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Transit at heart of west bench proposal

Trains to link valley: The blueprint for development of Kennecott land focuses on open space, easy access to employment centers

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WEST VALLEY CITY - Public transit - in the form of a light-rail spine with scores of connections - is the backbone of an ambitious 75,000-acre master plan for the Salt Lake Valley's far-western edge.

The proposal, laid out Wednesday at a fourth and final development summit, calls for trains to tie together the Wasatch and Oquirrh during the plan's 50-year life. It envisions green space and walkable communities with light-rail stops no farther than a quarter-mile from any west-bench neighborhood.

"It warms my heart," said Peter Calthorpe, the plan's Berkeley, Calif.-based chief architect. Planners compared the opportunity to plan the massive swath of largely unoccupied land to innovative Mormon pioneers who stretched streets wide for ox carts and laid out the future state's capital in a dynamic grid.

Indeed, Calthorpe says designing Kennecott land's 144 square miles from the Great Salt Lake's wetlands to Utah County's western mountains is "a planner's dream."

The exercise runs counter to development traditions of the late 20th century that spawned sprawl, strip malls and people driving everywhere for everything.

"People have seen the failures from the past thinking," said Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon. "This is a blueprint for our future."

Tom Roach, the county's principal planner, agrees.

"The Salt Lake Valley is starting to get used to the idea of smart growth," he said, adding that working with a single landowner eliminates myriad obstacles.

The master plan seeks to make open space the focus, while integrating employment centers and neighborhood villages with the north-south transit line. It calls for two urban centers: the Magna area on the north and South Jordan's Daybreak on the south, connected to both Salt Lake City International Airport and the east-side TRAX system.

A mix of 163,000 housing units, plus 104,000 jobs and a 100-acre college campus, are planned. So, too, are potential reservoirs, a preserved Bonneville Shoreline Trail, 34,000 acres of open space and even a ski area in the hills above Copperton, west of Soldier Flats.

Late additions to the plan include six regional parks, at least 50 acres in size, room for research parks and a wildlife-management proposal.

Calthorpe calls the master plan one of the most progressive in the country.

"I'm not sure it's been done on this scale before," he told a crowded chamber at the E Center. "One strategy satisfies many ends."

Jeff Daugherty, the county's planning director, says he was surprised that transit and environmental concerns rank one-two in the survey.

"It sends a clear message," he said. "This is a significant departure from the way we've been accustomed to living."

For Ed Hansen, a longtime Magna resident and Chamber of Commerce official, it is sort of like going back to the future. He notes the once-vibrant mining and industrial center - Magna has become increasingly isolated with

just 26,000 souls since its mining heyday waned - seems poised for a rebirth.

"The community's coming full circle now," he said with a chuckle.

One concern, planners concede, is congestion. By 2060, the west bench alone could swell the valley's population by 500,000.

Still, Daugherty insists the opportunity parallels the one tackled by Mormon pioneers.

"Our hope," he added, "is that future generations will again declare: 'This is the place.' "

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