

Case Study: Scenario Planning for Regional Growth

Bear Lake Valley Blueprint

Key Takeaways

This case study is an analysis of a scenario planning project focused on land use planning that occurred in 2010-2011 in the Bear Lake Valley. Reviewing the project report and local planning documents and conducting informal interviews with regional planners informed this case study. Here are the key findings:

- Scenario Planning is a powerful tool that can help a community recognize and accept growth pressures, proactively plan for growth, and work together to create a community vision.
- Political buy-in and support for a scenario planning process is essential for the success of the process and its ability to inform policy changes. Having a local champion (or champions) for the process is also key.
- When planning for growth, it is important for decision makers to carefully manage real and perceived conflict between private property rights and land use planning.

Background

Bear Lake straddles the border of Bear Lake County, Idaho, and Rich County, Utah. The Bear Lake region, which is sometimes referred to as “The Caribbean of the Rockies,” is a popular place to recreate both in the summer and in the winter. As a result of the area's desirability as a place to live and visit, Bear Lake has experienced an increase in development pressures, particularly from new construction of vacation rentals and second homes. Unfortunately, as with many gateway and natural amenity regions, local and state

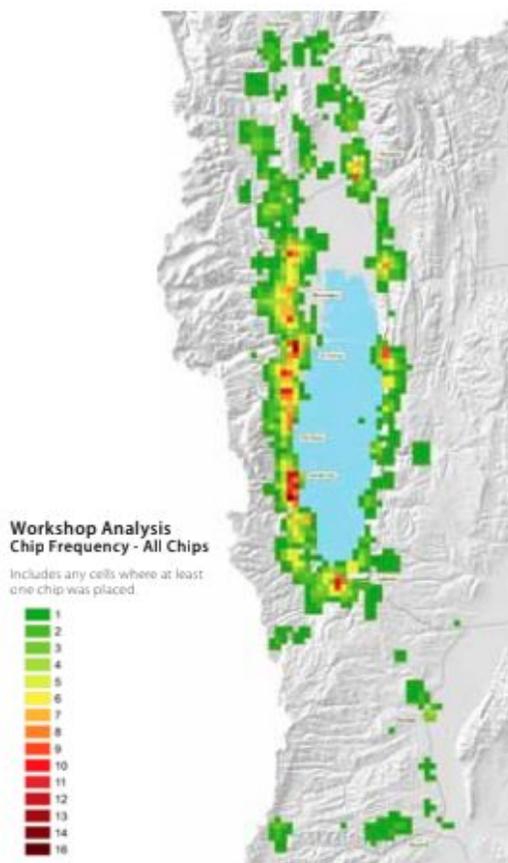
jurisdictional boundaries do not align with the “problemshed” of regional challenges.

Seeking to develop a shared vision for the region that could help decision-makers work together to respond to growth pressures across jurisdictions, a grassroots movement initiated a process to develop a Bear Lake Valley Blueprint. A local steering committee and Envision Utah facilitated the process, intending to help the region move beyond asking “What do we want?” toward “How do we get there?”

Scenario Planning Process

From the outset, the process of preparing the [Bear Lake Valley Blueprint](#) fell on a steering committee of local full-time residents with [Envision Utah](#), a non-profit specializing in regional visioning and scenario planning, facilitating the collaborative effort.

Figure The Bear Lake Valley. Source: [google maps](#)



To inform this process, Envision Utah formulated a baseline [scenario](#) that projected growth until 2060 based on growth trends of the previous 20 years (1990-2010). The public was then invited to participate in workshops and surveys to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with the region's particular growth patterns and to express preferences for how that growth could be managed to best preserve the region's character and natural resources. In total, eight public workshops were held in the different towns throughout the Bear Lake Valley as well as Salt Lake City. At these workshops, large paper maps of the valley were distributed among participants who were then instructed to use different markers, colored tape, and paper squares to illustrate their ideas regarding jobs, housing, transportation, conservation, and recreation on the maps. Two online surveys were also distributed in August and September 2010 to provide an opportunity for residents who could not participate in the workshops to express their growth preferences.

After aggregating the maps and reviewing the survey results, the steering committee identified common values and themes to guide the development of three alternatives to the original baseline scenario:

Figure Results of the community mapping exercise: placement of chips of any kind.

1. an “Estate Lots” scenario, which dispersed development along the region's hillsides and road corridors
2. a “Farm Towns/Recreation Villages and Clusters” scenario, which concentrated modest growth in most communities around the lake

3. a "Recreation Town/Main Street, USA" scenario, in which the municipalities of Garden City and Montpelier absorbed most of the region's growth as a recreation destination and a job creation center, respectively.

Each alternative incorporated the same number of new houses and jobs contained in the baseline scenario but dispersed that data according to the preferences identified by the public. Estimates were calculated for annual housing infrastructural costs, land conserved, types of housing, water quality and consumption, and local and regional transportation costs for the baseline scenario and the three alternatives.

These four scenarios were presented at three different town hall meetings and another survey was distributed between November 2010 and February 2011 to determine which of the scenarios appealed most to the public. Of the four scenarios presented, the most popular were the "Recreation Town/Main Street, USA" scenario (42 percent of residents) and the "Farm Towns/Recreation Villages and Clusters" scenario (37 percent of residents). The steering committee and project facilitators used the public feedback to create a vision statement, vision principles, and a vision map to inform local officials' decisions regarding future growth.

Envision Utah also included instructions for creating regional and local action plans and an implementation toolkit in the final Blueprint documentation intended to help the communities work towards the goals generated through the visioning process. The topics of these tools included accessory dwelling units, affordable housing, clustering, community endowment, critical lands protection, dark skies, development standards, redevelopment, zoning, form-based code, impact fees, intergovernmental coordination, transportation, purchase of development rights, design, and more, including topics on agriculture and economic and social development. The toolkit was composed of information, online resources, and case studies.

Outcomes and Impact

The vision of the Blueprint is still referenced in the Bear Lake Valley. The Blueprint process helped to generate energy around coordinated recreation planning, and planning for a new regional trail network is now underway. Garden City also decreased the density of their "hillside estates" zone to preserve sensitive areas and viewsheds as a result of the Blueprint's findings, although this was not accompanied by an increase in allowable density in existing developed areas. The Garden City comprehensive plan does list channeling development into areas with existing or planned infrastructure as a land use policy. A majority of new development has happened in Garden City, as per the preferred "Recreation Town/Main Street USA" scenario, although much of this has to do with restrictive county ordinances which were already in place. Few other suggestions from the Blueprint toolkit have come to fruition, due to a variety of factors. First, things tend to move slowly in the region, including governance and development. The total number of units developed in the region is small compared to other areas in the West, and local planning capacity is limited. Second, the local jurisdictions continue to prioritize private property rights over coordinated direction for new development and view these as conflicting goals. Third, regional planners in the area feel that concern about the influence of the process sponsors limited the public's sense of ownership of the process, weakening its political clout.

Lessons Learned

The Bear Lake Valley Blueprint experience suggests that scenario planning can be a valuable tool for creating a community vision. It can also help to move people beyond the “no change” mindset to instead accept that growth is happening and work together to think about how they would like their region or town to grow. The case also suggests that extensive engagement with the public and community leaders is needed to create a sense of ownership and increase the likelihood of implementation. While creation of the Blueprint involved extensive public engagement, perceptions of sponsor influence seem to have undermined its influence on local policy. This case also exposes the potential conflict between private property rights (considered sacrosanct in many rural communities in the West, and the main source of opposition to the Blueprint vision) and efforts to direct or regulate new development. It is important for planners and decision makers to recognize this upfront in a scenario planning process, so they may attempt to manage this dynamic or acknowledge that it will limit which tools will be politically feasible. Finally, planning moves slowly in small towns and rural counties where there may be limited planning capacity. Providing toolkits and other resources can help, but additional assistance may be needed to enable these communities to implement progressive planning interventions.

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