

# Engaging a Region in Dialogue

*Making Decisions Together with Capital Region Quest*

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CASE  
IN  
POINT  
2008



# CapitalRegionQuest

## ABSTRACT

The Mayors and Reeves of the Capital Region Committee worked with Envision Sustainability Tools to develop a capital region application of the scenario-planning tool MetroQuest. The result was Capital Region Quest, a cutting-edge simulation program that enables multiple stakeholders to engage in complex planning situations through decision-base scenarios. This case study examines the application of Capital Region Quest as an engagement tool to facilitate dialogue among diverse groups regarding regional issues including population settlement patterns, economic development, transportation routes, water quality and energy use. It enables the application of current policy and development growth contexts to these issues in a visual manner and results in a stimulating environment for people to begin dialogue on the myriad choices available to the region.

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**BACKGROUND:** a broad look at the MetroQuest regional planning tool

“MetroQuest is an interactive planning support tool that evaluates alternative future scenarios, facilitates the creation of sustainable regional visions, and supports the implementation of smarter plans” (MetroQuest, 2008).

## WHO

MetroQuest was developed during 10 years of research at the University of British Columbia’s Sustainable Development Research Institute and was first introduced publicly in 1997. It is now a product of Envision Sustainability Tools (Envision), based in Vancouver and founded by Mike Walsh and Dave Biggs. One of the overarching goals of the tool is to combine sustainability practices and knowledge with the power of information technology. During the 10 years of development, three key principles were identified to underlie the tool (MetroQuest, 2008):

- Expanded timeframes – sustainability calls for going beyond traditional planning to evaluate both the short and the long-term implications of our choices
- Multiple bottom lines – sustainability encourages balancing a much more comprehensive set of issues in planning
- More stakeholders – decision makers are under increasing pressure to engage with an ever-widening set of stakeholders when making decisions.

## WHAT

MetroQuest uses a decision-based computer simulation to encourage and facilitate dialogue around complex issues, timelines and policy implications of various planning scenarios. In order to do this, it uses several key features (MetroQuest, 2008):



## METROQUEST PLANNING EXAMPLES:

MetroQuest is designed as a very adaptable tool with the ability to be customized based on region-specific data, policies and development plans. As such, it has been applied in many different situations, with many unique purposes and outcomes. Some more recent examples include:

- Long range planning – Idaho Transportation Department created a 30-year vision for transportation development in Idaho through hands-on workshops with wireless voting handsets.
- Regional visioning – City of Calgary engaged leaders, stakeholders and citizens to develop a 100-year community vision using a city-specific adaptation of MetroQuest.
- Official community planning – Municipality of Whistler developed an official community plan based on the preferred development scenario generated through broad participation and collaboration.
- Growth management – City of Guelph used an adaptation of MetroQuest to explore long-range strategies for managing their rapid growth by assessing alternative scenarios.
- Stakeholder consultation – Town of Inuvik conducted a series of workshops including the public and youth in order to evaluate the town and its long range plans.

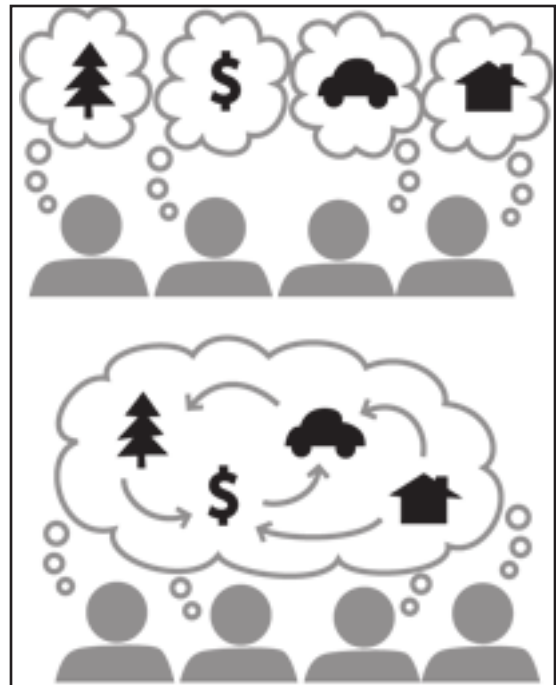
- Create forty year regional scenarios in interactive workshops
- Explore choices and outcomes in real time
- Score the performance of alternative scenarios according to your priorities
- Evaluate scenarios using colorful visualizations, maps, indicators, and graphs
- Compare possible future scenarios side by side
- Save and export key scenarios for more detailed analysis or reporting
- Monitor the progress of your community towards a shared vision

These features are designed with several benefits in mind. Throughout the planning process it is important to be able to foster and maintain stakeholder interest. MetroQuest assists in achieving this through several benefits (MetroQuest, 2008):

- Engage non-experts, decision makers, stakeholders and the public
- Simplify complex choices
- Promote holistic and long range regional planning
- Foster dialogue about values and visions
- Demonstrate transparency through meaningful and proactive involvement
- Educate the community on regional planning issues
- Demonstrate the costs and benefits of alternative choices
- Collect valuable feedback on priorities and acceptable trade-offs
- Generate and maintain support for a plan throughout the planning cycle
- Monitor progress towards your shared vision

These features and benefits of MetroQuest help lead to changes in the way municipalities, cities, or regions plan and build for the future. These changes potentially include (MetroQuest, 2008):

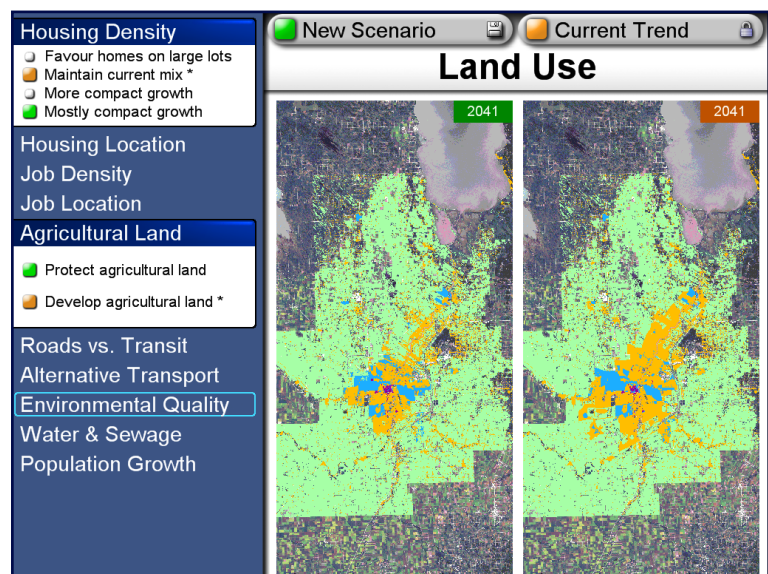
- Reduced costs by promoting wise use of infrastructure and cost effective growth management
- Improved mobility by promoting development that decreases traffic congestion and travel times and increases the viability and appeal of alternatives
- Improved environmental conditions



MetroQuest helps people see how priorities are integrated, not isolated.

by illustrating the costs and benefits of policy choices on the region's air, land, and water

- Reduced greenhouse gas emissions by promoting land use, housing, transportation and energy related choices that reduce our dependence on fossil fuels
- Increased sustainability by promoting responsible choices that meet the needs of both current and future generations



Screen capture illustrating the two-scenario (new scenario vs. current trend) comparison of land use.

## THE CASE: how MetroQuest became the Mayors and Reeves' regional engagement tool

### LOCAL ADAPTATION

Envision's consultation with the Province and the Mayors and Reeves resulted in the customized tool called Capital Region Quest (CRQ). The overall purpose of CRQ is to assist in the development of the Regional Planning Framework through a broad engagement of regional leaders, stakeholders and residents (see box at right). The tool facilitates this through a broad look at the region and its boundaries, trends and scenarios through multiple sectors including transportation, infrastructure, services, environment, and land uses.

It begins with the Current Trend and projects regional development issues 40 years into the future to 2041 (using 2001 as the base year). CRQ features 10 key indicators including:

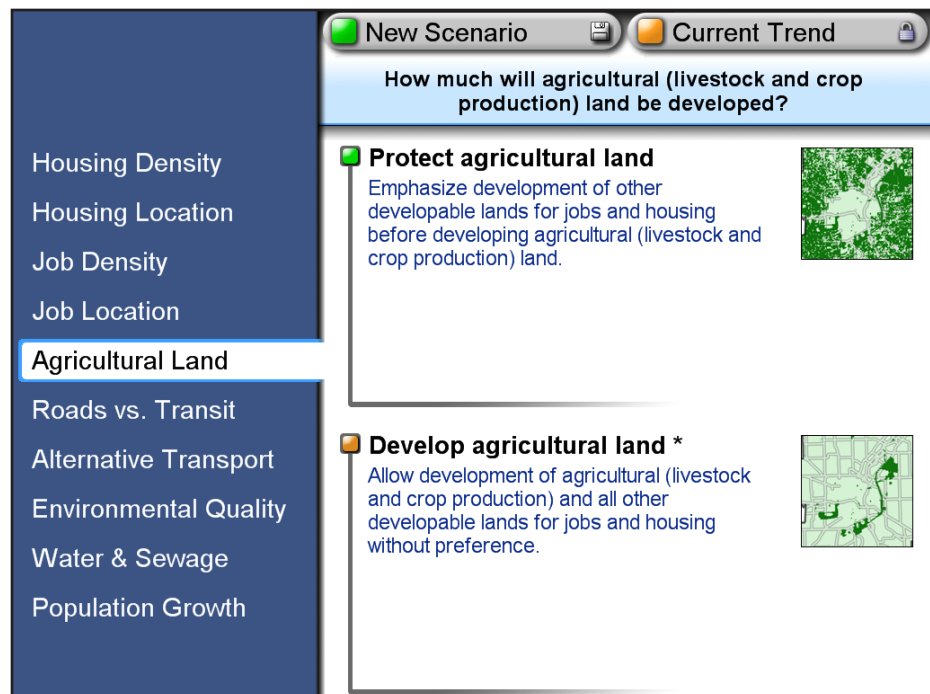
- Housing diversity
- Urban containment
- Alternative transportation
- Commute time
- Air quality and greenhouse gases
- Water conservation
- Waste management
- Eco-footprint reduction
- Fiscal health
- Household affordability

In the Current Trend, these indicators are measured based on their relative performance compared to broad sustainability principles.

The tool then enables a different trend to be created based on different choices about each indicator. In CRQ's version of MetroQuest, the indicators are illustrated through questions. For example, one question is, "How compact will new housing development be?" with the choices being: 1) favour homes on large lots, 2) maintain current mix, 3)

### INITIATION

The MetroQuest story in the capital region of Manitoba began when it was first introduced and suggested to the Mayors and Reeves of the Capital Region Committee (Mayors and Reeves) by former mayor Glen Murray. Following up on this suggestion, the Mayors and Reeves invited Envision to give a presentation to them and then to a larger group including more stakeholders. After numerous meetings, the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs with the Province of Manitoba offered to split half the cost of having Envision develop a version of MetroQuest contextualized to the capital region with the Mayors and Reeves. The Mayors and Reeves applied to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' (FCM) Green Municipal Fund (GMF) to cover the other half of the cost. As a project goal, the Mayors and Reeves wanted to develop a "Regional Planning Framework" and GMF funding was approved on this basis. Throughout this process, many who were involved saw the need to initiate dialogue between area Rural Municipalities (RM) and the City of Winnipeg, beginning the process of identifying common goals and priorities in a cooperative and collaborative way.



Screen capture showing the detail of the agricultural land development question.

more compact growth, or 4) mostly compact growth. After proceeding through all nine questions, an alternate trend is created and projected to 2041. This enables comparisons between where the current trend is leading and how different choices may impact and alter that trend.

## ENGAGEMENT

One of the most significant benefits of this tool is the dialogue created between diverse groups and individuals. In a workshop setting, it forces participants to realize there are many options, each with different implications. This encourages participants to debate and discuss the different points of view they each bring to the table and perhaps come to an agreement, or at least an understanding, about the different options available. It enables groups to choose an alternate future for the capital region in an interactive setting.

Another benefit is the ability to compare the current trend with the preferred trend – the trend created through the choices of workshop participants. By exploring the indicators outlined above, the tool illustrates how the preferred trend differs from the current trend. This enables connections to be made between regional development and policy choices, and the implications of making choices different from the current trend. It can be an empowering experience for participants to see that regional development choices can encourage a more liveable region.

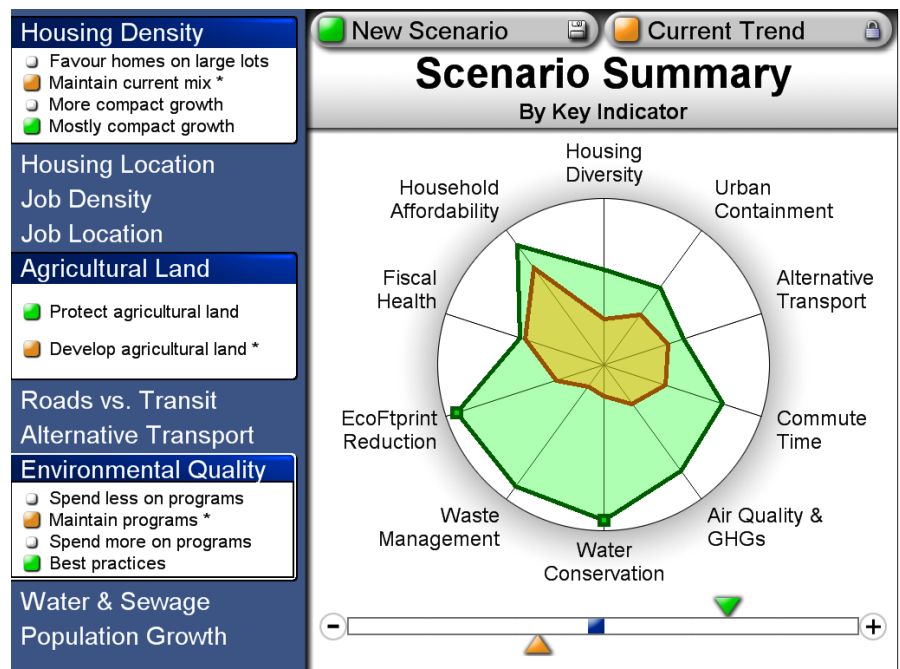
## OVERALL GOAL

The CRQ engagement in the capital region has a broad goal



Screen capture showing the built-in visualization tools for the housing density question.

of gathering ideas on the preferred development that will lead the capital region into the future. It is also intended to obtain input from a broader group rather than just the Mayors and Reeves, other leaders and key stakeholders. Through this process, a Regional Planning Framework will be developed to identify and validate regional priorities, putting vision into action.



Screen capture showing the scenario summary web that compares the two scenarios with all 10 key indicators - the closer to a complete circle, the better a region is doing on a relative scale.

**LESSONS LEARNED:** a selection of critiques about the process, the tool and the engagement

## THE ENGAGEMENT

- At workshop sessions, there should be more time to speak generally about the context, goals and objectives of the project. If the Mayors and Reeves intend this input to be part of the Regional Planning Framework, this would lend more weight to getting people's input.
- From early engagements, it remains unclear if participants understand the purpose of the engagement. Was it to demonstrate a new computer simulation tool (a la Sim City) or a serious exercise leading to a planning framework that will impact the future development of the capital region?
- It was encouraging seeing a high degree of willingness and enthusiasm at exploring the broad and long range – even idealistic – views of future development.
- There tends to be a lack of time to explore the questions that have the appearance of being very simplistic. The depth and implications of each decision (location of housing, location of jobs, environmental initiatives, etc.) gets exposed during the dialogue.

## OVERALL PROCESS

- It is unclear if CRQ is the only resource for the region in developing the Regional Planning Framework or if it is just a tool to use in conjunction with other resources.
- Will there be enough discussion? One of the benefits of the dialogue is building collective knowledge through a broad engagement. However, it is unclear if there is enough time for the Mayors and Reeves to produce a Regional Planning Framework and engage a wide audience at the same time.
- It is a much-needed tool to bring about necessary dialogue between Winnipeg and the surrounding municipalities as the region faces significant sustainable development issues. The networking and discussions that can take place when everyone is in the same room are one of the strengths of CRQ.

## THE TOOL

- It is good when it engages people in dialogue. This is most evident when it is used with a manageable group so there is a comfort level adequate for open discussion and debate. This value can be lost if there is not enough time and the facilitator feels pressure to “get through” all of the material under time constraints.
- CRQ is based upon very “green” assumptions. In many ways, the questions are limiting, providing participants with choices such as, “Do you want to be bad, do you want to keep the status quo, or do you want to be good (i.e. “green”)?” However, the tool is intended to be very “high level” and long range in its outlook so very nuanced decisions become difficult. Broadly speaking, it is good at picking an overall direction for the future – the details of how to get there can come at the next stage: writing the framework, amending municipal plans, building infrastructure, and approving developments.



## **LOOKING AHEAD:** where the engagement is going

In the coming few years, the Mayors and Reeves intend to develop a Regional Planning Framework and build consensus among all member municipalities. While this will not be an official plan with statutory authority, it is intended to provide a context in which to make future development decisions. In addition, each municipality has a copy of CRQ and can use the tool to engage in their development plan reviews. By doing this, each municipality has the opportunity to bring their development plans in line with the overall framework.

### **KEY STEPS TO TAKE**

1. Build regional cooperation between the municipalities and Winnipeg. It is especially important to have Winnipeg at the table engaging in dialogue – which has not happened to a significant degree yet.
2. Use CRQ not only as a tool to gain input for the Regional Planning Framework, but to build general public interest about thinking and acting like a region.
3. Realize the potential of eventually turning the framework into regional planning and regional governance – despite the challenge of gaining widespread support and consensus.
4. Strongly encourage municipalities to make development decisions based on the framework and their updated development plans.

**RESOURCES:** places to access more information about MetroQuest, Capital Region Quest, and the Mayors and Reeves' regional engagement

MetroQuest - [www.questforthefuture.com](http://www.questforthefuture.com)

John McNairnay (Planning Consultant, Mayors and Reeves of the Capital Region Committee) - [john.mcnairnay@mts.net](mailto:john.mcnairnay@mts.net)

Daile Unruh (Mayors and Reeves of the Capital Region Committee) - [djunruh@mts.net](mailto:djunruh@mts.net)

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:**

I would like to extend a thank you to all who contributed to this “Case in Point.” In particular, thank you to John McNairnay for allowing me to participate in conducting a Capital Region Quest workshop to gain a first-hand look at the tool in action.

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