

The Salt Lake Tribune

Canyon Users Seek Development Limits (13 May 09)

Governments are looking to update plan to protect canyons in preparation for population growth.

By Brandon Loomis

Wasatch canyons users who attended a planning session here Tuesday appeared to favor development restrictions rather than limits on recreation as the Salt Lake Valley's population grows. About 40 people attended the session at Alta High School to help shape a joint effort by the state, Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County and the U.S. Forest Service. The governments are looking to update a 20-year-old plan to protect the seven canyons on the valley's east side -- their recreation, wildlife and drinking water -- in preparation for a population doubling over 30 years.

Envision Utah Executive Director Alan Matheson led the session, explaining to the crowd that two-thirds of the valley gets most of its drinking water from the canyons, while people visit them 6 million times every year. Thousands also live there, with the most populated being Emigration Canyon. Emigration Canyon may grow from 1,000 people to 3,000 in the coming three decades, Matheson told them, at the same time that the valley grows from 1 million people to 2 million. "That's going to put only more pressure on these resources," Matheson said.

Over the course of the evening he polled the crowd electronically, unveiling a pattern of high regard for recreation in the canyons and little appetite for private development there. Given four choices of an activity that most affects the canyon environment -- dispersed recreation, developed recreation, transportation and private development -- half clicked the button blaming private development. Forty-nine percent who answered a follow-up question said the most effective protection would be a limit on development.

"There's way too much development in the canyons," Sandy resident Gina Sudbury said after participating in the session. She doesn't mind some ski resort development, she said, though she thinks the cities should handle lodging for most of the future growth. "I want to protect the water and the nonmotorized recreation." Sudbury said she mostly hikes and snowshoes in the Cottonwood canyons.

The county's existing plan prohibits building on steep slopes or unstable soils and generally prescribes low densities, Matheson said, but 55 percent of respondents said they'd like tougher rules.

Meanwhile, 37 percent said recreation is the most important component of the canyons -- rating higher than water quality or supply. The same percentage of respondents said none of the canyons is overused by recreationists, and similar numbers favored maintaining current recreation rules but with improved public transportation into the canyons.

Some favored better refereeing of the diverse recreationists who share trails, though. Sandy resident Chris Auman said he would like Millcreek Canyon's alternating biking and hiking days to spread to other canyons so he can relax while hiking. "Mountain bikers go for the adrenalin rush," he said. "I go for the tranquility."

Envision Utah also conducted a session in West Valley City on Tuesday, and plans more this week. The group is accepting comments in writing and online, and will draft recommendations by the end of the year. Ultimately the Salt Lake County Council will consider the recommendations for its canyons plan.

More planning sessions

Wednesday » Skyline High School cafeteria, 3251 E. 3760 South, Millcreek, or Sandy City Hall, second floor, 10000 S. Centennial Parkway, Sandy.

Thursday » Westminster College concert hall, 1840 S. 1300 East, Salt Lake City, or West Jordan High School media center, 8136 S. 2700 West, West Jordan.