

Blueprint in the works for the Bear Lake Valley ***The goal is to balance development, farming land and open space***

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GARDEN CITY, Rich County — A widow would like to feel safe among the unfamiliar tourists renting houses and hotel rooms near her home. The mayor wishes a call center would open and provide jobs for the area. And a local taxidermist and part-time farmer resents development, preferring that land revert to agriculture and wildlife.

But their competing visions for the Bear Lake region are on hold because of the economic downturn.

Folks here in Rich County, Utah, and Bear Lake County, Idaho, are using the lull to consider the past and what they want to become in the future.

They have hired growth and planning consultant group Envision Utah to host community meetings, gauge public opinion and create a plan to balance development with agricultural land and open space. Environmentalists want to protect the lake. Community leaders would also like to see a plan for economic development.

The planning process is being called the Bear Lake Valley Blueprint.

It's easy to bifurcate the region into competing camps: Utah versus Idaho. Year-round residents versus seasonal. Longtimers versus newbies. Upper middle class versus lower middle class. Farmers versus recreationalists. Environmentalists versus business owners.

Envision Utah will host a series of meetings over the next year, during which planners will record the visions of residents. The hope is that people from all camps will give input, and their varying visions will be married into a comprehensive plan for growth and development in the future.

"The heritage is small-town, laid back," said Lori Haddock, a deputy Bear Lake County assessor and co-chairwoman of the Bear Lake Valley Blueprint's steering committee. "People want to maintain that."

Vacation destination

On a sunny day, Bear Lake is deep blue against the green and brown mountains dotted with mostly new and huge log-and-stone houses.

At Ideal Beach Resort, there is a golf course, tennis courts, two pools and manicured lawns next to the white sands of the lake shore.

Lauren Crowther's family stays at the resort each year as part of a weeklong family reunion.

"We usually let the children play at the beach," said Crowther, a Salt Lake area native who now lives in Idaho with her husband and children. "We go to the park. We play on the lawn. We make crafts."

Members of the Crowther family were among some 65,000 people staying in the region that night — an estimate that considers people in homes and hotels, as well as vacationers who have pitched their tents on the beach.

"I think Bear Lake is a close adventure for families, and I think people are learning more about it all the time," said Judy Holbrook, tourism director for Bear Lake Valley Convention and Visitors Bureau. "We're becoming a destination rather than a pass-through for those people who are traveling to Jackson and Yellowstone."

The distance between Fish Haven, Idaho, and Jackson, Wyo., is 149 miles.

"We have 300,000 to 500,000 visitors to Bear Lake every summer," Holbrook said.

But to consider actual population in the region requires understanding two factors: housing and residents. There are now more vacation homes for seasonal residents than primary homes for year-round residents of the Bear Lake Valley. About 61 percent of the region's housing is secondary, and 39 percent is primary, said Christie Oostema, planning project manager with Envision Utah.

But the federal and state government, when estimating population, consider only full-time residents — about 6,000 in Bear Lake County and 2,000 in Rich County.

The region is expected to grow but not necessarily in the number of year-round residents.

"By 2060, if the 20-year trend we projected were to continue, we'd be looking at 74 percent secondary (homes) and 26 percent primary," Oostema said.

Residential land use also will consume more and more of the region. People are building larger homes on bigger lots.

"While the population is not growing by a lot, we are likely to consume a fair amount of land," she said. "That really kind of tracks with the rest of the country. For example, in Chicago, the population has only grown by 4 percent in the last few decades, but the land area has grown by 46 percent."

By 2060, the region will give up an estimated 20,000 acres to new residential growth, consuming the land area of 18 more towns the size of Montpelier, Idaho, or seven more towns the size of Garden City.

Jared Hislop welcomes more residential growth. Hislop and his father are real estate agents and own Bear Lake Project Management, caring for rental homes on behalf of their owners.

But business has slowed down in the last couple of years, with job losses or fear of job loss scaring people away from buying vacation homes. Hislop and his father started a yard-care service about two years ago, mowing lawns, trimming bushes and gardening two days a week.

"Neither of us likes to do it," he said, "but it's cash flow."

A seasonal economy

With the summer influx of visitors, the economy around Bear Lake is seasonal, based on tourism, with hundreds of jobs in leisure, hospitality and construction.

Farther out from the lake, the economy is based on agriculture, mostly cattle grazing with some dairy farms in Bear Lake County and some raspberry fields in Rich County.

Canby raspberries grown for decades in the hills above Garden City are now mostly gone.

About 10 years ago, a virus attacked the plants, and a U.S. Department of Agriculture scientist urged farmers to replace their plants with disease-free ones. But the two farmers whose crops had for decades produced the bulk of the area's raspberries opted for retirement.

"They had some killer years," said Thayne Tagge, the first to bring Bear Lake Raspberries to Salt Lake City about 32 years ago. "Their raspberry plants lasted 25 years, which is unheard of. Then they puttered out. They were getting older and wanted out. Land was easier to sell."

There hasn't been much development on the land, according to county records.

The famous Bear Lake Raspberries are now grown by farmers in nearby Laketown. Crop yields are not yet as high as the Garden City raspberries, and many Canby raspberries in the shakes sold at roadside hamburger stands along the lake are shipped in from Skagit Valley, Wash.

Residents in the region also work for the school districts and an assortment of businesses, such as Bear Lake Memorial Hospital in the region's most populous town, Montpelier, population 2,350.

At about \$16,000 a year, per capita wages in Rich County are among the lowest in Utah, said Brian Carver, the community and economic development director for the Bear River Association of Governments, which serves Box Elder, Cache and Rich counties.

"No one wants to build a bank or grocery store in Garden City," Carver said. "There are only 400 residents year-round."

When they need to buy groceries, Garden City residents say they can shop in a store at the KOA Campgrounds of America. Larger retailers are a car trip away in Logan and Montpelier.

In the modern-day Bear Lake region, there are not enough year-round, high-paying jobs to keep young people from moving away.

Haddock, co-chairwoman of the Bear Lake Valley Blueprint's steering committee, doesn't have any adult children in the area. They left for school and work.

"I know there's a lot of families who would like to come back here," she said.

Many year-round residents in the area have to leave the valley for work. Each morning, carpools of workers head to a phosphate plant in Soda Springs, Idaho, and a coal mine in Kemmerer, Wyo.

Where others see challenges, Garden City Mayor John Spuhler sees opportunities.

Spuhler said he believes the Bear Lake Valley can grab more tourism dollars by becoming a winter vacation destination for snowmobiling and skiing in Logan Canyon. The region can diversify the economy with the "in-sourcing" trend, in which foreign-owned companies start call centers in small towns in the U.S. because many Americans are frustrated with cultural misunderstandings associated with dialing toll-free numbers answered in places such as India.

"I think, specifically, in Woodruff and Randolph, they would really benefit and capitalize," Spuhler said.

Spuhler uses the Internet in his business of providing technology consulting to companies across the U.S. He and his family began visiting Bear Lake in 1985, when they were living in Denver. Four years ago, they moved to the area permanently.

Spuhler says the planning with Envision Utah won't be credible if people don't participate in the open houses and meetings planned in the next year. Without resident participation, elected officials likely would be left to make all the decisions.

"I've called people and asked about the process in other towns," he said. "Some like it, and some don't."

The lake

The idea to hire Envision Utah to facilitate planning came from Claudia Cottle of the environmental group Bear Lake Watch. While development may be necessary, destroying the very thing attracting that is development — the lake — would ruin the region, Cottle said.

"The lake is remarkably resilient," she said in the clubhouse of The Reserve, an upscale development in Fish Haven.

Members of Bear Lake Watch, formed by late actor and football star Merlin Olsen, keep their eyes on the lake level. "It's down about 10 feet from its high," Cottle says.

When water levels are down, vegetation grows on the beaches.

Current marshes near Garden City, she said, are not natural. Bugs live in the tumbleweeds, then fall into the water, where fish eat them. Grasses protect fish, which can lead to overpopulation of some species.

"The natural processes are trying to chase the fluctuating lake," Cottle said.

Snowmelt affects the levels of the lake. But the most dangerous altering of the lake levels comes from farmers in Box Elder County who irrigate their crops with lake water through a series of pipes and canals, she said.

Power companies in Utah and Idaho also divert water from the lake for a dam that generates electricity.

Farming

In the old days, people in the area grew spuds and cabbage. While farmers had cows, they mostly raised sheep, said "Little" Roger Earley, 49.

Earley lives in the unincorporated area of Round Valley outside Laketown. He farms part time and also works as a taxidermist.

"I'd bring it back to the old days in a heartbeat," he said.

Farmers are under a lot of pressure to sell their land to developers. It's not just about the land but the water under the land. Cities are pressuring farmers to sell, too, Earley said, because of the impact fees they collect from homebuilders.

Earley remembers as a child driving around the lake and not having the view from the road obstructed by houses.

"These people move in and take over city councils," he said. "The locals, you're done."

When Earley realized he wouldn't be able to make a living as a full-time farmer or rancher, he began working at taxidermy. But development has driven away wildlife, which also has hurt his bottom line.

People used to hunt deer, elk, geese, sage chickens, moose and, of course, bears. Hunting has all but gone now, although residents in nearby Sweetwater Hill often get backyard visits from deer.

Earley is not sympathetic when he hears folks complaining about the deer eating their shrubs.

"It's not the deer's fault," he said. "You moved into their home."

The good ol' days

One recent sunny afternoon, Joan Arke cleaned her house, even washing her rubber gloves, and set them out on the deck to dry inside-out.

Arke first visited the lake with her late husband 35 years ago, and they later built a house near the shore because the scenery reminded them of their native Norway.

Sitting down and taking in a view of the lake, Arke described how Garden City has changed over the decades. When she and her husband first arrived, there were local schools. Now kids are bused to Laketown and Randolph.

"It's being more commercialized from being a lake community to a city," she said.

Arke then decided to visit longtime friends Merle and Doug Spence, who have lived in the area their whole lives but now spend about eight months a year in St. George.

Doug Spence has retired from his job plowing snow for the state and decided to retire as far away as he could from the white stuff. Merle Spence was one of the state's first female magistrates. She still runs into couples she married and people she punished for committing crimes when they were teens.

Doug Spence has a small cabin in the back of the main house. Its walls are covered with sketches his father made of Garden City in the early 1940s. There were two grocery stores — John Hodges store and Ray's Service & Grocery — and a motel and cafe.

Garden City had an icehouse, and the owner hauled in large chunks of ice from the frozen lake during the winter to a small shed covered with sawdust for insulation.

"He used to let us kids play in that," Doug Spence said.

Back outside, Arke and Merle Spence reminisce about the past.

Most residents of Garden City have to pick their mail up at the post office. The Spences could get their mail delivered, they say, but they have chosen to pick it up.

"I would (have gotten a mailbox) years ago," Merle Spence said. "It would have been different."

"I don't feel comfortable," Arke said. "I really don't. There's all these strange people."

Arke's neighbors can fetch \$600 a night to rent out their house. She never knows who is staying next door.

"Everybody wants to come here," she said.

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