

# Deseret News

## *Canyons report shows desire to protect land, preserve access*

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SALT LAKE CITY — A nearly three-year effort to learn residents' priorities regarding the seven major canyons on the eastern side of Salt Lake County reveals an intense desire to protect recreation, land and watershed resources now — and far into the future.

The Wasatch Canyons Tomorrow report, put out by Envision Utah, represents an effort to build on multiple existing plans that address uses in such places as Big and Little Cottonwood canyons, Parleys Canyon, Millcreek and Emigration among others.

The report was debuted in a Tuesday meeting of the KSL Editorial Board and will have an official kickoff next week during a public event.

Tapping partnerships that included the U.S. Forest Service, Salt Lake City, Salt Lake County, the governor's office and state agencies, a 50-member steering committee set out to identify what people "value" most about the canyons, what challenges are being faced — such as transportation — and how to counter increasing pressure as Utah's population continues to grow.

"There's tremendous value in the Wasatch Canyons," said Envision Utah's executive director Alan Matheson. "It's where we get the majority of our drinking water, they serve as our backyard and as a respite."

The canyons, too, are a huge economic driver, Matheson added, with pressure to foster enhanced access to recreational pursuits such as skiing, mountain climbing and hiking.

In multiple study group meetings held over the past several years and through surveys that garnered responses from an estimated 16,000 people, a recurring theme emerged that coupled the need for access with a guiding desire to be good stewards of the canyons.

"We want to accommodate growth and preserve access, but there is this recognition, especially by the U.S. Forest Service, of when do (the canyons) become overused," said Laura Briefer, with Salt Lake City's department of public utilities. "When does it become loved to death?"

Correspondingly, survey themes that focused on recreation, land use and transportation produced results that show a protective nature by residents against land development, in addition to a grudging acknowledgement that transportation plans in many of the canyons should incorporate options that do not include or at least limit the use of personal cars.

As an example, survey results show:

62 percent of people believe the Wasatch Canyons are overused

62 percent of people believe regulations should be strengthened regarding land use, compared with only 4 percent who believe they should be relaxed and 34 percent who say existing regulations should be enforced

A plurality of people, 36 percent, identified development on private land as their primary concern affecting the canyons, followed by 26 percent who said water quality and other environmental issues concerned them most. The smallest category — at 8 percent — said increased regulation of private land topped their list of concerns.

Residents, too, said management approaches that include charging fees to improve facilities should be a top priority, with 24 percent saying that is the best path to chart, while 23 percent said simply an improvement to facilities to meet demands should be undertaken, with no indication fees should be charged.

Gabe Epperson, Envision Utah's project director, said some of the results are interesting and controversial — such as limiting development — since 20 percent of the land in the canyons area is owned privately.

Other themes that emerged identified the need to formulate a comprehensive trails management plan, a climbing management plan and to tackle access and public safety issues as they relate to cyclists.

Those who took part in the survey recognized that transportation planning has to be a critical component of any management strategy, Epperson said, with routes to popular skiing destinations already clogged with traffic.

Epperson said the survey showed a willingness to institute a parking pass program at Big and Little Cottonwood canyons, where 91 percent of the survey participants also said they support expanded bus service to those areas.

"A No. 1 theme emerged that people support year-round robust transportation alternatives and people grudgingly recognize there has to be other means of getting there besides their cars," Epperson said.

The report is expected to be introduced at a Salt Lake County Council meeting over the next several weeks and may serve as a guide as county planners undertake the process to update the canyons master plan.