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Listening to thousands on the canyons' future

By Peter Corroon

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From anywhere in the Salt Lake Valley, the Wasatch Mountains dominate the landscape. Our quality of life continues to be enriched year-round by the proximity of these towering mountains and their canyons. Their beauty and recreational opportunities are easily accessible, they provide critical water resources, and the local economy benefits from the canyon amenities, tourism and ski industry.

Providing quality outdoor opportunities within the framework of watershed protection will be an increasing challenge as the Wasatch Front population continues to grow.

Wasatch Canyons Tomorrow, an initiative of the State of Utah, Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City and the U.S. Forest Service, is involving the public in tackling this challenge. The purpose is to update Salt Lake County's master plan, and the process is facilitated by Envision Utah.

It will help us understand how pressures associated with population growth, recreation and canyon development will affect water quality and water supply, recreation, natural resources and habitat, tourism, transportation, land-use and public safety. It will also explore strategies to address these impacts.

In the month of November, more than 4,500 Utahns participated in Wasatch Canyons Tomorrow open houses and on-line surveys, responding to the best opportunity in decades to influence Salt Lake County's Wasatch Canyons Master Plan. This plan guides the county's land-use policy, decisions and ordinances for the Wasatch Mountains. More than 5,000 comments came in during the first round of public meetings in May.

Participants reviewed a range of scenarios based on initial public input.

The scenarios outlined diverse policy options and projected the impacts of those policies.

While the November public feedback is still being analyzed, a solid majority of participants support the following:

- » Watershed protection and open space preservation.
- » Year-round public transportation in the major canyons.
- » A rail line up Little Cottonwood Canyon.
- » Improving existing trailhead facilities.
- » Establishing "no parking zones" along some portions of the major roadways to discourage over-crowding.
- » Improvements at resorts, within existing resort boundaries, to facilitate year-round outdoor activities.
- » Improving popular backcountry recreation areas for climbers and mountain bikers.

In addition, respondents strongly support clustering potential new canyon development at higher densities to preserve open space, increasing funding to protect watershed lands and restricting zoning variances that conflict with existing regulations.

The Wasatch canyons are currently managed under layers of planning, policy, statutes, ordinances and regulations on federal, state, and local levels. Continued coordination and cooperation among federal, state and local government



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agencies, residents, businesses and the public will be imperative to meet growing demands and preserve what we value about the canyons. The results of this process will impact public policy for decades.

To make wise public decisions about the future of the Wasatch Front canyons, decision-makers need to hear from Utahns. At a third round of public meetings in February, residents will be able to share their thoughts on a series of draft recommendations.

I encourage you to participate in those meetings and an on-line survey. The continued enjoyment of the canyons into the next century may only be assured by pursuing strategies to sustain what we most value.

Peter Corroon is the mayor of Salt Lake County.