

Planners taking close look at recreation possibilities

Published: Monday, Sept. 14, 2009 11:25 p.m. MDT

Picture a light-rail line connecting the Salt Lake airport to premier ski resorts.

Or dedicated bicycle lanes up the recreation-friendly canyons along the Wasatch Front in Salt Lake Valley.

How about a ban on dogs in those canyons?

Those are just a few of the ideas that emerged from a public opinion survey recently released by a Wasatch canyons planning group in which enhancing public transit, limiting private development and addressing overuse also figure prominently.

And, while respondents generally agreed on the importance of the seven Wasatch canyons as recreation destinations, there was less than a consensus on how to balance the demands of a booming population with the need for protecting ecosystems and fragile watersheds.

A yearlong effort to construct a new, long-term master plan for City Creek, Emigration, Red Butte, Parleys, Millcreek, Big Cottonwood and Little Cottonwood canyons was launched in May, and a first public outreach/comment period was just completed that gathered responses from more than 2,000 residents through an online survey and public meetings. Envision Utah's Wasatch Canyons Tomorrow project, backed by Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City, the state of Utah and the U.S. Forest Service, will update a canyons plan that was last revised in 1989.

Envision Utah's planning director, Gabe Epperson, said the survey results will form the basis for creating new planning and development schemes for the well-used canyons.

"This information informs the next steps in the process," Epperson said. "Now, we use the input to create planning scenarios ... then we'll go back to the public for more comment."

While many use conflicts and issues were widely noted, opinions deviated just as widely on how to address them.

Competition between bicycle and automobile traffic was raised repeatedly, but some respondents cited dedicated bike lanes as a solution, while others believed cycling should be more regulated and cyclists ticketed or separated from the roads.

Maintaining canyon access for dog owners and their pets split respondents almost straight down the middle. About half want to continue keeping the canyons doggie friendly, while the other half favor a ban on dogs.

How to handle the increasing pressure of automobile traffic on canyon byways also brought a variety of responses. Many want year-round bus schedules (currently, most bus service focuses on getting skiers and snowboarders to canyon resorts during the winter months,) while others saw economic incentives/disincentives such as charging a per-vehicle fee as another approach.

Another idea that has surfaced is the possibility of extending light-rail service in the most-used canyons, with the vision of a seamless transit connection from the Salt Lake City International Airport to popular resort destinations.

Epperson said all the information, including the diverging opinions and novel new approaches, moves the project toward creating solutions. "All of these comments and responses contribute to the planning process," he said. "End results are always a hybrid ... finding the combination of things people like and what's feasible."

Wendy Fisher, executive director of Utah Open Lands and a member of the project's steering committee, is hoping that public outreach efforts raise awareness to the critical water resources that reside in the canyons.

"Education is a big part of this," she said. "A lot of us do recreate in the Wasatch canyons and don't recognize how big a role it plays as a watershed."

Canyon water resources provide about half the water used by nearly 500,000 residents along the Wasatch Front.

Conclusions on water issues, transit, recreation and land development reached in the report will be incorporated into long-term Salt Lake County master planning next year when the project wraps up.

Ann Ober, intergovernmental relations specialist for Mayor Peter Corroon, said public participation will continue to be an integral part of forming a vision for the canyons. "Throughout this process, from the study to creating policy, we will continue encouraging the public to weigh in," she said.