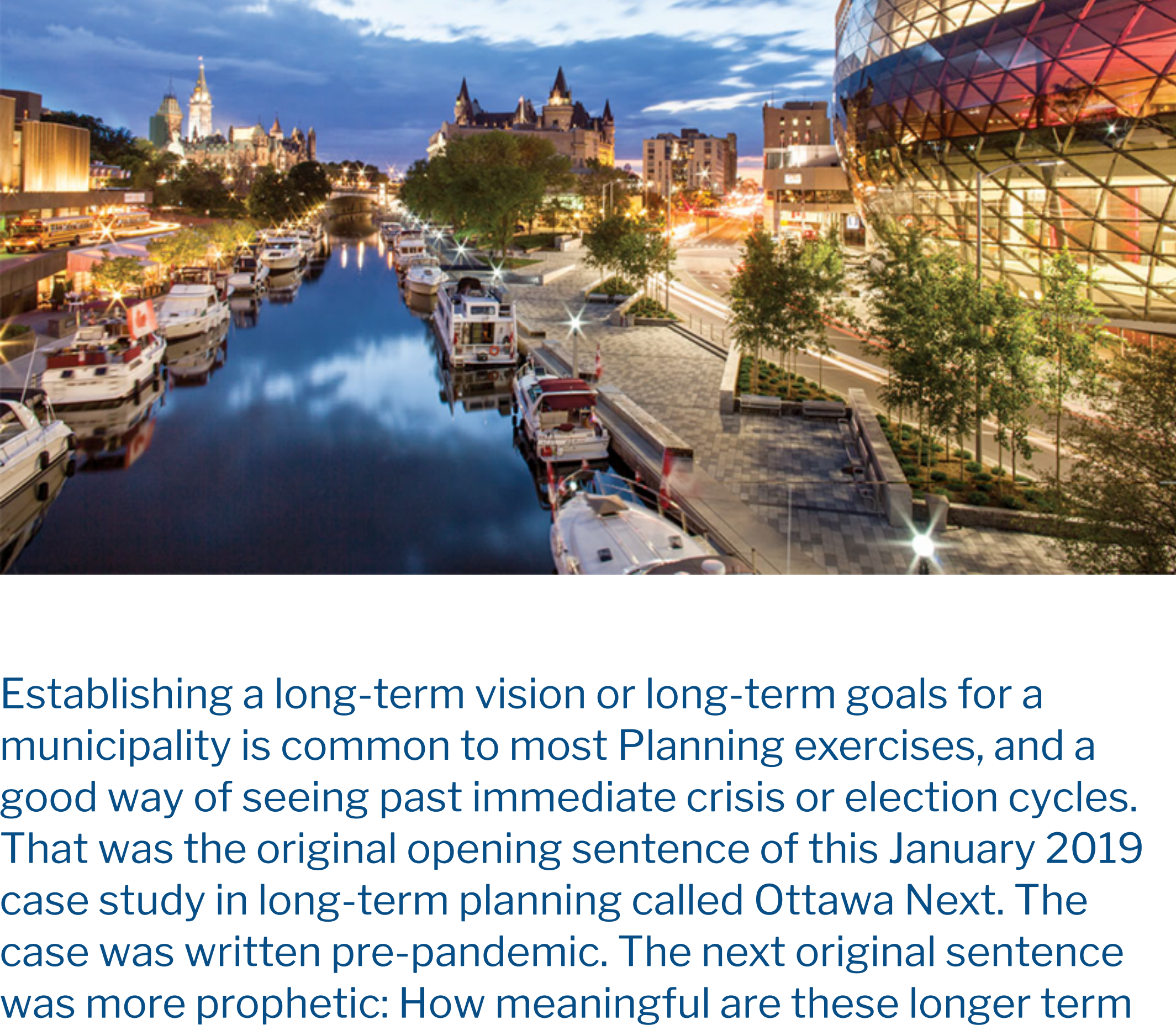


January 2020

WHAT COMES AFTER TRENDS? OTTAWA NEXT



Establishing a long-term vision or long-term goals for a municipality is common to most Planning exercises, and a good way of seeing past immediate crisis or election cycles. That was the original opening sentence of this January 2019 case study in long-term planning called *Ottawa Next*. The case was written pre-pandemic. The next original sentence was more prophetic: How meaningful are these longer term vision exercises in a world of accelerating and deepening economic, environmental and technological change?

While it's a little too soon for hindsight, COVID-19 has hammered home the truth of long-term planning relevance, and the good news is, the focus on building community resiliency, access to services, healthcare and food and mobility has only increased in importance.

According to Alain Miguélez, Manager, Policy Planning at the City of Ottawa, "community resiliency comes first and foremost from our ability to deliver public services - those services are what's keeping things going through the pandemic. Public services are best delivered when they can be funded on an on-going basis by a critical mass of people. That means density."

In one example of the *Ottawa Next* scenario process, Planners took into account the outcomes of extreme isolation similar to what most municipalities are experiencing now.

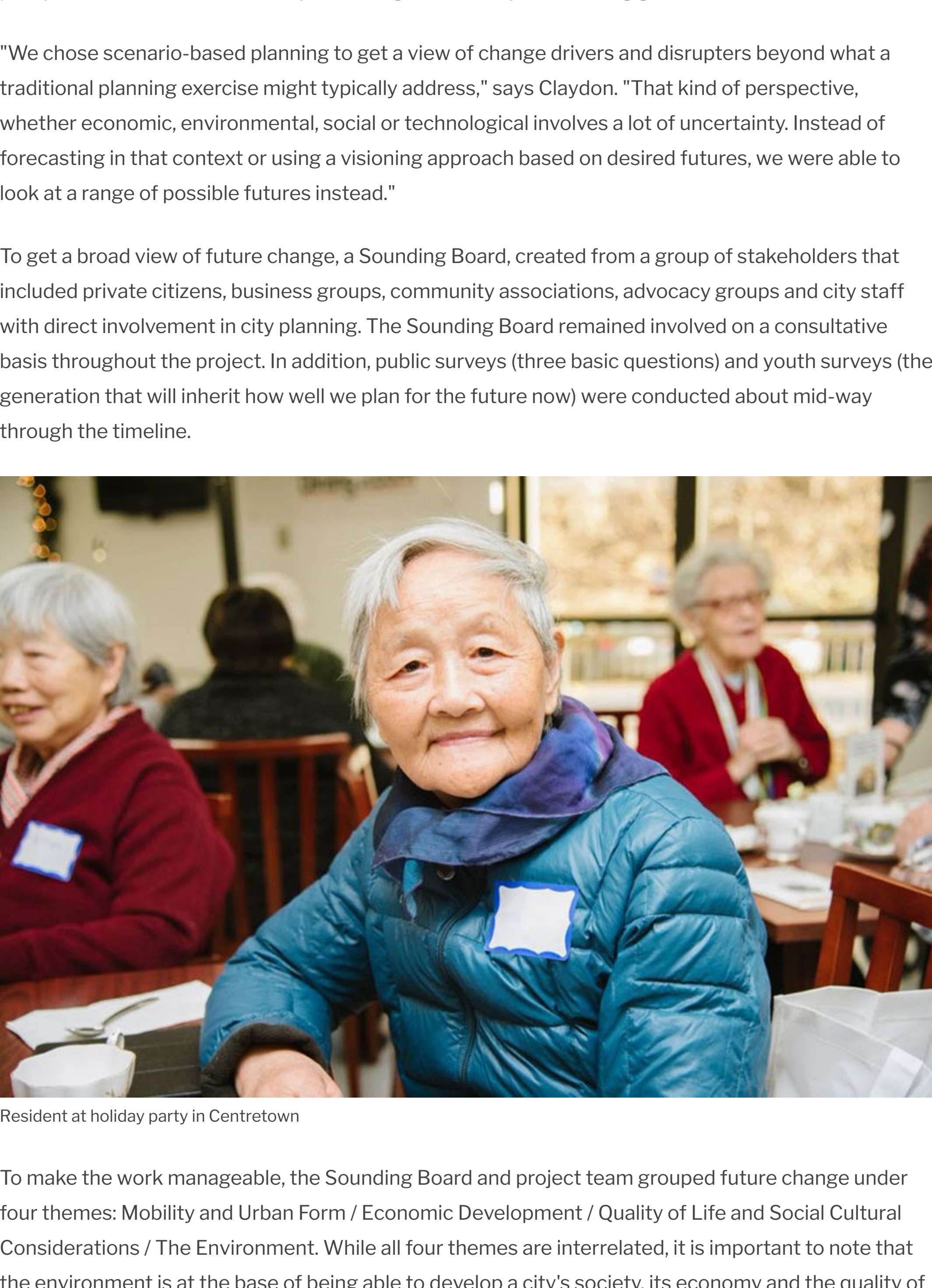
"Resiliency meant thinking of the shape of the city as a way to make and keep people healthy, not the other way around," says Miguélez. "It meant working toward a long-term vision of 15-minute communities, giving residents options to walk more, have more access to transit, easier access to basics of urban living. Sure there will be short-term pressures post-pandemic regarding the topic of density - reality is, we'll have to offset those pressures with good planning."

Fifty years ago, who would have guessed at how profound the impact of the internet, of climate change or of diversity would be on the city. As we plan for the 21st century, how do we chart a course for achieving a long-term vision when our world is changing even faster than before- when past trends may only be a weak indication of what will come in the future?

Ottawa Next is one answer to this bigger question: a scenario-based planning exercise that just may give the municipality of Ottawa the perspective City Council requires to build resiliency in a future of fast-moving, ever-shifting and less predictable change.

A formal definition of municipal resiliency goes like this: The capacity of individuals, communities, institutions, businesses and systems within a municipality to survive, adapt and grow no matter what kinds of chronic stresses and acute shocks they experience. In simpler terms, it is the capacity to bounce back from an adverse event, set-back or calamity. The problem is, you may not know exactly what it is you will be bouncing back from. And what about opportunity as opposed to a calamity? Perhaps ensuring your community can adapt quickly, whether the change is adverse or beneficial is the best way to consider this approach.

Carol Ruddy, a Registered Professional Planner (RPP) with the City of Ottawa for 17 years, says resiliency is all about being prepared - or conversely, "a less resilient city will continue on as if nothing will change; that leads to challenges that cannot be addressed with short-term fixes".

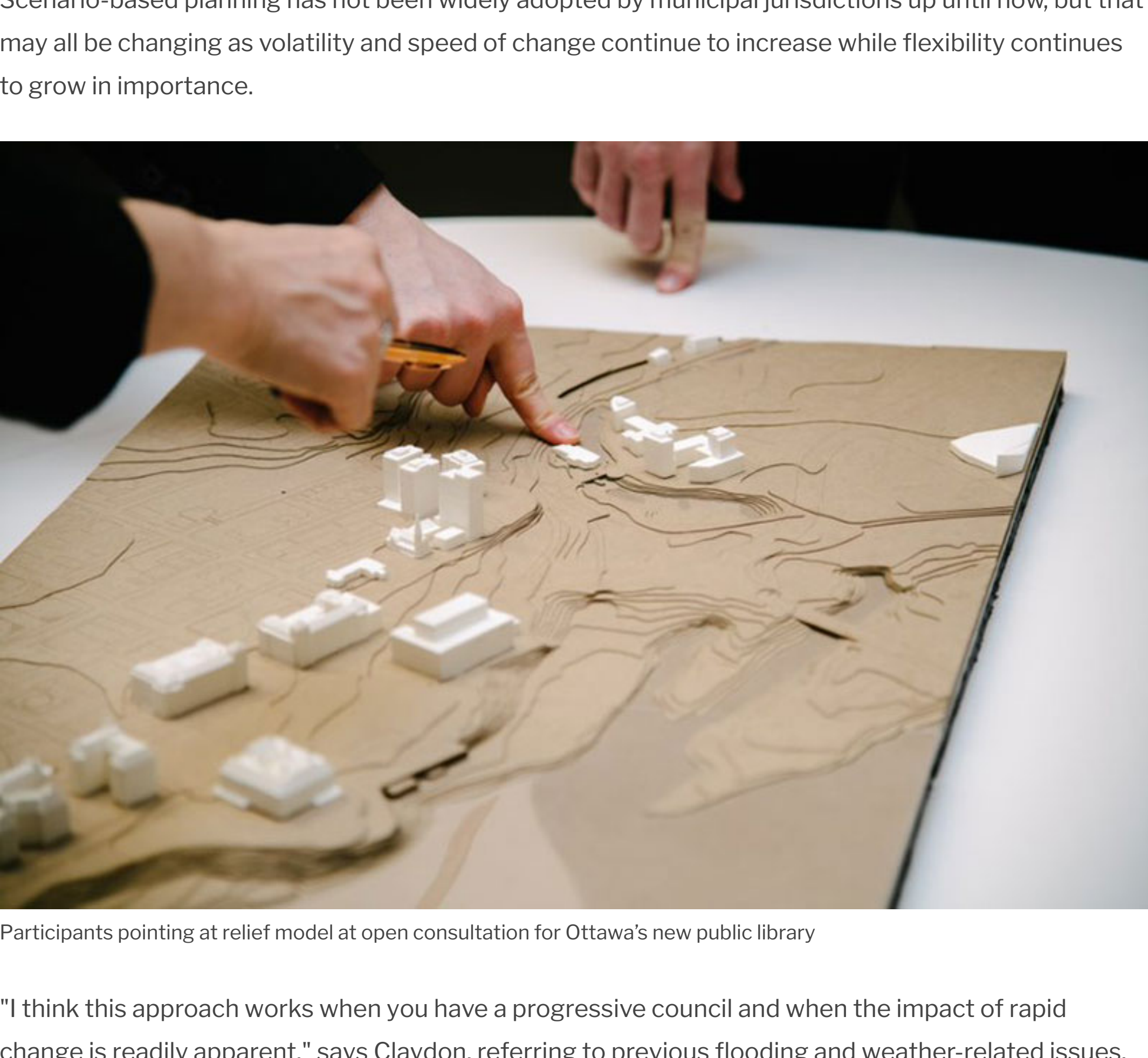


Aerial view of Downtown Ottawa

Along with her planning colleague George Claydon, Joe Berridge, RPP of consulting firm Urban Strategies, and Dan Leeming, RPP from the consulting firm The Planning Partnership, the entire Ottawa Planning team created a process to develop guidance informed by plausible futures that looked beyond trends. Ottawa's City Council approved the progressive approach in December of 2016 because they saw the need to rethink what predictability meant in a changing world, and to get ahead of the normal planning cycle of 20 years. Work on the new Official Plan along with relevant policy outcomes is now underway and being informed by the learning gleaned from *Ottawa Next*.

"We chose scenario-based planning to get a view of change drivers and disrupters beyond what a traditional planning exercise might typically address," says Claydon. "That kind of perspective, whether economic, environmental, social or technological involves a lot of uncertainty. Instead of forecasting in that context or using a visioning approach based on desired futures, we were able to look at a range of possible futures instead."

To get a broad view of future change, a Sounding Board, created from a group of stakeholders that included private citizens, business groups, community associations, advocacy groups and city staff with direct involvement in city planning. The Sounding Board remained involved on a consultative basis throughout the project. In addition, public surveys (three basic questions) and youth surveys (the generation that will inherit how well we plan for the future now) were conducted about mid-way through the timeline.



Resident at holiday party in Centretown

To make the work manageable, the Sounding Board and project team grouped future change under four themes: Mobility and Urban Form / Economic Development / Quality of Life and Social Cultural Considerations / The Environment. While all four themes are interrelated, it is important to note that the environment is at the base of being able to develop a city's society, its economy and the quality of life it offers.

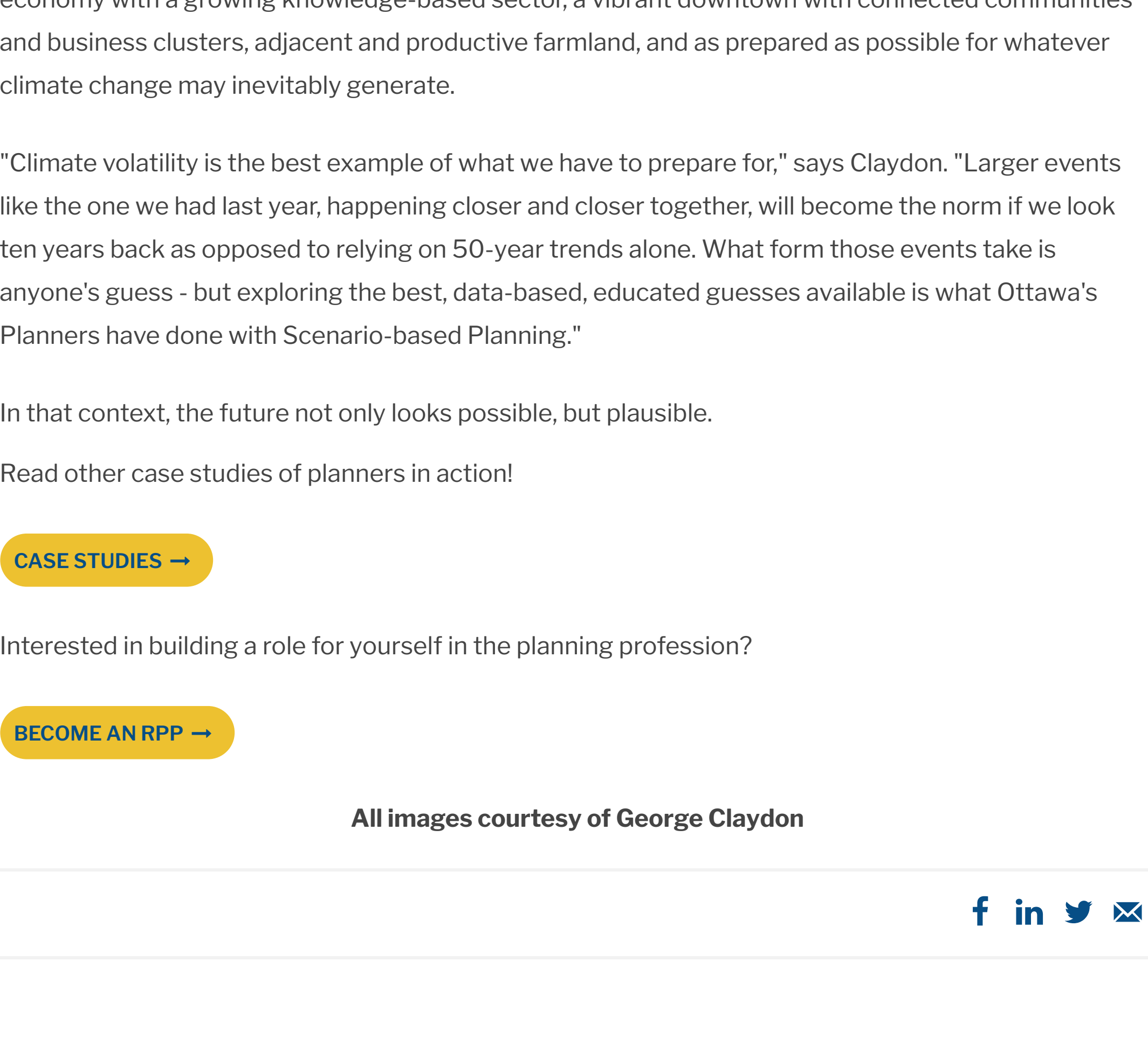
Three future scenarios were developed for each theme. The Economic Development theme, for example, envisioned three possible scenarios: Government Town, Economic Boom and Mega Region. The scenarios were not meant to be predictive - the idea was to provide a range of plausible outcomes for assessment and critical review.

Based on these economic development scenarios, eight drivers of change were documented: importance of diversification in a knowledge-based economy, increasing importance of the knowledge-based sector, growing demand for quality labour, increasing spikiness (economic concentration) of cities and businesses, increasing importance of inter-city and global connectivity, innovation-based competitiveness, shifting values in urban choices and the role of signature projects in urban branding. For the first time as well, it was proposed to view and position Ottawa-Gatineau as the central city in the broader Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal megaregion, and to leverage that centrality to grow the economy.

Finally, a series of considerations were identified for each driver of change for planners, managers and elected officials to consider as they embarked on the development of Ottawa's new Official Plan were identified for each driver of change.

"The challenge of scenario-based planning is in bringing together a number of different change drivers factors into a credible scenario so far out into the future," continues Ruddy. "Ottawa's goal is to become North America's most livable mid-size city. What does that look like? It could be about accommodating as many as two-to-three million people living in the Ottawa- Gatineau region before the end of the century. Do you choose increased density or do you move borders. Our transit infrastructure is adjacent to our best agricultural land; moving the borders might be tempting but also may not be the best way to protect food security long term."

Scenario-based planning has not been widely adopted by municipal jurisdictions up until now, but that may all be changing as volatility and speed of change continue to increase while flexibility continues to grow in importance.



Participants pointing at relief model at open consultation for Ottawa's new public library

"I think this approach works when you have a progressive council and when the impact of rapid change is readily apparent," says Claydon, referring to previous flooding and weather-related issues. "Every community, every city, is facing the same set of challenges. Our infrastructure is not aligned with climate change, our economics, demographics and work force are rapidly evolving, how businesses grow, where employees want to live, the huge impact of a changing global economy - there's enough data out there to assess plausible futures so that whatever you plan for today can adapt to what might be well down the road."

The *Ottawa Next* team began the comprehensive project in October of 2017 after an extensive organizational process. The final presentation was made under a year later to the Planning Committee in September of 2018, which in turn will impact the policy recommendations in the Official Plan - a draft of which is scheduled to be presented in the fall of 2020.

Carol Ruddy has her Masters Degree in Community and Regional Planning from UBC and is an RPP. Collaborator George Claydon holds a Masters Degree in Urban and Regional Planning from Queens University and is working at the City of Ottawa on assignment from Infrastructure Canada.

"Being an RPP gives you the professional depth and guidelines to deal with major planning issues," says Ruddy. "I'm blessed to be in a room with an amazing and extraordinarily bright team of professionals - based on the challenges we face, that's very good news. My training, what we all share, helps us look at those challenges with enough depth and breadth to help our elected officials make great decisions. It all goes hand in hand."

The City of Ottawa is currently rewriting its Official Plan; when complete, it will take the city all the way to 2046. Based on some of the findings in *Ottawa Next*, the city is considering significant policy changes - known as the Five Big Moves:

- **Growth:** Achieve, by the end of the planning period, more growth by intensification than by greenfield development. This growth will provide for complete communities and a variety of affordable housing options.
- **Mobility:** By 2046, the majority of trips in the City of Ottawa will be made by sustainable transportation (walking, cycling and public transit).
- **Urban Design:** Improve our sophistication in urban and community design, and put this knowledge to the service of good urbanism at all scales, from the largest to the very small.
- **Resiliency:** Embed public health, environmental, climate and energy resiliency into the framework of our planning policies.
- **Economy:** Embed economic development into the framework of our planning policies.

Neighbourhood block party

The City of Ottawa has high aspirations for the future. Upward of two million residents, a diverse economy with a growing knowledge-based sector, a vibrant downtown with connected communities and business clusters, adjacent and productive farmland, and as prepared as possible for whatever climate change may inevitably generate.

"Climate volatility is the best example of what we have to prepare for," says Claydon. "Larger events like the one we had last year, happening closer and closer together, will become the norm if we look ten years back as opposed to relying on 50-year trends alone. What form those events take is anyone's guess - but exploring the best, data-based, educated guesses available is what Ottawa's Planners have done with Scenario-based Planning."

In that context, the future not only looks possible, but plausible.

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