

Reframing the Future of East Palo Alto

A Proposal for a Strategic Foresight Workshop

Prepared for the East Palo Alto City Council



Submitted by Sarah McCarthy Grimm
December 2018



Dear Mayor Abrica and Vice-Mayor Gauthier,

First, thank you for generously offering your time over the course of multiple conversations this Fall. Your insights were foundational for the semester-long project about East Palo Alto that I worked on in the Design Strategy MBA Program at California College of the Arts.

If you're interested, I'd love to show my gratitude through a Strategic Foresight workshop, at no cost to you, for the City Council and selected participants to take part in. It might be a great opportunity to build on or revisit some of the topics you explored in 2012 when formulating your visionary 2035 General Plan.

The attached proposal is for a half-day workshop that I would facilitate, either on my own or in collaboration with an EPA citizen who you think might be a good fit. I intend to withhold my own ideas entirely and serve only as facilitator of your collective process. Further, I'm sensitive to what we have discussed about the prevalent social tensions in the city, and I would like to work with you about how to best address these issues.

If we move forward with this workshop, I hope to be in conversation with you to shape it into what you see as the most beneficial for your community. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Sarah McCarthy Grimm

Overview: Imagining East Palo Alto in 2033

What does East Palo Alto (EPA) look and feel like in 2033? How is EPA shaping that very future with its decisions today? Like many cities in the region, EPA currently faces major challenges that will evolve significantly in the next 15 years. EPA's situation is unique in that it has historically been heralded "An Island of Affordability in a Sea of Wealth"¹ and one of its founding myths is around protecting vulnerable populations.² Further, EPA has seen serious citywide violence followed by an astounding recovery in its short history as an incorporated city. Due to changes in costs of living and displacement associated with economic development, it stands to lose this foundational character as a social-justice-oriented, multi-cultural community.

How can EPA work towards a future in which social justice and economic development are mutually beneficial? How can EPA preserve its character as an affordable, diverse community in which its citizens are engaged? Strategic Foresight offers a systems-level methodology to answer these and any other questions the City Council sees fit. This proposal is for a half-day workshop that would enable the EPA City Council and community to engage with foresight tools through three distinct activities.

First, participants will brainstorm a wide variety of possible futures using the Systems Mythology method of scenario planning, which the Institute for the Future formulated. This method combines systems thinking and mythology to guide an imaginative consideration of the future. It gives four colored frameworks that denote distinct contexts within which to envision the future.³ Next, the group will decide on a preferred future and write a story to indicate what 2033 feels like within the collectively chosen scenario. The final activity is a process to design a tactical system map that might propel EPA toward that preferred future.

General Goal and Specific Outcome: Foresight Tools and Tactical System Map

Visions of the future, whether data extrapolations or family planning, are generally based on a linear projection from the present. Sometimes, this is the best method, and at other times, different frames are more illuminating. Strategic Foresight offers tools to think systematically about the future that are relevant in various contexts. The overarching goal of this workshop is that the participants leave with a sense of confidence in employing these methods in their work and lives.

A more concrete outcome is that the group will have a shared vision of EPA's preferred future and a course of action to take in their communities to nudge their city towards that vision. A document will be delivered to participants within 72 hours of the workshop that will include:

- 1) the matrixes of possible future scenarios,
- 2) the story of EPA's preferred future, and
- 3) the tactical system map that the group designs.

¹ [Report by Logan Rockefeller Harris and Sydney Cespedes at U.C. Berkeley](#)

² This "myth" refers to the Tenants' Rights law that passed when the first City Council was sworn in.

³ [JFTF Systems Mythology Toolkit](#)

Who Will Be in the Room? Representing the Myriad Perspectives of EPA Citizens

The decision of who to invite to the workshop will ultimately be at the City Council's discretion. The facilitation team will take care of logistical details involving invitations, RSVPs, and questions. Ideally, a representative diversity of stakeholders would participate, including but not limited to the following:

- The City Council (Mayor, Vice-Mayor, and Councilmembers)
- The City Manager
- A long-time resident who has lived in EPA for 15 years (the future time horizon of the workshop)
- A member of the LGBTQ community
- A new resident who has lived in EPA for less than 1 year
- A nurse or other healthcare provider
- Teachers – ideally from elementary, middle, and high schools
- A school board member
- A small business owner
- A social worker

The facilitation team might include:

- 1-3 Facilitator(s)
- A graphic recorder (ideally from EPA) for real-time drawing of the conversation
- A photographer / videographer

A Final Note

This workshop is designed to build on or revisit an already robust vision for EPA in 15 years. One hope is to uncover some new insights into tactical actions the community can take now. Another is to make space for collective imagining that might not otherwise arise in the demanding schedules of the participants. The following sample agenda is intended towards that end and can be reshaped according to the City Council's preferences.

A Sample Agenda

8:30am: Arrive and Settle In

Participants are invited to store their belongings, help themselves to coffee and snacks, and settle into their seats.

9:00-9:30am: Welcome and Introduction

The workshop will open with an acknowledgement of the original, indigenous stewards of the land. The *Invitation to Brave Space* by Micky ScottBey Jones⁴ will be projected and read aloud to set the tone for the conversations. Then, everyone will introduce themselves and the facilitation team will give an overview of the activities ahead.

9:30-10:30am: Systems Mythology

Participants will learn a colors-based forecasting method for imagining possible future scenarios in EPA. This tool can later be applied to any facet of their work on the City Council or in their careers, or even in their personal lives.

Time	Activity	Objective	Facilitator Will...	Participants Will...
20 minutes	Introduction to Systems Mythology	Gain familiarity with the grounding principles for each color	Give a presentation and answer questions	Listen and ask questions
5 minutes	Envision the Blue future	Brainstorm what a Blue future in EPA might look like	Hand out worksheets, project guidance notes	Fill out worksheet – 1 keyword for each STEEP
5 minutes	Envision the Red future	Brainstorm what a Red future in EPA might look like	Hand out worksheets, project guidance notes	Fill out worksheet – 1 keyword for each STEEP
5 minutes	Envision the Green future	Brainstorm what a Green future in EPA might look like	Hand out worksheets, project guidance notes	Fill out worksheet – 1 keyword for each STEEP

⁴ [Mickey ScottBey Jones, activist in Nashville, TN.](#)

5 minutes	Envision the Purple future	Brainstorm what a Purple future in EPA might look like	Hand out worksheets, project guidance notes	Fill out worksheet – 1 keyword for each STEEP
15 minutes	Report back	Understand each color scenario from many angles/perspectives	Type into projected table to give the big picture	Read keywords to the group from their worksheets

10:30-10:45am: Break

10:45-11:30am: A Story of EPA's Preferred Future

Participants will arrive at a consensus around EPA's preferred future's keywords, and then write a fictional story from the future to show what EPA feels like within that preferred future.

Time	Activity	Objective	Facilitator Will...	Participants Will...
5 minutes	Review Big Picture	Understand different perspectives and scenarios at play	Project a big-picture table and guide discussion	Point out what they prefer
15 minutes	Voting on a preferred future	Consensus around the framework for EPA's preferred future	Highlight winning keywords	Vote on keywords
20 minutes	Writing the story of EPA's preferred future	Write a story together based on keywords about an average young woman in EPA in 2033	Ask: What does she see? Hear? Smell? What does her day look like? Type up the story as it's being written	Go around the circle, each saying 1 sentence at a time.
5 minutes	Clarify and finalize the story	Clarify the story of EPA's preferred future	Read story aloud once through, and then again with pauses whenever participant asks for one	Raise hands to pause facilitator and question aspects of story that need clarification

11:30-11:45am: Break

11:45am-12:45pm: Action Design

The final step is to make that story actionable, and here participants design a tactical system map that will help steer EPA towards the preferred future they have chosen.

Time	Activity	Objective	Facilitator Will...	Participants Will...
10 minutes	Individual stories	Each person draws how they envision the story	Read collective story aloud once, then play music for drawing time	Draw on large paper on the wall
10 minutes	Tactics Brainstorm	Come up with various tactics that could be used to get to that story	Project story and chosen keywords	Write tactics on post-its at their seats or standing
10 minutes	Categorize Actions	Categorize tactics based on STEEP	Be available to assist	Put post-its on appropriate STEEP large sheet
10 minutes	Choose 3 tactics for each STEEP	Refine tactics towards a system approach	Facilitate voting	Vote on actions
20 minutes	Tactical System Mapping	Tactical system map to steer community toward preferred EPA 2033	Draw lines on large sheet	Tell me how actions connect

12:45-1:00pm: Wrap-Up

Participants are invited to share one thing they will take away from the workshop and explore the option of having a way to follow up with one another.

Operational Logistics

The various practicalities can be altered to accommodate whatever space the City Council chooses for the workshop.

The Room

Each person will have a desk and chair, arranged in a circular format around the facilitator's spot, which is against a white wall where a computer screen is projected. There are at least 2 blank walls where large sheets of paper are taped up for the third activity.

Light

Ideally the lighting is bright and warm. Natural daylight with windows would be ideal.

Projection

The facilitation team will bring a projector and will need a small table and a white background to project on.

Supplies (Brought by Facilitation Team)

Post-it notes, large sheets of paper, tape, and markers.

Food & Beverage Table

Coffee, tea, cold water, and snacks will be provided by the facilitation team. The room will have a table set up in the back where participants are welcome to help themselves.

Recording

Depending on the City Council's discretion, a graphic recorder and photographer-videographer will be in the room as participant observers.

Bibliography

- Conversations between Sarah Grimm and Ruben Abrica, Lisa Gauthier, and a handful of citizens
- Institute for the Future, Systems Mythology Toolkit,
<http://www.iftf.org/systemsmythology/>
- Logan Rockefeller Harris and Sydney Cespedes, University of California, Berkeley, “East Palo Alto: An Island of Affordability in a Sea of Wealth,”
https://www.urbandisplacement.org/sites/default/files/east_palo_alto_final.pdf
- Mickey Scottbey Jones, *Invitation to Brave Space*
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