Utah’s Secret Weapon for Long-Range Planning

BY: Peter Harkness | March 2015

Robert Grow is aptly named. He has devoted his entire career to dealing with economic growth -- not promoting it or hindering it, but controlling and channeling it to serve the needs of the broader community rather than a select few.

He is an engineer, a land use and development attorney, and the former president of a steel company. He has consulted on growth issues in more than 75 cities around the country. But he is best known for his work as the president and CEO of Envision Utah, the organization that has emerged over the last 15 years as the preeminent model for regional planning.

In fact, Envision Utah isn’t regional. It’s a statewide enterprise. It isn’t exactly a program, either; it’s more of a process. And it’s not a government effort, though the state and most local governments are involved. The best way to describe it is as a loosely defined, public-private-nonprofit partnership that includes most every stakeholder imaginable: local public officials, planning professionals, developers, conservationists, business and community leaders, and just about anyone else who shows an interest and a willingness to collaborate for a common purpose. Participation is entirely voluntary.

It sounds like an amorphous tangle of interests and stakeholders, but Envision Utah’s accomplishments over more than a decade are undeniably impressive, even remarkable. When the initiative first began, the state’s biggest concerns were water and air, and Envision Utah has helped achieve big successes in both those areas. Despite a statewide population increase of nearly 30 percent since the 2000 Census, water consumption has fallen by more than a quarter, in large part because of increased housing density on smaller lots. Emissions of inventoried air pollutants has dropped by almost half, and the state is currently working toward an even more aggressive clean air campaign. Projections made in 1998, before Envision Utah got started, assumed that an additional 300 square miles of rural land would be lost to development by now. Thanks to changing land use patterns that Envision Utah has helped to promote, the actual total has been less than half that amount.

But changes to the state’s transportation system are the most dramatic of all. Vehicle miles traveled have actually fallen back to what they were in the late 1990s, largely because of improved community design and a dramatic increase in public transit. Utah now has more transit infrastructure than many larger states, with a total of 70 stations for its rail and light rail systems.

Robert Grow, Envision Utah’s president and CEO (Envision Utah)

To talk to Envision Utah’s leaders is to learn that they value the organization’s procedures almost as much as they do the tangible changes. From the beginning, Envision Utah has been successful at engaging citizens. Nearly 20,000 people participated in the first round of developing a “quality growth strategy” more than 15 years ago. Robert Grow’s goal for the latest effort, known as “Your Utah, Your Future,” is 50,000 people. Programs have been launched in communities ranging from Salt Lake City to the towns of Provo, Magna and Kearns.

Today, a decade and a half in, Envision Utah has become a national model for planning. It now faces new, divisive challenges. And there’s one major exception to the success story: education. Envision Utah has been unable to do much about Utah’s public schools -- the state has slipped in most performance rankings and per capita spending per pupil is the lowest in the country. The state education budget has endured years of stagnation since the Great Recession began; only this year has Gov. Gary Herbert begun to recommend a significant new investment in the public school system.

But on balance, at a time when dysfunction seems to define government at the national level -- and, increasingly, at the state and local level -- Envision Utah’s grassroots, nonideological, transparent process, blending sophisticated research into relevant facts and community values, has a story to tell that extends far beyond the borders of its state.

There is a rich history of urban planning in Utah. The original Mormon plan for community design, known as the Plat of the City of Zion, won an urban design award from the American Planning Association in 1996 -- 163 years after it was developed by church founder Joseph Smith for a community in Missouri. When the Mormons arrived in
Utah in 1847, leader Brigham Young made certain that the fundamental plan became the standard for Salt Lake City and every Mormon settlement established every 25 miles around the state and elsewhere in the West.

More than a century and a half later, the planning tradition has not died. The most recent example is Daybreak, a highly successful planned mixed-use development started a decade ago in South Jordan, just southeast of Salt Lake City. Envision Utah was involved in the planning as a partner with Kennecott Land Co.; Robert Grow served as its legal counsel. At 4,100 acres, Daybreak now accounts for 1 in 6 home sales in the Salt Lake Valley. All the homes are within a five-minute walk or bike ride of amenities, such as shopping or parks. The residential design follows the tradition of historic Salt Lake City neighborhoods like Sugar House and The Avenues, with large front porches and bright colors. Many of the Daybreak houses have solar and thermal panels and other energy-saving features. In 2011, the National Association of Home Builders gave the development its platinum award for suburban smart growth.

Daybreak is a planned, mixed-use development southeast of Salt Lake City. (Dean Derhak)

Don Whyte, who oversaw the development of Daybreak as president of Kennecott Land, says the trick to planning growth “is to get to the stage where we can see what we agree on. It’s not that hard to agree on the stuff we want and don’t want. If you just bring in a plan to be approved, it automatically will be viewed as an adversarial plan.” Whyte was inspired by Robert Grow’s work early on. “He knows how to manage a group well,” Whyte says. “He has an ability to get people to buy in not only with their support, but with their money.” Whyte now is involved in an ambitious plan to use Envision Utah’s collaborative process in development of a huge 300,000-acre ranch in Florida. “If it can happen in Utah,” he says, “it can happen here.”

Despite the state’s legacy of careful urban planning, land use has always been a highly sensitive issue in Utah politics. In the 1970s, the state’s newly enacted land use planning law ran afoul of the prevailing political culture. “Early on,” says Alan Matheson, a former executive director of Envision Utah, “there was a lot of resistance, especially from those who thought centralized planning was synonymous with communism. They thought it was a ruse for creating regional government.” The law was repealed by public referendum, and the idea of growth management disappeared from the state agenda for almost a quarter-century.

When growth control issues began coming up again in the mid 1990s, Mike Leavitt was governor. He proceeded cautiously. Leaders of a group called the Coalition for Utah’s Future came to him in 1995 and asked for state sponsorship of a new planning effort. He declined, saying that Utah’s public sentiment never would tolerate something viewed as a state-sponsored attempt to tell people how to live. Leavitt knew that Utah was a bottoms-up state, so any hint of a top-down initiative -- federal or state -- would be a deal-killer.

But Leavitt was a believer in the broader idea of better planning. He steered the effort away from direct government control. That was how Envision Utah took the shape that it did. “Envision Utah is a community effort, not a government effort,” Leavitt says today. “It has had to adapt. The state was facing very serious growth problems. Water and open space were being used up for unconnected reasons. There was a genuine concern that we must do a better job, and that it had to be done locally. We had to teach the ethic of planning.”

The creation of Envision Utah produced some strange alliances. Conservative Republicans in the legislature were impressed by the reduced costs for infrastructure -- along with maintenance, fire and EMS -- that could be achieved with compact development. Environmentalists and others approved of the diminished use of water and reduced air pollution. Eventually there emerged a set of basic principles that came to define Envision Utah. One of the most important of these was that it wouldn’t be a project; it would be a process. It would start with a baseline report showing how the state’s heavily populated areas would grow if no changes were made to existing trends. The results would be shared with as many residents as possible, and everyone who wanted to participate would be included in the process of deciding how the area should grow.

The initial study was focused on the Greater Wasatch area -- a narrow 10-county corridor down the Wasatch mountain range reaching 100 miles north to south of Salt Lake City and 40 miles east to west. The relatively small area was projected to account for 80 percent of Utah’s future growth. At the time, the area was home to 1.6 million residents, but was projected to add 1 million more by 2020 and to almost triple in size by 2050. As of the 2010 Census, the total had already exceeded 2.3 million.

The final report showed that small changes in the growth strategy could have profound effects on the Wasatch
region over time, saving almost $5 billion in infrastructure costs, preserving 116 square miles of agricultural land and
171 square miles of undeveloped land. Transit would improve to the point where residents would save up to $2
billion in transportation costs, resulting in less air pollution. Perhaps most important: Water conservation would
double, saving 93,200 acre feet of water. Some of those elements in the strategy seemed an overreach at the time
they were proposed; 15 years later, most of them have been accomplished.

Most critically, an extremely ambitious -- and in the end successful -- effort to sell the new growth strategy to the
public was launched. Public polling, which had initially reflected deep skepticism, began to shift. Voters in three key
counties -- Weber, Salt Lake and Davis -- in November 2000 passed a local sales tax increase to fund the
beginnings of a commuter and light rail system. Eight years earlier, that same ballot measure had been handily
defeated.

Sophisticated public opinion research was critical in the early years of Envision Utah, and it remains a key ingredient
in its success today. New Urbanist planner Peter Calthorpe was brought in to run a series of workshops, along with
Republican pollster Richard Wirthlin, who focused on gauging public opinion. Together, their “values research”
helped determine the public’s core values, rather than just their policy positions. The research revealed that those
values were remarkably aligned statewide. “We found that language has power,” Matheson recalls. “The use of the
word ‘environment’ can be polarizing, but everybody loves ‘nature and the outdoors.’ It was a big change from
selling product to developing policy.” Envision Utah is now in its third stage of values research, which is a central
part of the “Your Utah, Your Future” effort. This time, the organization is making heavy use of social media and
gamification models, allowing participants to explore different development scenarios and weigh in with their
choices.

From the beginning, the inclusion of a wide range of people -- the grassroots effort -- was a defining tenet of the
process. But perhaps more discreet was a “brass-roots” strategy for attracting certain key individuals, particularly
those who might have been natural opponents because of concerns about centralized planning. In fact, most
upper-tier politicians in the state have been involved with Envision Utah. According to Matheson, it has become “sort
of a farm club for state leadership.”

The most prominent local leader on Envision Utah’s side is Ralph Becker, the mayor of Salt Lake City. A land use
lawyer and planner himself, Becker says the Envision Utah process “really has had an effect without being top-down
in any sense. It has formulated a long-term direction that reflects public sentiment.”

Becker can also be a critic of Envision Utah. Some years ago, he and other local officeholders were concerned that
the ‘quality of staff work had deteriorated, with some seeking their own agendas, losing their objectivity.” Becker and
other officials from Salt Lake City were sufficiently concerned that they began to withdraw their involvement. In time,
the situation was reversed, but it was a warning. The Envision Utah process requires unrelenting discipline and
constant scrutiny. And it cannot not lose sight of the fact that it is local leaders who must carry out any growth
strategy by making changes in their zoning ordinances, planning for new growth.

Envision Utah today is infused with a new energy. As the program evolved during the first decade of the
millennium, Envision Utah went through a less dynamic period in its history. Grow had left his position as chair in
1999 to serve a term as a mission president for the Mormon Church in Sacramento, Calif.; he didn’t return to
Envision Utah full time until 2010. In 2012 Grow became president and CEO, and the ambitious “Your Utah, Your
Future” campaign was launched shortly afterward.

The collaborative, deliberative approach of Envision Utah has been so successful that it’s now being used in other
areas. One such effort is an ongoing planning process called the Mountain Accord. Purposefully patterned after
Envision Utah, the Accord is working on a compromise plan for the future development of the Wasatch mountains,
bringing together the ski industry; conservationists; the town of Park City; Salt Lake City; Salt Lake, Summit and
Wasatch counties; the U.S. Forest Service and many others. There is more at stake than just the ambitions of
wealthy ski resort developers. The Wasatch mountains and their canyons are a critical watershed in a state where
water is the predominant concern. Right now, the Mountain Accord is in the process of choosing a preferred
scenario for the region, mirroring the first phase of the traditional Envision Utah process. Then specific steps to carry
out that plan will be drawn up. “I don’t know exactly how it is going to work, but it absolutely has to work,” says Carl
Fisher, executive director of the conservation group Save Our Canyons. “We’ve been fighting over the canyons for
decades. But everybody is participating in this and have bought into [the Accord]. This is an important first step for
the future.”
It’s a thorny debate involving two dozen different interests, and reaching a universally accepted plan initially seemed impossible. But for veteran collaborators like former Gov. Leavitt, it’s just another issue looking for a solution. “The conflict between the ski industry and conservationists, or between farming and mining interests -- those exist everywhere,” he says. “The question is can we solve the conflict using brute political power or can we sit down together and solve it.”

The most important challenges for Envision Utah in the next few years may be ones on which it has been relatively silent so far. One of those is federalism. In Utah, 63 percent of the land is federally owned, and residents are angry because they feel they have no control of their own environs. That anger has resulted in the arrest of protesters, including a San Juan County commissioner, who openly defied a federal Bureau of Land Management order not to use motorized vehicles in Recapture Canyon, in the Four Corners area of southeastern Utah. A trial is set for early this year. Jousting with the federal government over land issues has never been one of Envision Utah’s favorite activities. But the group may be called upon to use its vaunted negotiating skills to fashion relationships that all parties to the dispute can accept.

Then there’s fracking. The energy industry has been operating in Utah for decades in search of oil, gas and uranium, but modern hydraulic fracturing technology has reinvigorated it just at the time that tourism in the national parks from Moab at the southern end of the state to St. George has taken off in popularity. Arches National Park, outside the town of Moab, a mecca for backcountry hikers and bikers, attracted a million visitors in 2013, for the third year in a row. But in the midst of some of the most awesome natural views in the world there are convoys of trucks and other heavy equipment constantly rambling into the wilderness to establish new wells, with the inevitable accidental spills into the Colorado River. In the end, the future of fracking on those lands will be up to the feds, not the state of Utah. But it is an issue that could soon work its way onto Envision Utah’s plate.

Both of these are terribly divisive subjects. Still, Grow has seen enough to know that Envision Utah will have to do what it has always done -- mix patience with ambition. “It works because you’re looking at a time horizon far out enough that you can see the results of what you’re going to do,” he says. “Setting time horizons really matters. You have to get your eyes off of your shoes.”

This snapshot illustrates how the Envision Utah process works. Several scenarios are laid out in the planning phase to help ensure agreed-upon goals, along with the potential consequences associated with each different proposal. (Envision Utah)