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Planned Growth

by Peter M. Corroon

Salt Lake County is growing rapidly, and this growth needs to be driven by careful and coordinated planning.

When Brigham Young arrived in Salt Lake Valley in July 1847 with a group of 148 pioneers, he first viewed it from the mouth of Emigration Canyon. What he saw was a distant mountain range on the west sloping into Great Salt Lake, Utah's inland sea. It was a vast panorama of open space.

Today, residents living in this valley number nearly 1 million and the state of Utah is one of the most urban states in the nation. The vast majority of Utah's population lives in a 110-mile narrow corridor called the Wasatch Front, with Salt Lake County lying in the midsection. The Oquirrh Mountain Range that Young saw to the west is now the home of the world's largest open-pit copper mine, owned by Kennecott Utah Copper in Salt Lake County. Kennecott owns 93,000 acres surrounding its mine where it is now planning to create mixed-use developments that will be home to up to a half-million people in the next half-century. (See [Humans/Nature](#).) This is a one-time opportunity to shape the growth of an area just minutes from downtown Salt Lake City.

Salt Lake County becomes more urban every day. From north to south, the county is 35 miles at its longest point; from east to west (the summit of the Oquirrh to the Wasatch Range), it is 33 miles at its widest. Geographically, it is very diverse but modestly sized. Fifteen canyons ring the valley setting of 16 municipalities and a large piece of unincorporated area.

For more than 150 years, Salt Lake's catchword has been "growth." The economy needs to grow in order to provide jobs, education, transportation, housing, recreation, and infrastructure for a population that is expected to nearly double over the next half-century. Utah normally leads the country in birthrate and is among the top states for immigration. In the West, people build out, not up, and personal transportation—for the most part—is governed by a "one-horse/one-rider" ethos.

The most rapid growth, of course, came well after Young's urban design. (See [Utah's Planning Heritage and Its Modern Significance](#).) Much of his influence is still visible in Salt Lake City. The capital city has wide streets on a coordinated grid numbering system that is used in many cities statewide. But the 19th century was really the last time any coordinated regional planning effort was employed in Utah. Over the years, there have been sporadic unsuccessful efforts to adopt land use standards.

With a growing population, finite resources, and dwindling land, even skeptics realize that uncontrolled, uneven, and hasty development will place a major burden on future generations. Decisions made today certainly affect people's lives tomorrow; but it is our children and grandchildren who will have to deal with the consequences of our poor planning.

In Salt Lake County, there is an unprecedented opportunity to define our vision of the future through planning, redevelop the central business district in downtown Salt Lake City, and work together as a community to define what is important to us.

The new Kennecott development on the west bench of the Oquirrh Mountains has made planning for the future something that we must accomplish today. To start this planning, we have targeted the Kennecott development to create our "West Bench Master Plan" to showcase how smart regional planning can occur.

The West Bench Master Plan is a partnership between the landowners and the multiple government stakeholders adjacent to the development. Its size and scope (93,000 acres; up to 500,000 residents, 59 million square feet of commercial space, 30 percent open space, dozens of schools, hundreds of miles of roads, and transit connections) force us to think regionally. We all need planning, not politics, to solve our growth issues.

For years now, we have known that the "easy" pieces of property have been developed. There are still some farms and horse property available for infill development, but most of the flat and gently sloped lands are built out. The pressure to build on private property in the urban interface areas adjacent to our canyons and forests will only increase in the future.

As with so many things, maintaining our quality of life means positive environmental action, protection of open space, coordinated planning efforts with other jurisdictions, and, obviously, fair treatment for property owners.

Bringing vision and coordinated planning to large tracts means cooperative efforts among often competing local governments, private developers, and adjacent landowners. To succeed in providing the kind of cohesive, connected community people say they want means all stakeholders need to work from the same vision, policies, and procedures.

In Salt Lake County, growth is uncoordinated. Over the past two decades, the population has moved south and west, away from the traditional center in Salt Lake City. Farm after farm is converted into subdivisions or big retail developments. On major thoroughfares it is nearly impossible to differentiate one city from the next. Most have lost their community identities. They have lost their own town center, or they never had one. For the most part, each city has planned for its future in a vacuum.

As mayor of Salt Lake County, I am responsible for providing city-type services, including planning and zoning, for a large unincorporated area. Taken separately, our unincorporated area has almost as many residents as Salt Lake City, the largest city in Utah. Our past planning, however, was shortsighted. Years ago, residents chose to live in the unincorporated area because they enjoyed the rural atmosphere and also did not mind going without curbs, gutters, or sidewalks in their residential areas.

Our unincorporated area is as urban today as any place in the county. In fact, over the past 30 years, major sections of the county have been annexed into cities or incorporated as municipalities. Annexations mainly included retail properties that would broaden the tax base of the annexing city. Incorporations were undertaken to increase local control over planning and zoning.

The county—working with our 16 cities, our metropolitan planning organization, and the planning group, Wasatch Choices 2040—is trying to help people look at the regional view, not just the local view. To succeed in designing a regional plan, every effort is being made to win the active involvement of mayors, city councils, and local planners. The *Ogden Standard-Examiner* newspaper, in an editorial on the need for local control over the planning processes, wrote, ". . . We realize that what happens next door to our property affects not only our land value but [also] our quality of life or our ability to conduct our own business." The newspaper also lauded what it called an enlightened view of urban and suburban lifestyles and well-designed communities.

In my master plan strategy for Salt Lake County 2005–2008, the vision statement promised that county government will conduct itself in a way that is mindful of the public trust and the responsibilities inherent in ethical and efficient government and committed to providing:

- safe and livable communities;
- long-range coordinated planning for our future growth;
- the stewardship of our natural resources;
- efficient, open government; and
- sustainable economic growth for all businesses.

Each of these goals has long-term implications for all residents in the valley. High-quality growth will not happen with piecemeal solutions. There is a unique opportunity to collaboratively and carefully plan. As Senator John Kerry said in his presidential campaign, ". . . mistakes of the past, no matter who made them, are no justification for marching ahead into a future of miscalculations."

"Unfortunately, in some places in the county the message has come down that you can combat sprawl by having larger lots," Brenda Case Scheer, dean of the University of Utah's College of Architecture and Planning, told the *Deseret Morning News* (December 1, 2005). According to Scheer, the dichotomy is, of course, that larger lots actually worsen sprawl by eating up open space and creating higher infrastructure costs.

The same article acknowledges that a little thoughtfulness today will save a lot of headache in the future as local leaders learn that denser development saves open space, lowers the cost of infrastructure, and makes housing more affordable.

In a speech titled "Hold on to Your Sense of Community," Don Gale, the longtime director of the KSL-TV Editorial Board, told a meeting of the Utah Association of Counties that Utah's tax policies encourage "city and county battles over retail outlets . . . or tax policies that favor big-box stores over local businesses." He also told the county leaders that it is foolish to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to move people through the state on the freeway system and then scrimp on county roads and city streets designed to move local populations and serve local needs.

That is why we plan. My first priority in developing our annual budget is the protection of our quality of life by planning for the future. As our county grows, we cannot sacrifice our quality of life and our environment for the sake of growth.

In Salt Lake County, we must grow in ways that make sense and serve the public; protect and preserve our foothills, watershed, and open space; and coordinate our planning efforts with all the jurisdictions in our county to maximize our community planning.

Longtime residents have always called Salt Lake City the "biggest small town" or the "smallest big town" in America because it seems like everyone knows everyone else or is a friend of a friend. Today's leaders should take responsibility for providing planning that encourages the kind of sense of community our residents felt in the "old days."

Future generations will be unimpressed if we fail to lengthen our stride as we address today's major planning and development issues. This is the opportunity in front of us. In baseball terms, let's not let the pitch go by.

Peter M. Corroon was elected mayor of Salt Lake County in 2004, becoming the second mayor in the county's history.

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