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Utahns support more transit options in Wasatch canyons, report shows

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SALT LAKE CITY — Utahns want more transit options in Big and Little Cottonwood canyons, and more than 60 percent support charging private vehicles to use the canyon roads.

Those were among the findings included in the Wasatch Canyons Tomorrow report released to the public Monday. The report represents nearly three years of studies and surveys to determine what people value most about the seven major canyons on the eastern side of Salt Lake County.

More than 16,000 Utahns weighed in on transportation, recreation and land-use issues facing Little Cottonwood, Big Cottonwood, Millcreek, Parleys, Emigration, Red Butte and City Creek canyons. From that public input, Envision Utah compiled a list of recommendations to act as guiding principles for Salt Lake County, Salt Lake City, the U.S. Forest Service and state agencies.

"We have an opportunity today to do our part to ensure that these canyons remain a great amenity, a great legacy to those who will follow," Envision Utah executive director Alan Matheson said during a news conference Monday at the Salt Lake County Government Center.

One key finding of the process, Matheson said, was that most people believe many challenges facing the canyons can be overcome through wise transportation decisions.

Eighty-eight percent of those surveyed during the study said they want the winter transit service in Big and Little Cottonwood canyons expanded to year-round service.

According to the Utah Department of Transportation, traffic on canyon roads in the summer is getting closer to that of the winter months. Utah Transit Authority buses serve the two canyons during the ski season, but those routes are suspended during the spring, summer and fall months, according to the report.

Seventy-three percent of people surveyed told Envision Utah they want UTA to study the feasibility of extending TRAX to some kind of transit hub at the mouth of Big Cottonwood or Little Cottonwood canyons, where buses can shuttle people to canyon destinations. And 70 percent said they want officials to study a mountain rail line up Little Cottonwood Canyon to Snowbird and Alta.

In addition, 90 percent of those who participated in the public process said they would like to see UTA offer an express bus service between downtown Salt Lake City and Park City.

"We're looking to work with UTA on possibly some summer transportation, as well as the winter," said Salt Lake County Mayor Peter Corroon. "Our park-and-rides tend to be fairly full in the wintertime, so we're looking at other locations and coordinating with UTA to get people up the canyon."

One recommendation from the public that came as a surprise to Envision Utah and its project partners was support for a recreation access pass in Big and Little Cottonwood canyons. The pass

could serve as a management tool to reduce traffic on canyon roads and encourage people to carpool or use transit options.

As part of that recommendation, money raised from the pass or a per-vehicle parking fee at trail heads or along canyon roads could be used to make improvements in the canyons, according to the report.

"I don't think anybody's talking about putting up toll booths and collecting money at the mouth of the canyon," Matheson said. "That wouldn't work."

However, even in these difficult financial times, 62 percent of those surveyed said they supported the option, he said.

"If we care enough about these canyons, we're going to have to do some things to manage them thoughtfully," Matheson said.