

The NH Water Works Association's Strategy to Ensure Safe, Dependable, and Affordable Drinking Water

By Thomas S. Burack, Esq.,* and Susan S. Kaplan**

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*Esq., Sheehan Phinney Bass & Green, PA, 1000 Elm Street, 17th
Floor, Manchester, NH 03101, (603) 627-8387,

tburack@sheehan.com

**Founder and Senior Consultant, Sustainable Futures Consulting, 45
Dorothy Perley Road, Lebanon, NH 03766, (617) 839-7480,

sskaplan01@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In 2020, New Hampshire Water Works Association took a new, integrated approach to strategy, communications, and governance. The lessons it learned can provide a useful model and insights for other industry groups that recognize the challenges of tomorrow will be different from those of today and that the best way to prepare for uncertainty is to anticipate its effects and create strategies for dealing with them. This paper describes the purpose and development of the three major components and illustrates how these integrated strategies will increase NHWWA's impact on addressing NH's public drinking water supply needs far into the future.



Introduction: The Story of Drinking Water in New Hampshire

The story of public drinking water in New Hampshire might best be described as "essential but invisible." However, thanks to a new, integrated approach to strategy development, communications, and governance, the New Hampshire Water Works Association (NHWWA) is writing a new story of drinking water that will make a big and continuing splash in the Granite State. The NHWWA's approach and the lessons it has learned can provide a useful model and insights for other drinking water industry groups that also recognize that the

challenges of tomorrow will be different from those of today, and that the best way to prepare for uncertainty is to anticipate its effects and build strategies to deal with them. This paper describes the purpose and development of each of the three major components of this initiative and provides insights into how this integrated approach will increase the NHWWA's impact on addressing the state's public drinking water supply needs far into the future.

A Brief History of the NHWWA and Recent Developments

The New Hampshire Waterworks Association, as it was initially known, was formed in 1939, with the purpose of "improvement of water supply service in New Hampshire." The NHWWA is a New Hampshire nonprofit corporation and tax exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

In February 2020, the NHWWA Board of Directors (Board) hired a seasoned executive director, Boyd Smith, and charged him with various responsibilities, including refreshing the organization. This meant more than a new coat of paint. It meant developing a deep understanding of who the NHWWA's customers are and what those customers need from this state-level association in the face of current challenges and an uncertain future. Fortunately, the NHWWA secured a planning grant through the New Hampshire Community Development Finance Authority's (NH CDFA) tax credit program to help develop a new strategic plan, along with a fully aligned communications strategy and implementation plan. As a critical follow-

on, the NHWWA also revised its governance documents, including its bylaws and policies, to ensure that the association is positioned to make a big splash for years to come on behalf of NH's drinking water experts and NH communities.

Strategy: Strategic Planning Based Upon Scenario Thinking

A strategic plan is a roadmap for where an organization wants to go and how it is going to get there – in short, what it is going to do in the future to serve its mission. Most strategic plans assume that the future world in which an organization will be operating will be basically the same as the world in which they are operating today. That is a fine assumption most of the time, but consider that you can wake up one day and your driveway is wiped out by a flood, or the world suddenly stops due to a global pandemic. The NHWWA Board was certain from the start that water suppliers will face unexpected challenges in the years ahead and the association will need to have its eyes on the horizon to help its members anticipate, prepare for, and meet those challenges. To figure these out, the first step in NHWWA's strategic planning process was to explore how the future worlds for drinking water could be different from the world of today.

Living in Today's World While Imagining and Preparing for the Worlds of Tomorrow: The Power of Asking, "What If?"

The Board and its new executive director were quite familiar with the classic list of concerns facing drinking water utilities, including everything from aging infrastructure to low funding levels, and from limited public awareness of the true cost and value of water to an aging workforce. At the same time, the Board sensed heightened concern about some big forces that could be in the offing, including a changing climate, shifting weather patterns, increasing population in New Hampshire, and the advent of new technologies.

Many "what if" inquiries can be good things. For example, when people see a sign for lottery tickets, the question that often crosses their mind is, "what if I win the lottery?" Then they start imagining great futures for themselves and what they may have to do to adapt to those different futures.

To imagine the future creatively and think "outside the box," the Board and staff participated in a series of exercises based on "what if?" thinking. For starters, they were asked to imagine that they were driving to work on a dark morning after a storm left a coating of ice on the roads. Next, the scenario got more complicated as the car coming toward them started sliding in the direction of the center line of the road. They were asked what the first thing was that came to their mind. Some murmured an expletive, while others said they realized they had seen this situation before, so they imagined themselves next easing off the gas and steering out of harm's way. From this exercise, the participants learned that a person's response to danger typically involves two steps: first, the mind recognizes the danger, and second, the mind intuitively instructs our body in how to protect itself, based on its prior knowledge and experience.

Formal scenario thinking and planning with organizations use the same thought process that humans use subconsciously every day of our lives and adds structure to it. Through a defined process, the NHWWA's leaders used their imaginations to develop different alternative worlds or scenarios that the NHWWA's direct constituencies, especially public water utilities, could find themselves confronting. The process also identified the likely effects or implications of those worlds for their constituencies and then developed strategies that the NHWWA could implement to help those parties successfully address the implications of those new worlds.

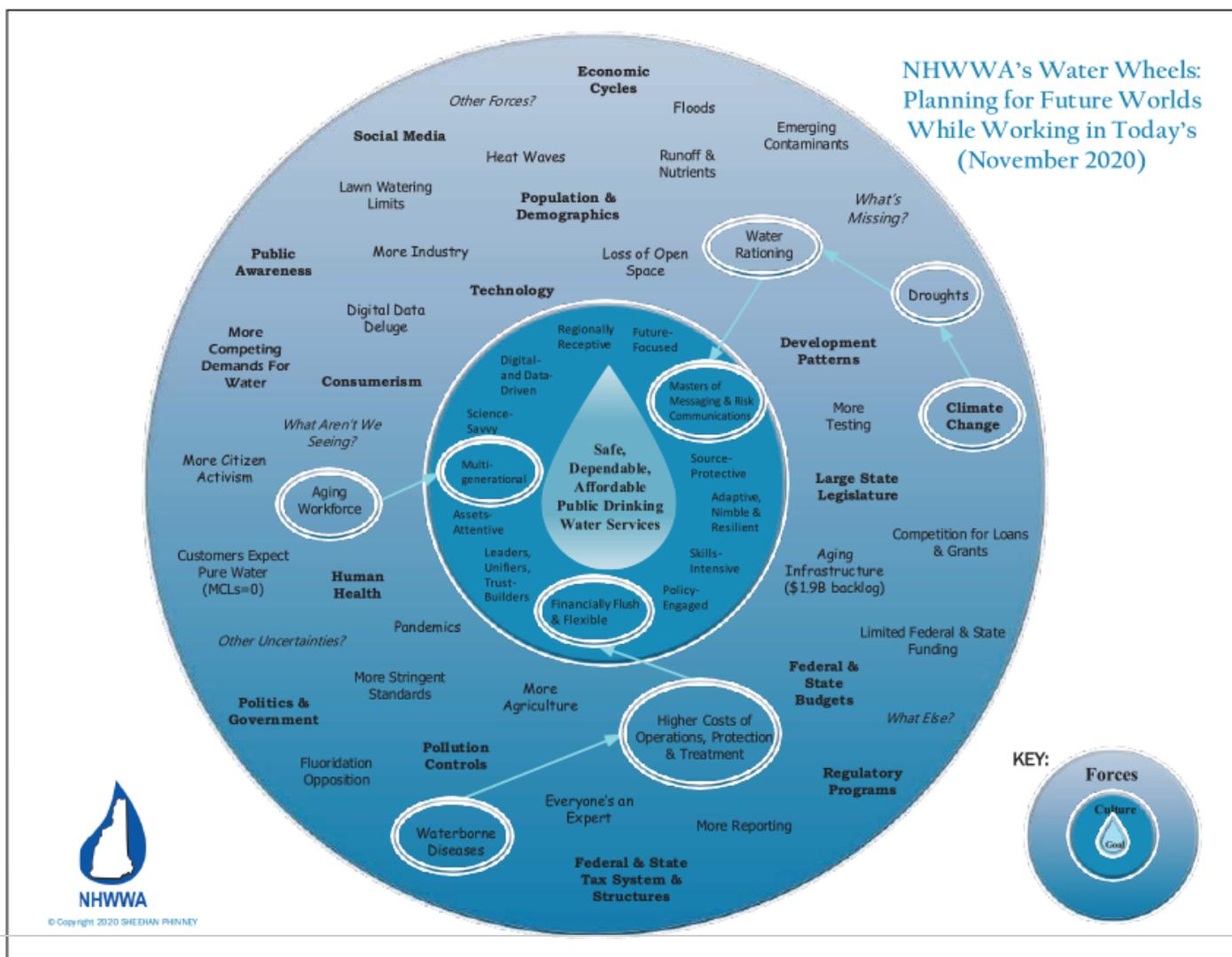
For this process to be fruitful, the NHWWA Board did not have to predict exactly what the future would look like. After all, few if any of us would likely have predicted a pandemic that would simultaneously sicken millions of people and cripple economies worldwide in 2020 and beyond. If the NHWWA Board used scenario thinking prior to the pandemic, it could certainly have imagined one or more scenarios in which there would, for whatever reason, have been disruptions of transportation systems, logistics, markets, workforce, or other supply or demand forces. By exploring the implications of those kinds of forces, the Board would have been positioned to develop and perhaps even test some strategies in case those kinds of disruptions actually occurred. The NHWWA would have had a new powerful tool for the pandemic by combining a problem and a potential solution, creating a "memory of the future." As soon as the NHWWA saw the actual problem arise that it had only imagined, it would have instantly recalled the solution it had already developed and could then implement it rapidly.

Overview of the NHWWA's Strategic Planning Process

The NHWWA's planning process was dynamic and fast-paced. It involved a series of scenario thinking exercises in which each step informed and provided a foundation for the next one. Starting in April 2020, the executive director and one of the authors (Tom Burack) interviewed practically all of the members of the board, some industry leaders, and a number of elected officials. The goal was to gather multiple perspectives to identify major forces, drivers and trends that could shape future conditions impacting New Hampshire and especially those that were having an impact on the state's drinking water systems or might have such an impact in the future. Based upon the interviews, the consultant assembled a list of major drivers, which in turn helped to begin identifying some of the characteristics that water suppliers might need to address the challenges likely to be presented by these drivers. The Board then practiced asking "what if?" questions and imagining alternative futures for New Hampshire and its communities.

At a Board and staff retreat in August 2020, the participants imagined future New Hampshire communities through some fun, structured sessions and started to identify the challenges water suppliers in those communities might face due to the implications of the presumed forces at play in these towns and cities. In a follow-up session online, the Board and staff consulted some industry experts, and then developed a set of strategies that NHWWA could implement to help its primary customers – the state's public water suppliers – succeed in the face of these alternative worlds. Those strategies were then "wind

tunnel tested" against the various scenarios to see which ones would "fly" most successfully in a range of different scenarios. If any potential strategies were considered to be of limited use, they were either modified or set aside. Those that appeared to be helpful across a broad range of alternative futures were retained for further refinement. In early November 2020, the Board adopted its new "living" strategic plan, which identified four key priorities. The NHWWA considers it to be "living" since it will not sit on a shelf but will instead be central to the Board's operational work going forward. A summary of the adopted plan is available on the NHWWA's website at <https://nhwwa.org/strategic-plan>.

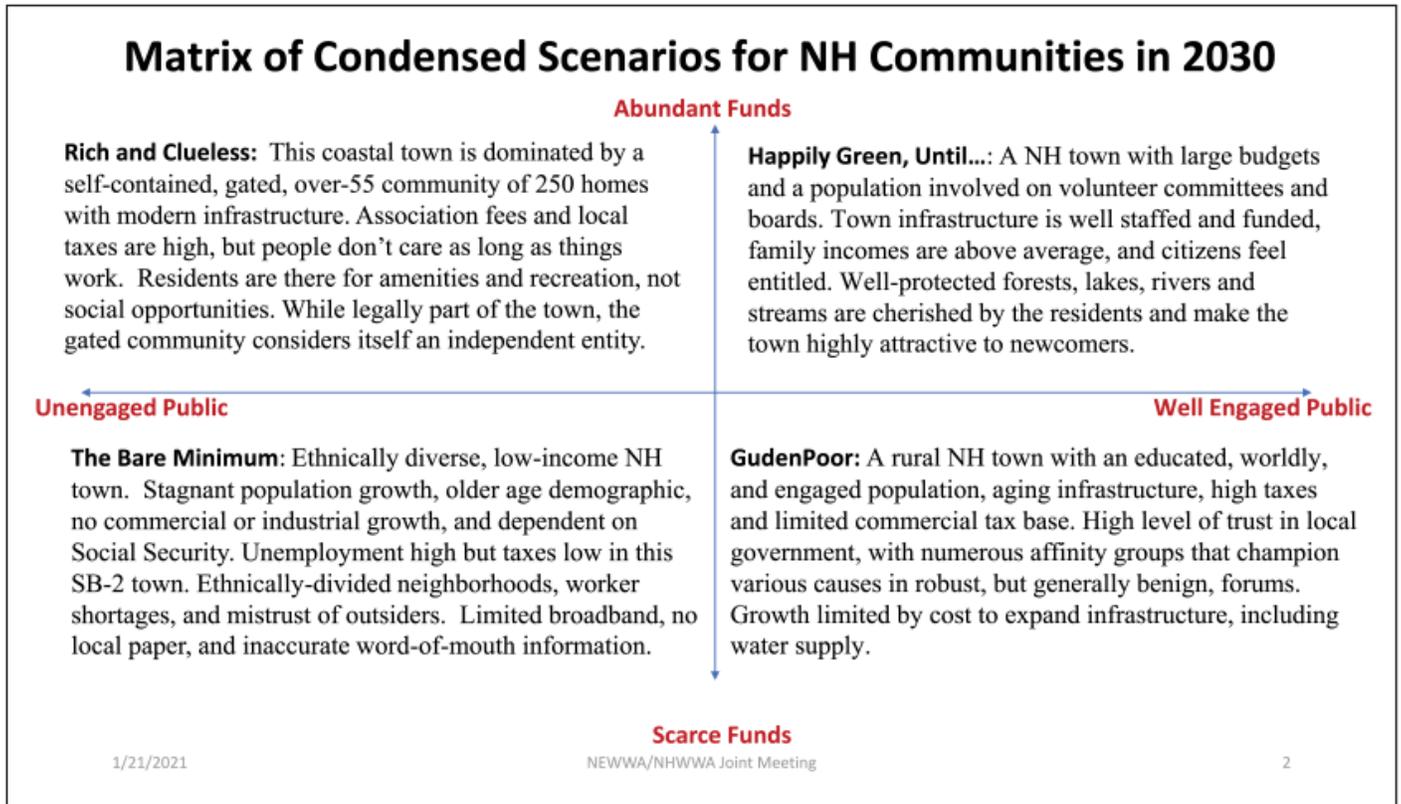


A Deeper Dive: Water Wheels as a Tool for Identifying Priorities

The information and ideas collected during the interviews was compiled into a "Water Wheel." During the subsequent engagement with the Board, the conversations moved toward establishing a single, overall goal for the association's work, which became "Safe, Dependable, Affordable Public Drinking Water Services" This goal statement appears in the center of the set of concentric circles in Figure #1 as a constant reminder that, just as if this were a bullseye target, it is the NHWWA's goal and NHWWA's actions must aim to achieve that goal. In other words, if the NHWWA is spending its time and resources doing things that do not contribute directly, efficiently, and effectively to this overall goal, those activities will be either realigned with the goal or stopped. The outermost ring in the Water Wheel displays the various forces, drivers, and trends (collectively, the "drivers") that are currently or possibly at play in the ecosystem. These drivers were largely distilled from interviews and from collective knowledge of the water supply industry and life generally. The inner wheel is all about culture; it is a distillation of key cultural attributes that will be helpful to accomplishing the water supply industry's needs in the future.

These wheels helped the Board understand the cause-and-effect logic flow that identifies the implications of different drivers at work and comes from asking "what if?" questions. For example, climate change is expected to cause more droughts (see upper right portion of Figure #1), so water suppliers might respond by rationing water. But for this common strategy to be successful, water suppliers may need to

become masters of messaging and risk communications. The strategy question for NHWWA became: what services can NHWWA provide to help its members achieve mastery of messaging?



Community Scenarios as a Platform for Imagining Alternative Futures

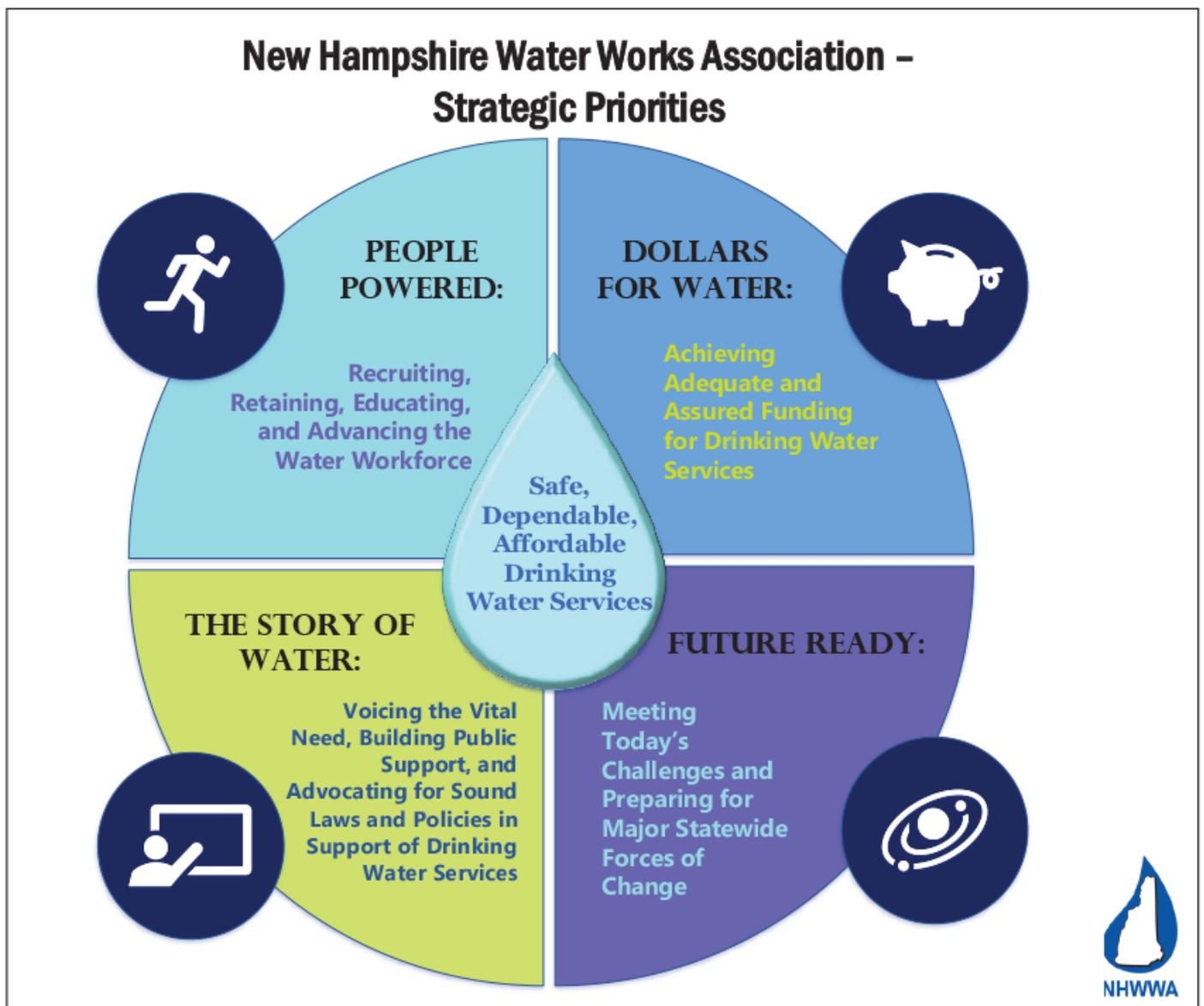
At the August 2020 retreat, the Board and staff chose to focus on two major, relevant forces: the availability of funding and the engagement of public understanding and support for water supply issues. These forces were arrayed against each other in four squares, from abundant to scarce funding and from unengaged to a well engaged public. (See Figure 2.)

The group was broken up into four teams, each assigned one quadrant and charged with imagining what a future NH community in that quadrant could look like at least 10 years in the future (i.e., in 2030 or later). Each group described their town, drew images of it, and gave their future community scenario a name. For example, "Happily Green, Until..." describes a community with abundant funding, a well engaged public, and a well-staffed and funded water supply system. In the lower left corner is "The Bare Minimum," a community with scarce funds, an unengaged citizenry, and the economic challenges that come with this profile.

As much as the Board and staff thought they had expanded their thinking and been truly imaginative, they soon recognized that elements of all four of their imaginary communities already existed in various towns and cities in the Granite State. So, to get more creative and ask more challenging "what if?" questions about their new towns, they began to imagine unlikely but still plausible things that could happen. They dove deeper and thought about other major forces at play, like climate change, ever-more-powerful social media, cyber threats, and a potential resurgence in heavy manufacturing in the northeast due to an abundant water supply. They imagined another layer of possible events and trends that could make the scenarios faced by their four communities different from those of today but still plausible and supportable.

"Happily Green, Until..." suffered a major cyberattack on its drinking water system. "The Bare Minimum" lost its 75-year-old drinking water treatment plant to a tornado, and suffered the ensuing outbreak of giardiasis. Then that community had to figure out how or whether it

could afford to replace its treatment plant or whether it should instead join a regional water system. By digging deeper, the Board and staff created scenarios that pushed things beyond where most New Hampshire communities have found themselves so far. This forced the Board and staff to be much more thoughtful in devising strategies that could be successful and prove useful in the longer term across a broader spectrum of future challenges. In short, this process broke the bonds of traditional, standard thinking, and put the organization on a path to imagining truly alternative new worlds of risk and opportunity.



Moving from Scenarios to Strategies

After looking at the scenarios and the presented needs, the Board and staff identified four overall thematic priorities. Three are largely outward focused, and one looks more inward. (See Figure 3.) All are intended to ensure that everything NHWWA does is designed to help its members deliver safe, dependable, and affordable drinking water. The strategic plan focuses on these four elements:

1. Centering on the people who power the drinking water industry and helping them to be the best they can be,
2. Advocating to rate payers, local boards, and state legislators for adequate funding for drinking water services,
3. Sharing the story of drinking water in a compelling and engaging way that draws public support for this critical service, and
4. Ensuring that the NHWWA is able to lead the industry as a strong and vibrant organization that establishes a culture of continuous learning and improvement through scenario thinking.

Achieving effective, ongoing communications within the NHWWA community itself and between the NHWWA and its external audiences is central to the success of all of these priorities, including elected officials, regulators, and the general public, along with equipping NHWWA's supporters to be knowledgeable and respected proponents of public drinking water supplies in their respective arenas.

Fortunately, the seed grant that NHWWA received from the NH CDFA included funds to develop and implement a communications plan,

which the association and one of the authors (Sue Kaplan) structured to help implement the 2020 strategic plan in a fully integrated way.

Communications: Aligning Communications with the Strategic Plan

The NHWWA's leadership created an advantageous environment for the communications consultant to observe and participate in the scenario thinking at the Board and staff retreat in August 2020. This made it easier to align the communications strategy and implementation plan with that planning. Engaging in the discussions about the organizational drivers, cultural attributes, and the central goal was also an investment in ensuring that the intent and expectations were embedded when the new messaging foundation was developed.

While the Board, staff, and its strategy consultant moved toward completion of the strategic plan for 2021 and beyond, the communications consultant began the first phase of the communications project, assessing the current state of the association's messaging and its communication tools. The existing tools included the website, social media (LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter), publications, brand identity, and email marketing. The review showed absences and/or inconsistencies in the content: mission, tagline, key audiences, and basic description about the association. As an example, the tagline on the website banner was distinctly different than what was posted on LinkedIn:

- Website banner: Dedicated to improving municipal water supply in the state of New Hampshire,
- Website About page: Supporting NH Drinking Water Supply Industry Since 1939,
- LinkedIn: Providing advocacy and training for municipalities, operators, engineers and suppliers,
- Facebook: Your resource for improving municipal water supply service in the State of New Hampshire.

The review found that there were three LinkedIn pages, two Twitter feeds, and two Facebook pages with irregular postings. The overlaps and inconsistencies in content made it hard for those using social media to have a clear sense of what the NHWWA is and whether to engage with the platforms. The assessment phase revealed that there were significant opportunities to create clear, consistent, and compelling messaging for the NHWWA to mobilize its goal and help fulfill its four strategic priorities.

The second phase of the communications project began with a deep dive into the final strategic plan. Based on that work, the consultant drafted the NHWWA's new messaging foundation that aligned seamlessly with the plan's four strategic priorities.

The third phase, implementation, started with drafting the key institutional content in the messaging foundation, in collaboration with Boyd Smith and Tom Burack to get it to a final set of statements. A messaging foundation includes mission, vision, description, tagline, key audiences, value statements, and value propositions.

Vision, mission, and values are typically long-term foundational statements. A vision answers these questions: *why do you want to go where you envision going? and what is possible in the future?* Visions are vivid, inspirational, clear, memorable, and concise. Missions are simple statements about why the organization exists, with no buzz words. They address who you are and what you want to achieve.

Powerful vision, mission, and value statements make it possible for members and external constituencies to be clear about the NHWWA's purpose. They are reference points and tools, enabling the organization to recall why it does what it does, what it intends to achieve, and how it will maintain brand consistency. The importance of doing this work for all organizations cannot be overstated. Since nonprofits are inherently purpose-driven, their messaging must illustrate their purpose. Clear, consistent, and compelling communications can, as examples, help a nonprofit or a business recruit and retain employees and become more successful in developing new partners.

The NHWWA's messaging was inspired by and drawn from the strategy, general themes, and specific priorities in the strategic plan. The messaging, communications strategy and implementation plan all flow from the strategic priorities and the goal at the center of the water wheel (See Figure #1). The new messaging includes:

- Mission: To improve public water supply service in the State of New Hampshire
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- Vision: Safe and sustainable public drinking water for New Hampshire communities
- Tagline: Working for New Hampshire's drinking water experts

This messaging foundation and the central goal of safe, dependable, and affordable public drinking water drove the communications tactics in the implementation plan.

The plan was driven by the four strategic priorities and structured to ensure each communication tactic is aligned to at least one priority, and has a purpose, a responsible party, target audience, description, and status. For example, to support the workforce development needs and highlight the story of drinking water in NH, the staff will talk with members to understand how the NHWWA's work is valuable to them. If they are willing to share their testimonial about the NHWWA along with a photo, it can be used with key audiences like public officials and potential employees to build the association's reputation. Tactics like these are outlined with specifics in a spreadsheet or table to ensure that the goals are fulfilled and shared with a variety of key audiences, as illustrated by the following examples.

- Strategic Priorities: #1 People Powered and #3 Story of Water
 - Tactic: interview 4-6 individual members to gather perceptions on NHWWA and key information sources they use; ask for a photo and testimonial about NHWWA's impact and effectiveness
 - Purpose: build reputation
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- Target Audience: donors, students, public officials, prospective members, members, and industry partners
- Uses – Video, website, publications, social media, grant proposals.

With the strategic plan, messaging foundation, and annual plan for communication tactics in hand, the next step was to draft a Request for Proposal for a website developer. The executive director proposed a budget item to design a new website highlighting the strategic work done in 2021 and streamlining functional processes online. The Board approved that request.

The NHWWA's new website (<https://nhwwa.org/>) was brought online in June 2021. It is a refreshing illustration of the Board and staff's vision and the association's purpose and capabilities.

Governance: Foundational Framework for Continuous Learning and Improvement

For the third component of the NHWWA's new foundation, the Board recognized that its governance system, primarily its bylaws and essential policies, was out-of-date and needed to be modernized to support greater nimbleness, agility, and responsiveness to the sometimes rapidly changing and evolving circumstances faced by the state's public water utilities.

As with many similar state-level organizations, the NHWWA is a charitable nonprofit that is tax exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. This status puts NHWWA in the common position of needing to serve charitable, scientific, or educational purposes while at the same time striving to meet the needs of its "members." Various societal trends over the past half-century have tended to cause membership in nonprofit organizations to decline, resulting in less participation overall in the workings, programs, and volunteer boards of many such groups. NHWWA has not been immune to this societal trend, as it can be difficult now to attain a quorum of 30 dues-paying members at an annual meeting, which had been the required forum for electing the Board of Directors and amending the bylaws.

Beginning in January 2021, the executive director and the scenario planning consultant, Tom Burack, serving now in his attorney status, began to assess the type and form of bylaws that would most effectively promote continuous learning through the scenario planning process as a key to the Board's ongoing work. Ultimately, they decided not to use "traditional" bylaws as the basis for updating the governance processes. Instead, they deployed a governance approach generally based on the principles of "policy governance" in which an organization's board sets the goals or "ends" that the organization will strive to achieve and hires a chief executive officer to develop and implement strategies to achieve those goals, subject to certain limitations that the board may place on the CEO's actions or activities.

Largely guided by these general principles, the executive director and the attorney prepared a set of draft bylaws that was reviewed in detail by the Board at a series of meetings through the Spring of 2021. In May 2021, the Board voted to recommend that the membership approve a new set of bylaws that includes the following major elements:

- Constitute the Board of Directors as a self-perpetuating Board (so that the Board as a whole would be responsible for recruiting, nominating, and electing new Board members, all of whom would serve staggered terms), and as the "members" of the organization for purposes of compliance with state law;
 - Simplify the membership structure by converting all categories of dues-paying "members" to "supporters";
 - Actively promote engagement of supporters in the work of the Board by encouraging all interested supporters, as individuals, to participate as volunteers on Board committees and sub-committees;
 - Increase transparency and engagement by requiring an annual meeting for the supporters at which the Board presents an annual report on the organization's accomplishments and actively engages supporters in the scenario thinking process by seeking their ideas, insights, and information;
 - Establish a Governance and Nominating Committee whose roles include identifying and recruiting new members of the Board through active engagement with the NHWWA's supporters, and;
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- Articulate and clarify the respective roles of the Board and staff, including through provisions that specify the Board's responsibility for strategic planning and policy-setting, and the staff's responsibility for implementation and reporting.

At a special online meeting held on June 8, 2021, the NHWWA's membership, with a quorum present, adopted the proposed new bylaws by unanimous vote. Following this vote, on June 16, the executive director, now operating under the title, "President and CEO," sent an email to all of the NHWWA supporters who attended the online meeting, thanking them for participating in the process of adopting the new bylaws, expressing appreciation for "our Board's willingness to embrace such important and sweeping changes that will directly impact their roles and responsibilities as volunteer Directors," and pointing out that by requiring more of everyone involved in the NHWWA, "current and future Directors will be even more motivated and empowered to serve...now that important duties with clear outcomes are codified in our foundational governance document."

The Big Splash that Keeps on Splashing

The President and CEO in his June 16 message described the full scope of the organization's modernization process as follows:

"The revised bylaws resulted from a ground-up analysis of Association mission and goals, crafted to clarify our organizational structure as well as build committees and positions to apply talent and resources to our shared priorities. Priorities were identified in our 2020 strategic plan, and include the critical challenges of workforce development,

infrastructure development and communications. The June 8, 2021, bylaws will help us meet these and future priorities and challenges."

The overall impact of the NHWWA's modernization efforts are expected to strengthen the organization and ensure that it is well-positioned not only to help the state's public water supply systems meet the challenges of today, but also to ensure that they are regularly imagining alternative future worlds, developing new strategies that could work in those future worlds, and ever-ready to implement them quickly and successfully, when and if the need arises. The combination of scenario-based continuous learning, effective and integrated communications, and a modern governance structure will help ensure that the NHWWA will be able to make a big splash for New Hampshire's public drinking water supplies not only today but also far into the future.

About the authors: Tom Burack, Esq., Sheehan Phinney Bass + Green, PA, served both as the consultant to NHWWA on the scenario planning and the attorney on the governance system components of this project. Sue Kaplan, Sustainable Futures Consulting, served as the consultant on the communications strategy and implementation plan. The authors extend their gratitude to Boyd Smith, President and CEO of the NHWWA, for his invaluable assistance and support in the preparation of this article. Mr. Smith authored an article on the early phases of this process, "Scenario-based Strategic Planning," Journal of the New Hampshire Water Works Association, Vol. 2, 2020, pp. 7-12.
