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Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project

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As our populations increase, and more and more development takes place, critical lands and waters are threatened or even lost in the ensuing rush for economic progress. At the same time, greater value is being placed on the natural resource amenities of clean air and water, scenic beauty, wildlife, and opportunities for outdoor recreation. Critical to these valued amenities is the need to retain and protect open space. There are a number of initiatives and projects addressing recreational and open space needs in Utah.

One such project is Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project, which focused on involving key stakeholders by directly seeking their input in the assessment of outdoor recreational and open space needs, priorities, and initiatives for each of the seven, governmental Planning Districts in Utah (Figure 1). By focusing stakeholders on issues related to outdoor recreation, amenity values (such as scenic beauty), and ecological services (such as clean water, wetlands, and wildlife habitat), the ultimate goal of the project was to identify action strategies for addressing open space needs throughout the state. Following is a description of the project, summary results for each of the seven Planning Districts, major themes, and recommendations to advance the retention and protection of open space in Utah.

Three Phases of the Project

Phase One: Conference Breakout Sessions

The Project was divided into three phases. First, over 250 people were invited from throughout the state to attend Utah's Great Outdoors Conference held in Salt Lake City in February of 1999. Conference participants included a cross-section of individuals representing the private business sector; non-profit organizations; city, county, tribal, state, and federal governments; Utah State University Extension; and the general public. In nineteen different

break-out groups, based on the Planning Districts in which participants lived, conference participants responded to the following questions: 1) What do you feel are the most pressing outdoor recreation and open space needs in your region of the state for the next twenty years?; and 2) What are the most pressing outdoor recreation and open space

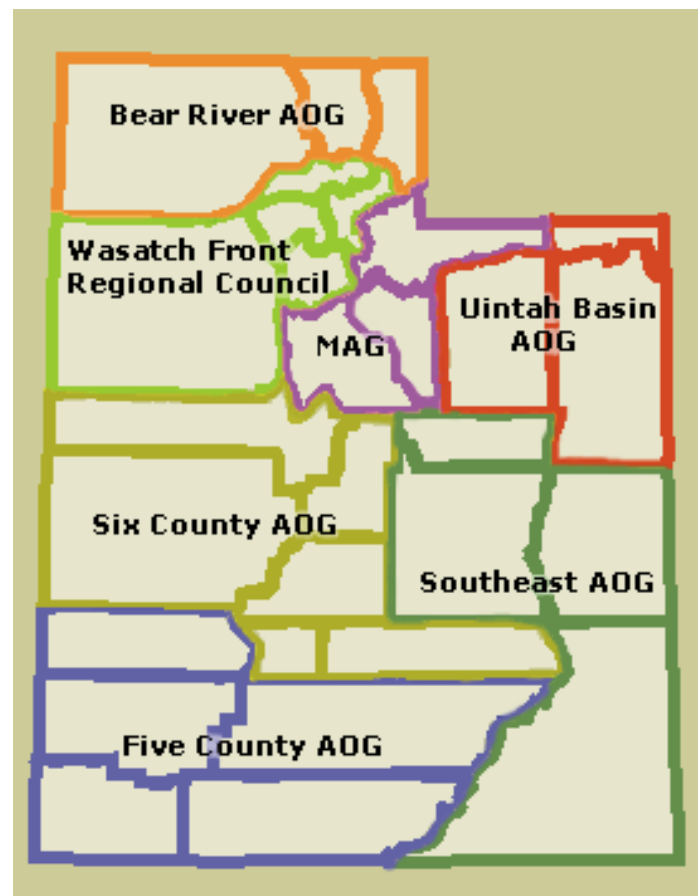


Figure 1: Utah's seven planning districts

problems or needs for specific towns and communities in your region of the state? Participants were asked to focus on needs related to parks, trails, greenways, wildlife areas, wetlands, and other natural areas that are available for public use, recreation, and tourism. Utilizing a nominal group process, a total of 414 items were generated by participants in response to Question #1 and 242 items in response to Question #2. At least thirty, prioritized, open space needs were identified for each of the seven Planning Districts, including over 200 specific items for the Wasatch Front.



Bikers racing in Blacksmith Fork Canyon

Phase Two: Key Informant Mail Survey

These prioritized lists were then used for the second phase of the project, a Statewide Key Informant Mail Survey, in order to further validate and prioritize the importance of outdoor recreation and open space needs that were identified at the Conference for each Planning District. A total of 287 surveys were mailed to Conference participants and additional key informants identified in certain Planning Districts that had relatively few Conference participants. A total of 182 surveys were returned for a response rate of 63%. Survey recipients were asked to rate specific outdoor recreation and open space needs on a 7-point Likert scale with 7 representing “Extremely Important” and 1 representing “Not At All Important.” Ranking of priorities was then determined by the highest averages for identified needs. Following are brief summaries of survey results from each Planning District:

Bear River Planning District

(Box Elder, Cache, and Rich Counties)

Most important to survey respondents in this planning district were maintaining existing facilities and preserving existing open space areas such as benches and hillsides. Also highly ranked were issues related to creating reliable open space protection funding sources that could be used for land acquisition and maintaining access to public lands, educating the general public about the benefits of open

space, including incorporating open space into planning for growth, and linking open space areas with trails and bike paths.

Wasatch Front Planning District

(Davis, Morgan, Salt Lake, Tooele, and Weber Counties)

Most important to survey respondents from this planning district were issues related to water quality and the protection of water delivery systems such as watersheds, riverways, streams, riparian corridors, and wetlands. Also important was protecting open space areas and corridors within urban/suburban areas and access to public lands. Support was also shown for more creative funding sources to address open space needs and more active partnering among the various governmental levels of open space providers and managers.

Mountainland Planning District

(Summit, Utah, and Wasatch Counties)

Survey respondents in this planning district placed a far greater importance on public education about open space issues than did respondents from any other planning district. Also important were issues related to obtaining funding sources to develop existing urban/suburban open space for parks, protecting access corridors to existing open space on public lands, and protecting water quality and water delivery systems such as the Provo and Weber River watersheds, rivers, and streams.

Uintah Basin Planning District

(Daggett, Duchesne, and Uintah Counties)

Issues related to protecting water quality and watersheds were ranked highest by survey respondents. Other issues also felt to be important, but with considerable differences of opinion by respondents, were those related to protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat, maintaining aging recreation facilities, increasing partnerships among open space providers and managers, and balancing development with open space preservation. Issues ranked high with little difference of opinion were those relating to identifying common open space protection goals within the planning district and protecting critical open space areas through better zoning, development controls, and public education.

Central Planning District

(Juab, Millard, Piute, Sanpete, Sevier, and Wayne Counties)

The issue felt to be most important by survey respondents was retaining access to RS 2477 roads (right-of-way granted for highways and roads across public lands). The other highly ranked issues included those relating to support for local economies, protection of water resources, retaining access to open lands, protecting landowners’ rights, increasing funding for county infrastructures, and coordination of master planning among the counties.

Southwest Planning District

(Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, and Washington Counties)

The listing of the highest ranked issues in this planning district exhibits the greatest diversity of issues of any

planning district. Issues felt to be important include balancing development with recreation and wilderness, better cooperation and communication among open space providers, education programs for adults and children, establishing sources of funding and technical assistance, controlling urban sprawl, and city planning.

Southeast Planning District

(Carbon, Emery, Grand, and San Juan Counties)

Survey respondents from this planning district placed considerable importance on taking action based on long range planning and using stewardship, education, and controls to protect existing public land open space. Also felt to be important were issues relating to protecting water delivery systems, heritage and cultural resources, and the quality of life for area residents.

Generally, statewide results, in terms of recreational and open space priorities from both the Conference and the Statewide Key Informant Survey, identify needs for: 1) cooperation and partnerships in planning for and providing open space; 2) trails/corridors for recreation and access; 3) education for both children and adults directed at proper use, minimizing impacts, and importance of open space; and 4) developing access and managing open space. In northern Utah, especially in the Greater Wasatch, needs were identified for: 1) water quality and quantity, wetlands, and wildlife habitat; 2) protecting access to mountain canyons and public lands; 3) open space protection in urban, suburban, and developing areas; and 4) identification of critical lands and funding for their acquisition. In the more rural, eastern and southern areas of the state, needs were identified for: 1) long-term, reliable funding for development and maintenance; 2) long-range planning (cooperation and assistance); 3) specific projects with economic benefits; 4) community quality of life and economic benefits; and 5) historic/heritage sites.

Phase Three: Public Presentations and Feedback

Phase Three of Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project involved presentations at public meetings, where prioritized listings of outdoor recreation and open space needs, identified in the first two phases of the project, were presented for each Planning District. The intent here was to seek out stakeholder comments on these findings and ask participants to identify existing and potential projects or initiatives addressing outdoor recreation and open space needs. Presentations were made to approximately 350 individuals at nineteen different meetings throughout the state. Public meetings included Association of Governments (AOG) meetings in each Planning District, Travel Region meetings, City/County Council meetings, and other special groups, such as a Public Lands Forum meeting. Over 300 specific outdoor recreation and open space projects were identified for the seven Planning Districts in Utah. In addition, a broader picture of the social and political context in which open space planning must occur became evident.

Major Themes and Recommendations

From the findings of the project, a number of major themes are evident. First, there are two broad types of open space needs identified among key stakeholders: 1) Specific Purpose Projects include such things as individual trails, visitor centers, water projects, heritage sites, and parks; and 2) General Concerns involve such things as funding, education, partnerships, and planning needs.

Second, there are two different orientations toward open space values. Some major differences exist between stakeholders in urban/suburban and rural Planning Districts regarding the purpose and value of open space. Urban/suburban stakeholders generally emphasize protection of open space for non-use or intrinsic values, along with recreational and access needs, community aesthetics and amenities, controlling growth and development, and providing ecological services such as wildlife habitat, wetlands protection, and water quality. By and large, stakeholders in rural areas are more concerned with the use value or instrumental value of open space, to help meet local economic needs through outdoor recreation and tourism development, maintain public access for recreation, and retain traditions of multiple use of natural resources on public lands. A key challenge to successful, long-term, statewide planning and funding efforts is providing opportunities to enhance both the use and environmental protection roles of open space simultaneously. Linking these two orientations is possible, but will require an explicit and balanced effort to bring these together. It is especially important to encourage support and collaboration with rural areas of the state.

Third, linear open space corridors and water-related resources are critical. Linear corridors mentioned most often include trail and paths, bikeways, and off highway vehicle (OHV) routes. Corridors were implied by projects mentioned for parkways, riverways, riparian corridors, wildlife corridors, canyon protection and access, and corridors linking communities and towns. Water-related projects are considered important throughout the state. However, in rural areas the focus is on providing or improving reservoir and river recreation, while in urban/suburban areas, water quality, wetlands protection, and wildlife habitat are of equal or greater importance. To enhance long-term benefits from statewide coordination and funding, Specific Purpose Projects will need to be designed to simultaneously meet recreational development and use goals along with natural resource protection goals.

The fourth theme evident involves funding. Stakeholders throughout the Planning Districts view funding as a key role for state agencies. However, the emphasis is not on simply providing funds, but also providing technical advice and coordination for identifying and acquiring funds. One recommendation is to provide a larger portion of funds to rural Planning Districts. Distributing funds on a *per capita* basis is problematic. Many urban/suburban residents of the



Soldier Hollow/Wasatch State Park in the fall

state travel to rural areas for recreation, as do many out-of-state tourists. This puts a higher level of pressure on rural resources and infrastructure. Long-term and consistent sources of funding are important for rural areas. Long-term resource protection and amenity/ecological service values are statewide concerns. Funding should be used to encourage Planning Districts to help protect these broader social values.

The fifth theme evident involves the issue of local control and statewide coordination. In general, stakeholders see great value in statewide coordination of open space planning and funding efforts, but at the same time want to retain local control. There is a large pool of existing and potential recreational and open space projects in all Planning Districts, and priorities can be identified by local stakeholders. Therefore, local needs should be a starting point for statewide planning and funding priorities, but projects must also meet broader state needs. Project funding criteria should recognize both use and non-use values of open space, and should help meet local needs as well as broader state level needs. Open space planning and funding must be a joint effort between local and state agencies and stakeholders.

Keeping the aforementioned themes in mind, planning and funding criteria for a project might include evidence that it: 1) meets both local and state level needs; 2) has local community support; 3) is part of larger scale planning efforts; 4) meets objectives related to amenity and ecological service values, even if the project focuses on use; 5) is part of a collaboration or partnership; and 6) has an educational component.

Comparison with Other Studies

While the Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project has provided a broad view of open space needs and projects throughout the state, the results are similar to several other Utah studies of recreation, open space, and critical lands. These studies, conducted by the Utah Division of Travel Development, Utah Division of Parks and Recreation, the Utah Critical Land Alliance, and the Coalition for Utah's Future, support the needs for funding, increasing local control, education and communication efforts, greater coordination between government agencies and between government and private entities, and enhancing trail resources in the state. These studies, as well as several recent polls and newspaper publications, all emphasize Utahns' concern with open space and critical land protection.

A Final Note

There is much support for the concept of protecting open space, but there are different attitudes about open space benefits and protection mechanisms. The primary differences revolve around the purpose of open space to meet specific use values *versus* amenity and ecological service values. Advancing open space protection in Utah will require a recognition of the values on both sides of this debate. Amenity *and* ecological benefits can result from open spaces that provide recreation use, access, and resource and community development values *if* collaborative processes are used in designing, prioritizing, and funding projects. And more local officials need to recognize the increasing need for state-level coordination and protection mechanisms, especially in northern Utah Planning Districts where growth and development are occurring at unprecedented rates. This requires more emphasis on collaboration, education, and balancing social acceptability and environmental sustainability. Thus, there are hurdles to overcome, but there is also "common ground" regarding open space planning and protection in Utah.

References

Burr, S.W., Blahan, D., Butkus, M., & Kurtzman, J. (2000 June). Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project (Professional Report IORT PR2000-1). Logan, Utah: Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism, Utah State University.

For More Information:

The full report titled "Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project" is available through Utah State University's Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism (IORT) on IORT's website at extension.usu.edu/cooperative/iort.

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