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On tap for Wasatch: Protecting our water

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More than a century ago, Salt Lake City leaders called on the federal government to protect the Wasatch Mountains' forests and pastures as a source of the city's drinking water.

That drive led to a 1906 presidential proclamation creating the Wasatch National Forest and to a partnership that is no less important to the Utah capital's future today, acting Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest Supervisor Cheryl Probert said this month at the release of an Envision Utah report aimed at maintaining the Wasatch canyons.

"Wasatch Canyons Tomorrow" is a 57-page list of ideas on retaining the environmental, economic and recreational vitality of the seven canyons that descend to the Salt Lake Valley's east side from northern Salt Lake City to Sandy. It follows participation by about 16,000 Utahns — online and in meetings — who voted on potential conservation ideas.

Central to Salt Lake City's interests are the continued flows of pure water as the valley's population grows from 1.1 million to a projected 1.7 million over the next 30 years, adding not only recreational and development pressures on the canyons but also demand for more water.

Envision Utah identified strong support for watershed protection, with participants calling it the most important issue — topping recreation, wildlife and transportation — in both Big and Little Cottonwood canyons.

Many of the 21 ideas that most participants backed centered on water quality, including public purchase of sensitive lands, a revolving loan fund to upgrade canyon sewage systems, incentives for developing only in appropriate areas, and a canyon parking fee to fund restrooms at trail and rock-climbing areas.

City water officials caution that there is much to be hashed out as the city, county, Forest Service and others negotiate the programs filling in the broad plan's details.

"I look forward to the continued dialogue," Salt Lake City Public Utilities Director Jeff Niermeyer said at the plan's unveiling.



Scott Sommerdorf | The Salt Lake Tribune Magda Allbright's St. Bernard "Bubba" licks his chops after a drink of City Creek water during a walk with his owner Friday, 11/12/2010. Wasatch Canyons report by Envision Utah outlines numerous goals for protecting Salt Lake City's watershed. The city plans to use this document as it works to keep its waters clean. Upper City Creek, Friday 11/12/2010.

Laura Briefer, the city utilities department's special-projects manager and a member of the Envision Utah report's steering committee, said even those ideas targeting water protection need careful study and attention to detail. For instance, she said, a revolving loan fund that upgrades sewage treatment from septic tanks to collector pipes might backfire if it enables more development in the canyons.

Likewise, she said, clustering condo and cabin development in high concentration at resorts and where roads and sewers exist — as a plurality of Envision Utah participants said they prefer — might not be the best option for city water users. The plan recommends pursuit of a legal mechanism for transferring development rights from private lands dispersed throughout the canyons, either to central points within the canyons or outside of them entirely.

Briefer prefers moving as much development as possible outside of the canyons.

"That's going to require a lot more legal and implementation study," she said, "on behalf of the county."

Another idea backed by most participants is the study of more mass transit reaching into the canyons — whether year-round buses, a winter train up Little Cottonwood Canyon or even aerial trams. Mass transit has the potential to protect the canyons, Briefer said, or to deliver too many people to them at once if there's no corresponding limit on car access.

"Transit is a great idea," she said, but "we risk loving the canyons to death."

Using transit to get people into the resorts and other popular sites could help decrease pollution runoff from the roads — not a particular problem now, she said, but a potential issue with growth.

"It's very encouraging," Briefer said, "and it shows that the county, the city and other agencies — the Forest Service — have done a really good job at communicating the importance of the watersheds."

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Ideas for each canyon

City Creek

This urban hiking, biking and dog-walking portal could benefit from a recommendation to relieve pressure by developing new recreation sites around the Salt Lake Valley.

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Ideas for each canyon

Red Butte

Largely restricted and used for watershed and vegetation research, this canyon behind the University of Utah would remain as is.

Emigration

With aging septic systems threatening water quality in this supplier to valley homes, a revolving loan fund could help upgrade sewage treatment.

Parleys

Despite its gateway to Park City's tourism engine, this canyon has no public bus service. Utah Transit Authority express buses could fill a big need.

Mill Creek

The Forest Service is studying the possibility of shuttle vans — possibly with trailers for skis and dogs — to ease a parking shortage in this narrow canyon popular for year-round backcountry recreation. Envision Utah participants largely backed an alternative-transportation approach and continuation of the alternating on- and off-leash dog days.

Big Cottonwood

New funds, through legislation, local bonds or other sources, could help buy sensitive lands, while establishing a system of development-right transfers to encourage private canyon landowners to build only at villages or even outside of the canyons.

Little Cottonwood

A winter train to Snowbird and Alta ski resorts could relieve heavy traffic congestion and reduce pollution runoff into the stream.

Source: Wasatch Canyons