

## Urban Land - April 2006 - Special Report

### Envision Utah: Laying the Foundation for Quality Development

by Robert J. Grow and Alan Matheson

From its beginnings as a regional visioning exercise to its role in laying the foundation for Kennecott Land's ambitious development, Envision Utah has changed the public dialogue regarding growth and planning.

Envision Utah, based in Salt Lake City, is widely recognized as one of the country's most successful efforts to involve the public in regional visioning. It received the nation's most prestigious planning awards, including the Urban Land Institute's Award for Excellence, the Alliance for Regional Stewardship's Gold Recognition Award, and the American Planning Association's Daniel Burnham Award. Envision Utah has changed the public dialogue regarding growth and planning and, increasingly, it is influencing the growth patterns of the greater Wasatch area, a ten-county region centered in Salt Lake City.

Since Envision Utah began its regional visioning exercise in the late 1990s, the region has built two light-rail lines, broken ground for 44 miles of commuter rail, and planned approximately 250 miles of additional rapid transit. The average size of new lots is declining, resulting in decreased land consumption, and transit-oriented developments are well underway near several light-rail stations. Perhaps most important to the future of the region, Kennecott Land has begun to develop its 93,000-acre property—a portion of which historically has been used for mining—as what may be the largest smart growth demonstration project anywhere. Envision Utah's efforts have helped lay the foundation for such an unprecedented development.

In 1995, the Coalition for Utah's Future, a not-for-profit organization of private and public sector leaders, began its visioning efforts, which, in their formative stages, coalesced into Envision Utah. Envision Utah made several key decisions that built the foundation of its success. First, it involved a broad-based group of stakeholders, as well as the public, in creating a vision and a growth strategy for the future of the region. This approach contrasts sharply with the traditional approach of forming an agenda and then seeking public support for that agenda. The Envision Utah process ensured public and stakeholder ownership of and support for the vision. Diverse stakeholders formed a "partnership" or working committee of more than 100 people who helped guide the entire regional visioning process, with which the public was involved through numerous workshops and surveys. Approximately 20,000 people directly contributed to the development of a regional vision, including those whose support would be most needed to implement the vision.

Second, Envision Utah conducted extensive research to identify the shared values of Utah citizens and based the vision on those values. The values study revealed that residents place a high value on a safe and secure environment, personal and community enrichment, personal time and opportunity, and financial security. Underpinning all these values are a dedication to family and the desire to help children handle life's challenges. The study facilitated development of a regional vision that reflects the community's collective vision for the region and will appeal to the community for generations because values, as opposed to opinions, are stable and enduring. In addition, understanding community values helped Envision Utah communicate the choices reflected in the scenarios and the vision in a way that resonated with the people of Utah.

Third, Envision Utah developed and analyzed several long-term scenarios of how the region could grow. These scenarios represented realistic choices and demonstrated a range of possible futures. Envision Utah used data and modeling from trusted sources to create and evaluate the scenarios, engendering public confidence in the results. The ensuing four scenarios ranged from continuation of the current development trend (rapid land consumption with little investment in transit) to significant infill and rapid transit growth. They were evaluated against numerous criteria, including traffic congestion, land and water consumption, and infrastructure cost. The scenarios allowed citizens to make truly informed choices for a future that they believe would best satisfy their hopes and aspirations. The vast majority of participants favored a scenario that included more transportation choices, more walkable neighborhoods, and more preserved parks, open space, and other critical lands than would come about under existing trends. Surveys statistically validated the strong consensus among residents of the region.

From the results of the scenarios evaluation, a regional vision combining the best of the scenarios was developed. Rather than a detailed map of new growth patterns, the vision is a high-quality growth strategy with six goals and 42 implementation strategies. Envision Utah continues to educate public officials and the general public about the benefits and implementation of the regional vision.

The vision has influenced governmental approval processes in the greater Wasatch area, largely because it is backed by the public and based on solid information. Local governments are gradually changing their approach to growth issues, and a number have reworked their general plans and zoning ordinances to reflect the regional vision in ways that allow and encourage high-quality developments. Envision Utah has facilitated this process by providing planning assistance to local

governments, a “toolbox” that includes model zoning ordinances and development strategies, and numerous demonstration projects involving public visioning exercises at the local and subregional level.

Beyond reworking general plans and zoning ordinances, local governments increasingly are comfortable with and supportive of development proposals that include walkability, mixed uses, and public transportation. The visioning process was educational, alerting the public and government officials to the advantages and disadvantages of various growth patterns. Rather than judging projects solely for their effect on the immediately surrounding neighborhood, more local governments are taking a regional perspective and assessing proposals for their consistency with the regional vision and their impacts on the region as a whole. Governments increasingly understand the importance of growth patterns, and they know that the public is likely to support development that comports with the regional vision. A developer interested in constructing a walkable, mixed-use development is now less likely to meet stiff opposition in the public approval process.

The regional visioning process has had a more indirect, although perhaps more important, effect on development patterns through the planning and construction of infrastructure. Transportation access is perhaps the single most important determinant of where and what type of development takes place. A freeway interchange is likely to stimulate a certain type of development, an arterial intersection a different type, and a transit station another type. The infrastructure improvements and plans that have taken shape since Envision Utah began its efforts are influencing land use patterns, particularly at transit nodes. For example, the Gateway, a major new walkable, mixed-use development, has been constructed near two future light-rail stops (see page 71); two higher education campuses are being relocated near light-rail access; and two major downtown malls near transit stations are planned for redevelopment as vibrant, mixed-use areas.

This past year, the two metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) for the greater Wasatch area partnered with Envision Utah to help develop a four-county vision to guide creation of the region’s long-range transportation plan. Through this “Wasatch Choices 2040” partnership, Envision Utah conducted an extensive public outreach process and, using scenarios analysis, helped the MPOs and the public understand how proposed changes in land use and transportation affect each other. This effort will lead to a more effective transportation plan that, in turn, will guide development patterns.

Developers have begun to plan and construct projects that are more consistent with the regional vision as demand for such projects increases. Developers and landowners participated in the visioning process, quickly learning from the scenarios and the visioning process about opportunities to develop properties that would benefit the region as a whole and better meet future market demand, while also increasing potential profits.

The visioning process and values study also have helped developers market high-quality projects. For example, a walkable community can be better promoted as a vibrant community in which people have transportation and housing choices than as a way to provide affordable housing and combat excessive energy consumption and automobile use. In addition, the scenarios analysis from the visioning process helps developers demonstrate to residents and public officials the benefits of projects that are consistent with the regional vision.

Following the public visioning process, planning commissions frequently asked developers, “Is the project consistent with the Envision Utah vision?” Developers soon found that consistency with the vision helped secure local government approvals. As a result, development projects are increasingly likely to be designed to benefit the entire region and to be located in transportation-supportive areas.

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## Case Study: Kennecott Land

Kennecott Land was formed five years ago to think about the future of 93,000 undeveloped acres in Salt Lake County, with a commitment to sustainability in the areas of economic development, education, and environment. The property contains more than half the remaining developable land in Salt Lake County and is the largest undeveloped landholding in a metropolitan area in the United States. Elected officials and other community leaders were involved in the planning process, which resulted in the “West Bench Master Plan.” The plans include significant rapid transit, open space, community amenities, and a range of housing types with easy access to business and employment centers. The development is projected to significantly reduce land consumption in the region, shift growth from more far-flung and sensitive locations, and minimize traffic congestion.

The relationship between Envision Utah and Kennecott Land is symbiotic. Due in part to the foundation laid by Envision Utah, the Kennecott Land vision is being received enthusiastically. Conversely, the Kennecott development shows that the Envision Utah vision passes the ultimate test of practical success: developer and market acceptance. Specifically, Salt Lake

County, in which most of the project lies, has been eager to

embrace a project that emphasizes high-quality growth principles.

The planning and construction of public transportation infrastructure, which Envision Utah helped facilitate, has been crucial to the Kennecott development plans. The Kennecott Land vision, which involves a completely transit-oriented development around a major transit line running the length of the property, could not happen without a regional transit network to which the Kennecott project could connect.

Envision Utah's work has also provided tools for Kennecott to communicate its plans to the public and to government. Information from the Envision Utah process, for example, provides evidence that the 93,000-acre Kennecott project will shift growth from sensitive and remote areas, decrease land and water consumption, and reduce traffic congestion.

In part due to the groundwork laid by Envision Utah, the Kennecott project's entitlement process is moving smoothly. The first phase of the project—the 4,100-acre Daybreak community—is entitled and under construction, and the market is responding enthusiastically. The rest of the project is progressing rapidly through the entitlement process. By means of this one project alone, Kennecott Land and Envision Utah will strongly influence the future of the greater Wasatch area.

Until high-quality growth makes market sense to developers, is desired by the public, and is likely to be approved by government, it will not happen. A regional visioning process is key to all three requirements. Envision Utah has helped people throughout the greater Wasatch area recognize the long-term impact of today's decisions on tomorrow's growth.

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