

Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project Conclusions and Recommendations

In 1998, the Utah Critical Lands Conservation Committee suggested five activities for land conservation in Utah: 1) engage the public; 2) establish a vision, mission, and goals; 3) identify program priorities; 4) create a legacy program; 5) develop grant criteria; and 6) identify and secure funding (Brinkerhoff 1998). We hope the results of Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project can help advance all of these goals, but we especially designed the project around steps one, three, and five.

We engaged the public in discussions of open space issues in all three phases. Despite the targeted audience used for data collection, we have a high degree of confidence in the results for several reasons: the use of multiple methods, widespread coverage of the state, the similarity of findings from all three phases, and our extensive efforts to provide external review of both the methods and results of each phase. So while our sample is not generally representative of *all* Utah residents, we feel the results are a good reflection of the attitudes of *key stakeholders who have professional or personal interest in open space issues throughout the state.*

Open space issues are of vital concern in Utah. Literally hundreds of needs and projects were identified for the state as a whole and for specific planning districts and communities. In Phases 1 and 2, two broad types of open space needs were identified: *specific purpose projects* like trails and reservoirs, and *general concerns* like funding, planning, education, and partnerships. Phase 3 meetings identified many types of specific projects, but the general open space concerns are largely unaddressed in the Utah. And there are attitude differences concerning the importance of different open space values, methods and goals for protecting open space, and the appropriate role of government. Directly addressing the general concerns and collaborating on specific purpose projects, will likely be key roles for state and federal agencies.

This section reports the key themes and recommendations based on a synthesis of all three phases. The themes contain implications for revising the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP), developing guidelines related to state and local funding initiatives and federal pass-through grants, and for future research and Extension efforts in recreation and tourism. Finally, we compare our results with similar studies conducted in Utah by the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, the Division of Parks and Recreation, the Division of Travel Development, and the Coalition for Utah's Future.

Major Themes and Recommendations

Theme 1: There two broad types of open space needs.

Two broad types of open space needs were identified: *specific purpose projects* such as individual trails, water projects, parks, heritage sites, and information centers, and *general*

concerns such as funding, education, partnerships and general planning needs. While the general concerns were often rated just as important as specific projects during Phases 1 and 2, specific purpose projects, especially linear corridor and water-related projects, dominated Phase 3 results. Addressing these two broad types of needs will require different approaches. State and federal agencies need to work *directly* on the general concerns, or it is unlikely that they will be addressed in an effective or coordinated way. Specific purpose projects will require local initiatives and state, local, federal, and private stakeholder collaboration.

Theme 2: There are two different general orientations toward open space values.

During Phase 3 meeting discussions, it became clear that there are major differences between urban/suburban and rural planning districts regarding the purpose and value of open space. Participants in rural districts felt the key values of parks and open space are for recreation and tourism use, to help meet local economic development needs, and to retain public land access and multiple use. In urban areas, protecting open space for non use or intrinsic values, such as community esthetics, controlling growth and development, and providing ecological services, are as important as recreation and access needs. Thus, in rural areas, recreation use, development, and access are more important concerns than protecting “open space” per se. For example, water projects are important in all parts of the state, but in rural districts the focus is on providing or improving reservoir or river recreation, while in urban districts wildlife habitat, wetlands protection, and water quality are of equal or greater importance.

Providing opportunities to enhance both the use and environmental protection roles of open space simultaneously will be the key to successful, long-term statewide planning and funding efforts. Linking these two orientations toward open space is possible, but it will require an explicit and balanced effort to integrate them, and it is especially important to encourage support and collaboration with rural areas of the state.

Theme 3: Open space corridors and water-related projects are critical.

Many projects and initiatives listed during Phase 3 meetings were concerned with water resources and linear-shaped open spaces. Trails, paths, bikeways, and off-highway vehicle (OHV) routes were linear corridors that were mentioned most often, but other types of open space corridors were implied by projects for parkways, riparian corridors, river ways, stream and canyon protection, canyon access, corridors between subdivisions and towns, wildlife corridors, and others. For example, 23 of the 95 specific projects listed in the Phase 3 report for the Wasatch Front District were trail projects, and many more were projects involving canyon access, and riparian and wildlife corridors.

Corridors and water projects have many different and often overlapping functions. Linear-shaped open spaces, for example, provide benefits related to recreation, esthetics, public land access, tourism, water quality, wildlife habitat, open space linkages, and neighborhood

quality. From an efficiency point of view, open space corridors can influence more people per acre than traditional park-shaped tracts or blocks.

A high level of interest in open space corridors and water related resources exists in all planning districts, but the reasons these areas are important tend to be different in rural and urban areas. Participants in northern Utah districts were interested in many types and values of open space corridors, but in the rural parts of the state, the focus was on use potential, such as direct recreation (e.g., like snowmobiling and OHV driving), retaining existing roads for recreation and resource development access, and tourism and community development. The protection vs. use dichotomy exists for water projects as well. (See Theme 2 above for examples.) Enhancing the long-term benefits from statewide coordination and funding requires that specific purpose projects be designed to simultaneously meet recreation use, development, and resource protection goals.

Theme 4: Funding, funding, funding

Phase 3 participants in both urban and rural districts view funding as a key state-level role. It is not simply money, but also providing coordination and technical advice for identifying and acquiring funding. Key concerns include: 1) funds for maintaining existing but dated facilities, 2) long-term, consistent sources of funds (rather than one time development or capital improvement funds), 3) increasing awareness of funding opportunities, 4) prioritizing project needs, 5) understanding linkages between local needs and funding opportunities, and 6) technical help for developing grant proposals. Rural districts are especially concerned with increasing available funding, meeting local needs, and with *fairness in the distribution of state money*.

Provide a larger portion of funds to rural districts.

While providing more open space funds specifically to rural districts may sound inconsistent with the fairness issue, the views of southern and central Utah officials suggest otherwise. There are two problems with the practice of distributing funds on a per capita basis. First, many Wasatch Front residents travel to rural areas of the state for recreation, which puts a higher level of pressure on rural resources and infrastructure than is suggested by population levels alone. Second, due to lower populations, incomes, and access to funding sources, rural areas have fewer sources of revenue and less administrative flexibility than urban areas. This suggests a long-term and *consistent* source of funding is especially important for rural areas. Additionally, providing long-term resource protection and amenity and ecological service values of open space are statewide concerns, and funding should be used to help encourage local planning districts help protect these broader social values.

Theme 5: Local control--State coordination

The first three themes address the problem of defining the role of the state in open space planning. This role could vary depending on funding sources and planning needs, but some general guidelines can help increase state and local cooperation in the long run and help integrate recreation use, community development, and environmental protection values of open space. In general, the study participants see great value in statewide coordination of open space planning and funding efforts but, at the same time, want to retain local control.

Focus on projects that address local needs.

The list of initiatives identified in Phase 3 shows there is a large pool of existing and potential open space projects in all regions of the state, that priorities can be identified by local stakeholders, and that local needs can or should be a starting point for statewide planning and funding priorities. This is not to say that state level needs should not be addressed (e.g., wildlife habitat in rural communities), but that some mechanisms for meeting both levels of concern should be used in planning and funding decisions. That is, state open space funding criteria should recognize both use and non use values of open space, and funding should help meet local needs as well as broader state level needs. As such, *open space "protection" per se (i.e., the non-use values of open space projects) becomes one factor for funding, not the sole determinant.* Rather than a top-down or bottom-up approach, open space planning and project funding must be a joint effort between local and state level agencies and stakeholders.

Provide a logical, consistent, open process for prioritizing projects.

While local control is a major concern in many areas, especially rural districts, so is equity in funding, planning, and related decision processes. The literature on procedural justice and environmental conflict shows that perceived fairness in planning and decision *processes* are as important for public satisfaction with agency decisions as is the actual outcome or *content* of decisions (Lawrence *et al.* 1997). In the case of open space planning and funding, clear and explicit criteria, application guidelines, and technical assistance are needed so local communities and district level planners have an equal opportunity for success. Based on our findings, some factors that can serve as funding and planning criteria include providing evidence that a project:

1. Meets both state and local level needs;
2. Has local community support;
3. Is part of larger scale planning efforts, and meets objectives related to amenity and ecological service values (even if the project focuses on use values);
4. Is part of a collaboration or partnership between different levels of government or includes private sector cooperators; and
5. Has an educational component.

While there are many other potential criteria that will be depend on the specific funding source, project type, and potential applicants or cooperators, the above factors can be refined and used to help provide fair and consistent guidelines for most funding and planning decisions.

Develop project criteria collaboratively.

Procedural justice principles also suggest that, where possible, funding criteria and guidelines be developed in collaboration with local officials rather than developed and implemented solely at the state level. For example, application requirements could be drafted by state agencies (e.g., Division of Wildlife Resources and Division of Parks and Recreation for the Land and Water Conservation Fund) and sent out for review and evaluation by potential stakeholders (e.g., Associations of Government (AOGs)) and neutral “experts” (e.g., Utah State’s Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism). Final criteria and procedures could then be developed combining both content and process elements that are viewed as the most fair and acceptable by both internal (agency) and external stakeholders and professionals.

Implement formal collaborative planning and decision processes.

Most of the above recommendations suggest actions that would increase local officials’ advisory role in open space planning and funding decisions. Formal collaboration, however, requires some degree of sharing authority or power in decision making (Walker and Daniels 1996, Moote and McClarren 1997). One way to accomplish this would be to designate a statewide open space committee that would make final process and content decisions. This could be a task force appointed by the state Parks and Recreation and Wildlife Boards, or an *ad hoc* committee with representation from all regions of the state. (For example, there could be one person from the AOG, Travel Bureau, and RC& D in each planning district.) The committee could recommend and approve funding and planning criteria related to any non-agricultural open space programs based on recommendations made by state agency staff and collaborators described in the above recommendations. More study is needed as to how this collaboration should be organized.

Provide state coordination and technical assistance in planning, partnerships, public involvement, education, and research.

In addition to funding specific purpose projects, there are several other administrative needs that are not currently being addressed by existing and potential open space initiatives, and for which state agencies can provide leadership and technical assistance. These are the general concerns from Phases 1 and 2 related to planning, public involvement, education, research, and collaborative partnerships. It is unlikely these concerns will ever be addressed without some form of state level coordination. Currently, these types of activities tend to be piecemeal and implemented on a case-by-case or issue-by-issue basis, such as the Wildlife Regional Advisory Committees and the recent public involvement effort of the Division of Parks and Recreation

related to planning for Snow Canyon State Park. In addition to these specific applications, however, there is a need to provide broader guidelines and coordination for public involvement, education, and research, and to include these as open space planning and funding criteria. This can be addressed in the SCORP process, and by collaborating with external organizations and stakeholders such as the Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism.

Theme 6: Protection tools should focus on easements but also be tailored to local concerns, projects, and circumstances.

The Phase 2 survey results showed that easements were rated as a preferred protection tool in every planning district. Agricultural land/open space zoning and purchase of development rights were also highly rated in most planning districts. Once again, however, there were urban and rural differences in preferences for protection tools.

While none of the 25 protection tools were rated below four on the seven-point importance scale, there were large differences of opinion regarding the importance of some tools in both the survey results and some Phase 3 meetings. The role of land purchase and more “heavy-handed” tools (e.g., building moratorium, development/conversion taxes) were more acceptable in urban districts than in rural parts of the state. In several rural planning districts, there was discussion about limiting the role of government and increasing private sector initiatives, and meeting participants in one Southeastern district hotly debated the use of the word “protection,” implying it was synonymous with preservation or “locking up” resources. In general, local control and private owner initiatives were preferred in rural districts and in some urban areas as well. Protection tools should be carefully evaluated when making planning and funding decisions—some tools will be controversial, and creativity and flexibility may be needed to identify the tools that are both effective *and* socially acceptable for protecting open space.

Comparison of Results with Other Studies

The themes and recommendations discussed above verify and extend the results of several other Utah critical land, open space, and recreation studies. For example, the value of open space to the citizens of Utah has been highlighted in recent publications of Envision Utah, the Utah Critical Lands Alliance, the Utah Travel Council, the *Deseret News*, and the Utah Division of Parks and Recreation. The Utah Critical Lands Alliance (2000) recently concluded that four “guiding principles” are important for open space protection: 1) let the people decide, 2) protect private property rights, 3) local control over land use decisions, and 4) bi-partisan, statewide support. And a series of 14 public meetings on recreation and tourism needs conducted by the Division of Travel Development (1996) concluded that local control, state assistance, funding, and state coordination are currently lacking. Two additional conclusions from the tourism meetings were that local officials tend to undervalue attractions in their own backyards, and that there is a need to establish better communications among state, local, and federal governments, and among different regions and tourism providers.

Perhaps the most striking similarities with our results can be found in the Utah Trails Assessment conducted by the Utah Division of Parks and Recreation and the National Park Service (1997). The primary trail needs identified were: developing new trails and maintaining existing trails, increasing information and education related to trail use, increasing public access to trails, and increasing coordination between trail users and local, state, and federal agencies.

Obviously, the time is ripe for addressing the interrelated needs of protecting open space and providing recreation and tourism opportunities in Utah. Other factors fueling the need for action are: 1) the high rate of population growth in the state, 2) the loss of open space and agricultural land in urban and high-growth areas, 3) statewide opinion polls showing strong support for open space protection, 4) on-site recreation visitor surveys showing support for collecting fees in recreation areas, 5) the need to update the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, 6) the diverse support for Envision Utah and the Utah Heritage Trust Fund proposal, and 7) new and increasing sources of federal funding for state and local recreation, wildlife habitat, and open space protection (e.g., Conservation and Recreation Act, Lands Legacy Initiative, the Livability Agenda for the 21st Century, the Forest Service's Forest Legacy and Urban and Community Forestry programs, and the Fish and Wildlife Service's Teaming with Wildlife and Watchable Wildlife programs).

The convergence of these factors may even suggest the potential exists for increasing taxes for developing recreation and tourism opportunities and for protecting open space in urban areas. Regardless of the source of funding, however, action and coordination at the state level is needed to enhance outdoor opportunities and to protect environmental quality and the quality of life in local communities.

References

- Brinkerhoff, C. 1998. *A Legacy to Future Generations: A Study of State Land Conservation Activities*. Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Division of Travel Development, Department of Community and Economic Development, Utah Critical Lands Conservation Committee.
- Coalition for Utah's Future. 2000. *Envision Utah: A Partnership for Quality Growth*. Was available at <http://www.envisionutah.org>.
- Lawrence, R.L., S.E. Daniels and G.H. Stankey. 1997. Procedural justice and public involvement in natural resource decision making. *Society and Natural Resources* 10:577-589.
- Moote, M.A. and M.P. McClaren. 1997. Viewpoint: Implications of participatory democracy for public land planning. *Journal of Range Management* 50: 473-481.
- Utah Critical Lands Alliance. 2000. *The Utah Heritage Trust: A public funding proposal to preserve Utah's critical lands*. Unpublished legislative proposal available at the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, Salt Lake City, UT.

Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project: Conclusions and Recommendations

Utah Division of Parks and Recreation. 1997. A Utah Trails Assessment. Salt Lake City UT: Utah Department of Natural Resources and the National Park Service, Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Program, Rocky Mt. System Support Office.

Utah Division of Travel Development. 1996. Utah! Community Meeting Summary. Salt Lake City, UT: Department of Community and Economic Development.

Walker, G. B. and S.E. Daniels. 1996. The Clinton Administration, the northwest forest conference, and managing conflict: When talk and structure collide. Society and Natural Resources 9:77-91.