

# Foresight improves government

BY KEON S. CHI

**F**uturists seldom agree on what we can or should do about the future. But they all tend to agree that the public is not being well served today because in the past policy-makers have failed to invest in the future.

Some futurists, such as political scientist Robert Nisbet, maintain that tomorrow cannot be predicted by looking at yesterday and today. He said, "The present does not contain the future, nor was our present ever contained in the past, not if what we are concerned with is change." He argues that futurists are confusing continuity of chronology with continuity of circumstances and events.

"Forecasters are rationalists, thus over-emphasizing the importance of rationality in human behavior," said Frank Trippett of *Time* magazine. "Forecasts are subject to optimism and pessimism, and the forecaster may be thwarted by misreading the present." In Trippett's opinion, the seeds of tomorrow are buried in today, but they lie too deep and germinate too subtly for ordinary eyes to detect their potential.

On the other hand, other futurists tell us that we can forecast public policy and do something about the future. They contend we can anticipate change through extrapolation and foresee potential problems through use of advanced technology and sophisticated methodology, so that we might prevent problems instead of merely reacting to them.

Government policy-makers have often been blamed for failing to anticipate the future. In futurist Alvin Toffler's words, "Our political decision-makers swing widely back and forth between doing nothing about a problem until it explodes into crisis and, alternately, racing in with ill-equipped, poorly pre-assessed crash programs."

Edward Cornish of the World Future Society said, "The future does not just happen to us. We ourselves create it by what we do and what we fail to do. It is we who are making tomorrow what tomorrow will be. For that reason, we futurists now think less in terms of predicting the future and more in terms of trying to decide more wisely what we want the future to be."

During the past three decades, there has been a rise and fall of foresight activities in the private sector and government. The 1970s saw a surge of futures projects

at all levels of government. By the mid-1980s, at least 40 such projects were underway in 30 states. A typical government futures project addressed four broad questions: Where are we now? Where are the trends taking us? Where do we want to go? And, what do we need to do to get there? The term anticipatory democracy coined

by Toffler was fashionable in the 1980s. In the past decade, however, foresight programs seemed to have lost their appeal in the wake of a booming economy and relatively peaceful world.

Kentucky is one of a handful of states with ongoing foresight programs. In 1988, the state's Legislative Research Commission created a program to provide legislators with information on the potential long-term impact of various public policies and to anticipate issues or trends likely to have a significant impact on the state. As part of the program, staff began scanning news and developments to alert legislators to emerging issues deserving attention. Legislative leaders be-

lieved that early identification of emerging trends would give the Legislature time to take advantage of opportunities and to ward off problems. In addition, the General Assembly in 1992 created the Kentucky Long-term Policy Research Policy Center to illuminate the long-range implications of current policies, emerging issues and trends influencing the state's future. The center, which has since produced numerous reports, serves as a model for other states.

A national organization of the 50 states and U.S. territories, The Council of State Governments, recently announced a trends-tracking mission that will alert policy-makers to emerging issues. "State government leaders who face growing demands on their time and on state resources need assistance to identify, analyze and respond to emerging trends," said Idaho Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, CSG's president for 2001.

Foresight, the process of identifying and interpreting information and data by looking ahead, can help state leaders better prepare for social, economic, technological and political changes. Foresight also can help them make more informed and wiser decisions. Finally, foresight activities are needed in an era of so-called "Fend for Yourself Federalism" when the states are expected to be more responsible and accountable than ever before.



*Efforts to head off problems can have big payoffs.*