“Learning from the Fringe:” Scenario Planning for a Resilient Houston

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Since 2009, the Center for Houston’s Future has been involved in an ambitious scenario planning process to identify alternative futures for the Greater Houston, TX area for 2015-2040. The Scenario Building Team (SBT) consists of 30 volunteers of varying ages, ethnicities, and professional backgrounds. Included are representatives of businesses, governments, universities and nonprofit agencies and professions such as architects, teachers, doctors, bankers, lawyers, social workers, professors, students, artists, small business owners, scientists and planners. The scenario planning process has involved four strategic retreats over the past 18 months, regional scenario explorations to important facilities and services in the Houston region, and sounding board sessions to inform various groups in Houston of the progress of the scenario planning process. The fruit of the efforts of the SBT is the development of two alternative scenarios, which are due for public release in early 2011.

As the process has developed, discussions have included questions of resilience and how to develop scenarios that promote a resilient future for the greater Houston area. One of the scenarios is entitled “Learning from the Fringe” and is an attempt to “play out” a scenario of resilience, grounded in community learning and focused on organizations that are currently “on the fringe” but could become central to a positive future. These organizations include, most notably, those addressing issues of the environment and natural disasters (especially hurricanes), education, leadership (especially of ethnic groups such as Hispanics and Asians), immigration, and energy. The scenario emphasizes the importance of community learning and adaptability in envisioning and incarnating positive futures in a city as large and diverse as Houston. Texans, and Houstonians in particular, have traditionally been known for their “can-do” attitude and entrepreneurship, along with their ability to welcome new ideas and to learn fast. This quality has been recognized by the SBT as a significant advantage in successfully envisioning and implementing a resilient future for the region. This paper will describe the practical process of scenario planning for the Houston region, how that process has incorporated resilience thinking, and some of the challenges and obstacles the group has experienced.