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Western growth positive, speakers say

By [Nicole Warburton](#)

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Rapid growth in the West brings both economic opportunity and the challenge of preserving the natural environment that draws people here.

During a special session Thursday at the Urban Land Institute's Spring Council Forum in Salt Lake City, at least 150 planners, developers and economic leaders from the West discussed ways to accommodate the region's growth, yet preserve its open lands and unique quality of life.

"We can preserve, we just have to do it thoughtfully and with consideration," said Con Howe, director of the ULI Center for Balanced Development in the West.

Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., speaking during a later session at the conference, told attendees that sustainable development is important and everyone affected by development should be involved in discussions about the future. This year marks "the first time in the history of mankind where half the world's population is living in more urban areas than rural," he said.

Leaders need to look ahead and remember to leave behind a "sense of humanity," he said. "It's up to a whole lot of us in the state to be mindful of what to expect over the next 20 years."

Speakers at the conference talked about ways their individual communities have managed growth while preserving nature and open spaces. Most spoke positively about growth in the West, saying that the only big challenge they could see in the near future was a lack of affordable housing.

"It's everywhere," said Christopher Duerksen, managing director of Clarion Associates in Denver, Colo. Housing costs "have skyrocketed while wages have not gone up."

The average annual income in Utah is just over \$68,000, according to Kelly Matthews, chief economist with Wells Fargo in Utah. But Utah ranks 18th in the nation in terms of housing-price appreciation. It's the fifth-fastest growing state in America and has the nation's youngest population.

Thomas A. Perrigo, comprehensive planning manager of Las Vegas, Nev., said "New Urbanism" was a development theory that communities could use to help create affordable housing and balance development with the need for open-space preservation. New Urbanism advocates building more-dense housing near public transit, and having walkable communities.

Wendy Fisher, executive director of Utah Open Lands, described how her organization has

worked to protect open space across the state. Among other tools, the group uses conservation easements, or written agreements that prohibit development, to protect open lands.

Community involvement is also important in preserving lands and keeping development from blocking access to public land, Fisher said.

Howe, in an interview after the conference, said he was impressed with the planning Utah has done for the future. He pointed to Kennecott Land's Daybreak development in South Jordan as an example of good growth. In downtown Salt Lake City, old buildings are being converted into apartments, instead of new housing being built in outlying areas

The key to keeping the West a place where people want to live is to involve everyone in decision-making, he said.

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