

Utah's Great Outdoors Open Space Project Executive Summary

Overview and Approach

The goal of the Open Space Project is to develop strategies and actions for addressing open space needs in each planning district in Utah. The focus is on protecting lands that are critical for providing *amenity* (e.g., parks, recreation, and esthetics) and *ecological service* (e.g., wetlands and wildlife habitat and corridors) values. The results are based on the opinions of key informants such as local and regional officials, land management and planning professionals, and other residents who are experienced or interested in open space issues or projects. These results should be used to complement other critical land initiatives such as agricultural land protection and biophysical studies of critical lands and wildlife habitat.

Phase 1: Utah's Great Outdoors Conference Working Group Sessions

In this phase we generated a list of recreation and open space needs for each planning district in the state with input from people who attended the Utah's Great Outdoors Conference in February, 1999. Nineteen breakout meetings were held with 176 conference attendees. There were 11 groups representing the Wasatch Front, 3 groups representing the Mountainlands District, and one group for each of the other five planning districts. A nominal group process was used to obtain participants' responses 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?*
- 2. What are the most pressing outdoor recreation and open space needs for specific towns and communities in your region of the state?*

A total of 414 items were generated in response to question 1 and 242 responses for question 2. At least 30 open space needs were identified for each planning district, including over 200 separate items for the Wasatch Front.

Phase 2: Statewide Key Informant Mail Survey

Using the items generated in Phase 1, mail surveys were sent to key informants in each of the seven Utah planning districts. Respondents were asked to rank the importance of all the items generated during the Phase 1 breakout sessions, as well as a list of 25 open space protection "tools" such as easements, impact fees, and purchase of development rights. Survey participants were given a brief description of each open space tool. Surveys were sent to all Phase 1 conference participants, as well as additional key informants in certain planning districts that had relatively few conference participants. At least 28 people in each planning district

received a survey. Non-respondents received two mail reminders: a postcard and a new survey form. A total of 287 surveys were mailed and 182 were returned completed, for a 63% response rate.

Phase 3: Public Meeting Presentations and Feedback

The purpose of Phase 3 was twofold: present the prioritized listing of open space needs and priorities to officials, key informants, and interested persons in the planning districts; and identify existing and potential projects that address the open space needs. We attended 18 meetings with over 350 attendees. At least two meetings were held in each planning district, including most Association of Government, Travel Region, and RC& D meetings held in October through December, 1999. Several county and local-level meetings were also attended in order to cover all regions of the state. At the meetings, the results of Phases 1 and 2 were presented, and attendees were asked to comment on the results and identify existing and potential projects that addressed the most important open space needs. Meeting participants provided input in three ways: during a general discussion period, during post-meeting workshops, or on worksheets that were provided to all meeting attendees.

Over 300 specific open space projects were identified during these meetings. The meetings also provided a broader picture of the social and political context in which open space planning must occur. The Phase 3 results were sent out for external review to three participants in each planning district.

Results and Conclusions

Despite the targeted audience used for data collection in this study, we have a high degree of confidence in the validity and value of 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. While the sampling methods were not necessarily representative of all state and planning district residents, we feel the results are a good reflection of the attitudes of *key stakeholders who have professional or personal interests in open space issues throughout the state*. The following is a synopsis of the central ideas that emerged from all three study phases, and a brief comparison of our results with other studies conducted in Utah in recent years.

Open Space Needs and Values

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.

While the pattern of open space *needs* is consistent for all districts, there are distinct differences in the *values* attached to open space in different parts of the state. Participants in rural planning districts focus on use-related values like recreation, tourism, local economic development, public land access, and multiple use. In the more urban/suburban districts in northern Utah, protecting open space for non-use and intrinsic values, such as esthetics, controlling growth, and ecological services, are as important as recreation use and access, and resource development values are minor. In rural districts, on the other hand, retaining access and multiple use are major priorities, not simply protecting “open space” per se. For example, water projects are important throughout the state, but in rural districts, the focus is on providing or improving reservoir or river recreation, while in urban districts wildlife habitat, wetland protection, and water quality are of equal or greater importance compared to recreation.

Major Specific Open Space Needs: Linear Corridors and Water Resources

The need for more water-related projects and linear-shaped open spaces were common themes in all districts and all study phases. Although *recreational* corridors were specifically mentioned most often (e.g., trails, bikeways, off-highway vehicle (OHV) routes), other types of corridors were implied by projects for parkways, riparian corridors, river ways, stream and canyon protection, canyon access, corridors between subdivisions/towns, and wildlife corridors. For example, 23 of the 95 specific projects listed in the Phase 3 report for the Wasatch Front were trail projects, and many more were projects involving riparian areas and wildlife corridors.

Water projects and linear open spaces can provide many recreational, ecological, and esthetic benefits simultaneously, and linear corridors influence more people's lives per acre than traditionally park-shaped tracts or blocks. However, attitudes related to the *reasons* these areas are important tend to differ between rural and urban areas. Northern Utah participants are interested in many types and values of open space corridors, but in the rural parts of the state, the focus is on recreation potential, especially for snowmobiles and OHVs, retaining existing access and roads, and tourism, community, and resource development potential. The protection vs. use dichotomy exists for water projects as well.

Funding

Participants in all planning districts view open space funding as a key need. It is not simply providing money, however, but also providing coordination and technical advice for acquiring and using federal, state, and private funding. Key funding concerns include the need for:

- finances for maintaining existing but dated facilities,
- consistent sources of funds (rather than one-time or capital improvement funds),
- increasing awareness of funding opportunities,
- criteria for prioritizing needs and specific projects,
- understanding linkages between local needs and funding opportunities, and
- technical assistance in developing grant proposals.

Rural districts are especially concerned with meeting local needs, increasing the portion of funds that go to rural areas of the state, and *fairness* in the distribution of recreation and open space funds. While providing more open space funds specifically to rural districts may sound inconsistent with the fairness issue, the views of rural district 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 parts of the state for recreation, which puts a higher level of pressure on resources and infrastructure than are suggested by population numbers 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. Thus, long-term and *consistent* sources of revenue are especially important concerns for rural planning districts.

Local Control–State Coordination

Officials in local areas throughout the state would like to see more local control in decision processes, and a greater focus on projects that address local concerns. While the findings suggest there is a need for state officials to take a more proactive role in meeting general funding and planning needs, local officials want to retain control of specific projects implemented in their districts, and prefer that state officials:

- put more emphasis on projects that meet local needs,
- provide a logical and open process for prioritizing open space needs and projects,
- develop project funding criteria collaboratively with local officials,
- implement collaborative decision processes, and
- provide technical assistance for planning, partnerships, and preparing grant applications.

A statewide task force or *ad hoc* committee could also be convened in order to incorporate these concerns without losing sight of state-level needs. Based on our findings, some important project funding and planning criteria would include that officials provide evidence that a project:

- meets both state and local needs,
- has local community support,
- is part of a larger scale planning effort that has amenity and ecological service benefits,
- includes collaborative partnerships, and
- has an educational component.

Protection Tools

On Phase 2 surveys, easements were rated as the most important protection tool in every planning district. Agricultural land/open space zoning and purchase of development rights were also highly rated in most planning districts. Like the open space needs discussed above, 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 the survey results and in some Phase 3 meetings. The role of land purchase and more “heavy-handed” tools (e.g., building moratoria, 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 participants in one Southeastern district meeting 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 with Other Studies

While the Utah's Great Outdoors Project has provided a broad view of open space needs and projects throughout the state, our 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 in the abstract, but different attitudes about open space benefits and protection mechanisms. The primary differences revolve around the purpose of open space to meet specific use values vs. 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

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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.