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# **Salt Lake City Is Finding a Payoff in Conservation**

By [KEITH SCHNEIDER](#)

## **SALT LAKE CITY**

As emblems of the economic transformation unfolding in this high desert city and its job-rich suburbs, the Mount Olympus Wilderness and the Black Diamond Equipment company are hard to beat.

The wilderness is 25 square miles of steep granite, mountain brush and fir. It spills from the summit of 9,028-foot Mount Olympus down to the eastern edge of this city, which has joined others in the West — including Denver, Portland, San Francisco and Seattle — in pursuing a development strategy based on ecological ideas once widely mistrusted here: energy efficiency, resource protection, land conservation and pollution prevention.

The base of the mountain is also the home of Black Diamond, a tiny start-up when it arrived in 1991 and now a well-known manufacturer of outdoor gear. The company has taken on the Mount Olympus Wilderness, in effect using it as an outdoor product-testing center.

“We’re here because this is such a natural place for our business,” said Peter Metcalf, the president and chief executive of Black Diamond, which employs 300 people in Salt Lake City. “But we’re no different than

other businesses that are in this region. We all understand the connection with this place, how we take care of it, and how well our business performs.”

Residents of this city and its suburbs, with a combined 1.2 million people, have come to view the ties between economic development and environmental conservation in a new way. They are scrubbing the air and water, building energy-efficient homes and offices closer together, constructing regional rapid transit systems, limiting new highway construction and conserving open spaces and natural resources.

Authorities on urban policy say that Salt Lake and other cities in the West, big Eastern ones like Boston and New York and smaller ones, too, like Grand Rapids, Mich., and Charleston, S.C., have become incubators of environmental ideas and programs, with tangible results. Jobs and income are increasing. Central city populations are stabilizing or growing. Businesses are cropping up.

“Environmental policy has emerged as a central organizing principle of economic growth at the metropolitan level in America,” said Robert Puentes, a researcher in Washington at the [Brookings Institution](#)’s Metropolitan Policy Program. “It’s a very new development, and it’s logical. Being more energy efficient and more environmentally sensitive lowers costs and makes metropolitan regions better places.”

It wasn’t always this way in Salt Lake City. For more than a century, Utah was supported by the wealth derived from mining, ranching and energy — industries intent on exploiting, not conserving, the state’s

natural bounty. Those advocating green values were viewed as a threat to expansion and prosperity.

But Utah's population, now around 2.5 million, is expected to grow to 5.4 million by 2050. Traffic congestion, the loss of open space to suburban development, and water pollution along the Wasatch Front, where 75 percent of Utah's residents live, have become public concerns. So have the high cost of housing and general anxiety about a deteriorating way of life.

These days, advocates for the conventional fixes to growth — more highways, more malls, more subdivisions ever farther from town centers — find themselves on the defensive in public hearings. Now there is a different strategy that involves doing more with less: less land, less energy, less asphalt, less spending.

Examples in the Salt Lake Valley are not hard to find. Kennecott Copper is starting a new community at the foot of its gigantic Bingham open-pit copper mine; it is designed to use less energy and less land and to put its residents closer to schools, stores, offices and recreation. Voters last year approved a sales-tax increase for a light-rail line that will tie the community, named Daybreak, to Salt Lake City.

But Keith Bartholomew, an assistant professor of planning at the [University of Utah](#)'s College of Architecture and Planning in Salt Lake City, said the region had a long way to go. "Our successes mean it's not going to be as bad as it would have been," he said. "But doing less bad is not enough. We need to multiply the successes, and we need to do it fast.

The nest we are soiling is not just the environment. It's the economy, too.”

An example of the half steps Mr. Bartholomew spoke of is a proposed \$1 billion, 14-mile freeway, which critics argue will cause more congestion and wreck wetlands along the Great Salt Lake. Two years ago, the state's Department of Transportation settled a lawsuit with suburban residents, and under the agreement, the state will trim the number of lanes, prohibit billboards, protect natural lands, ban trucks, limit speeds to 55 miles per hour, require the state to establish a 2,225-acre nature preserve and restrict development so the highway serves as a scenic parkway.

Residents are also voting to spend tax money on alternatives to highways and land conservation. If all goes according to plan, when construction is finished by 2015, the region will have spent roughly \$3 billion to build a 45-mile light-rail system and an 88-mile regional commuter-rail network.

The two-term mayor of the city, Ross Anderson, a Democrat, has shaped much of Salt Lake City's administration and economic policy around reducing emissions of gases that cause [climate change](#).

So far, the city has cut emissions by 36,000 tons annually by taking one small step at a time, like directing every city-owned installation to switch to energy-sipping lightbulbs, saving \$33,000 a year.

“We've succeeded in completely debunking the speculation that achieving reductions in climate-change gases means economic

devastation,” Mr. Anderson said in an interview. “Our experience here and in other cities shows that you can achieve very significant cost savings by focusing on efficiencies, and at the same time grow the economy.”

Of course, like many Western cities, Salt Lake City was poised for growth anyway. Economists and business development authorities cite many factors, including a strong work ethic, good public schools and universities and a history of cultural stability rooted in the Mormon Church. But they also mention the beginnings of an environmental ethic, an update of an old cultural value in the area.

“There is a sense of stewardship in this region, and it’s been here ever since the pioneers came,” said Jeff Edwards, the chief executive of the Economic Development Corporation of Utah, a recruitment agency. “People feel the land is a gift, and they will do what they need to sustain it.”

In effect, Mayor Anderson and other Salt Lake officials say, green ideas as old as Earth Day are producing healthier metropolitan economies. It makes sense, then, that in Salt Lake City the Mount Olympus Wilderness attracts devotion. And that is where Mr. Metcalf of Black Diamond comes into play.

Mr. Metcalf embodies a mix of business acumen and environmental advocacy. He is also the vice chairman of the Denver-based Outdoor Industry Association and has brought the industry’s two annual trade shows to the Salt Palace.

Mr. Metcalf has helped attract nearly 50 outdoor equipment and apparel makers to the region, including [Quiksilver](#), the makers of Rossignol ski equipment, and [Backcountry.com](#), an online retailer.

“It’s not about being an environmentalist or a conservationist,” he said. “I care a lot about that. But it’s really about dollars and business. If this place is ruined, this company and others will go.”