced to futures studies approaches. It seems that the political winds of futures studies may be blowing a favourable breeze....

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