

Envision Utah

Finding Allies, Building Alliances One Community at a Time

The year was 1997. Michael Jordan shook off the flu and rallied his Chicago Bulls to defeat the Utah Jazz in six games. British scientists created “Dolly,” the first genetically engineered lamb. The initial Harry Potter novel (*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*) hit bookstore shelves and quickly became a worldwide phenomenon. “Titanic” filled the silver screen as the most expensive film ever made and the first to gross nearly \$2 billion. In Salt Lake City, a group of visionaries gathered in January to form Envision Utah, a collaborative initiative focused on bringing major public and private stakeholders and residents together to coordinate activities and put a spotlight on growth challenges—and solutions—in the ten-county Greater Wasatch Area.

No longer sleepy little Utah—home of the Great Salt Lake, five national parks including the awe-inspiring landscapes of Zion National Park, seven national monuments and the Golden Spike National Historic Site—the state ranks as the sixth most urban in the nation. In 1997, the population was just over 2 million and in 2013, it exceeded 2.85 million. Eighty percent of the state’s citizens reside in a 100-by-40 mile swath of land bordered by the Wasatch Mountains on the east and two large lakes (Utah Lake and the Great Salt Lake) and the Western Desert with its military testing ranges and thousands of acres controlled by the federal government on the west, with Salt Lake City as the area’s economic and cultural center point. By 2050, the population is projected to top 5 million with two-thirds of Utah’s growth internally generated.

Where will these additional souls live? How will they get to work or school? Will the subsequent increase in automobiles, home heating, and businesses make the air unbreathable? Where will the water come from to slake the thirst of a doubled population? These and other growth-related issues confronted politicians, state and local governmental officials and planners, private industry leaders, school administrators and many others who paused to reflect on the impact of the state’s projected population boom.

Confronting a “Common Pain”

Envision Utah is a public-private, non-profit quality growth partnership. Its founder and current CEO is Robert J. Grow, a trained land-use attorney and former president and chief operating officer of Geneva Steel, an integrated steel mill funded by the US government during World War II to bolster American steel manufacturing capabilities that ceased operations in late 2002.

Grow had the correct background as a highly regarded local business lead with a working knowledge of Utah’s air quality challenges and expertise developed as a member of the advisory board for Utah’s Department of Community & Economic Development. Most importantly, Grow had a vision for Utah’s growth and approached his role as a “Sherlock Holmes.” “The chair should never think he knows everything,” Grow explained. “The more people we asked questions and listened to, the easier it was to sort out the truth.”

The truth quickly became apparent: With the population set to more than double in less than 50 years, the near- and long-term impact of such growth needed to be dealt with now, not by future generations. The choices we make today will determine what the future is like for our children and grandchildren.

The envisionutah.org website states the problem succinctly: “Utahns have prospered under the vision of the pioneers who first entered this state. But by 2050, our population will double to five million, two-thirds of whom will be our own children and grandchildren. As one of America’s fastest growing states, we cannot take our high quality of life for granted. How we grow will affect how we and our children will live. Will we just sit back and see where growth takes us, or will we be visionary, like those who came before us, and actively secure our future?”

In 1997, Grow and others involved in the Coalition for Utah’s Future formed a collaboration—Envision Utah, a voluntary and organic process stemming from the private sector that would eventually attract thousands to its workshops and forums—to wrestle with the issues and bring forth a principles-based vision and plan to manage Utah’s growth.

Getting the right people involved

In her 2012 treatise published by Brookings Mountain West focusing on regional planning lessons learned from the Envision Utah experience, Dr. Brenda Scheer, former dean of the University of Utah's College of Architecture and Planning, wrote: "Although the Utah model is known for its inclusive processes, getting the buy-in of key 'brass roots' players before starting the process has been a formula for minimizing resistance in the long run."

The shiniest brass came in the form of Governor Mike Leavitt and Utah business leader Larry H. Miller. Leavitt had just completed his first term as governor on his way to ten years as the state's chief executive and whose 80-plus percent approval rating would be the envy of any political leader. Miller was trusted by thousands of Utahns who bought their automobiles from his wide range of dealerships in the Salt Lake Valley and who watched the beloved Utah Jazz basketball team that he owned. Together, these popular public and private sector leaders set the tone for the public/private Envision Utah collaboration.

Even Brigham Young, Utah's founding father and first governor, was involved. An actor portrayed the bearded pioneer leader who recognized the value of long-term community planning. Those in attendance at the Delta Center on January 14, 1997, were reminded of Utah's long-standing planning heritage. Leavitt and Miller were honorary co-chairs and well-recognized conveners of stature for the Envision Utah effort; their participation was critical in getting other community and business leaders involved.

The importance of a Committed Leader

In August 2012, Envision Utah's board of directors appointed Robert Grow as President and CEO. "Robert is the right guy at the right time and for the right reason to lead Envision Utah," Utah Governor Gary Herbert, an honorary co-chair of Envision Utah, told the *Salt Lake Tribune*. Grow was the founding chair when Envision Utah began in 1997, and had been the chair since 2010.

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Since his initial involvement in the Coalition for Utah's Future in the late 1980s, Grow helped initiate or strengthen efforts similar to Envision Utah in more than 80 metropolitan regions nationwide and in Canada—including helping establish the “Louisiana Speaks” process to guide rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina.

“I have a passion for Utah and care deeply about the legacy that today's leaders leave for future generations,” Grow told the *Tribune* in 2012. “Envision Utah's mission is to keep Utah beautiful, prosperous, healthy and neighborly for the people who choose to live here. I am at a point in my career when I can give of my time and energy in ways that will further Envision Utah's mission.”

Ari Bruening, Envision Utah's chief operating officer, calls Grow “a visionary leader.” “His eyes are always on the horizon,” says Bruening. “Our end product is not a mandate for local or regional governmental agencies to follow but rather a set of principles with recommended strategies. Under Robert's leadership, we believe the public has the right to choose its future. We are a neutral broker tasked with bringing people to the table.”

In addition to vision, one of the best qualities a collaboration leader can possess is to bring people together for a common goal. Scheer, in her Brookings paper, says that Envision Utah—under Grow's leadership—has “used a combination of political savvy and public education to affect a shift in the attitudes that people have about sprawl.” The result is that most public entities along the Wasatch Front have voluntarily, on their own timetable, adopted zoning and other regulations that encourage choice in the housing market, including affordable and multifamily, more walkable and connected neighborhoods, and transit-oriented development coordinated with a regional transit system that is the envy of many larger cities.

The diverse and inclusive nature of those involved with the Envision Utah collaboration is one of the reasons for its success.

Who's at the table does count

Envision Utah understood from the beginning that who is involved in the process is extremely important for the collaboration to succeed. Today, current Utah Governor Gary Herbert and banking executive and philanthropist Spencer F. Eccles are the honorary co-chairs. Members of the Executive Committee and the Board are a who's who of Utah business, community, and governmental leaders, including elected officials and planning professionals.

For the initial Quality Grow Strategy, Envision Utah hand selected more than 100 "representatives of substance" to join the process. These were mayors, county commissioners, state legislators, civic planning experts, conservationists, business leaders, community activists, and interfaith leaders representing a broad selection of geographies, demographics, and viewpoints. As Bruening recalls, "Our stakeholder group consisted of people who could make decisions supported by technical experts, and those who would assist with downstream implementation."

The diverse and inclusive nature of those involved with the Envision Utah collaboration is one of the reasons for its success. Quoting Scheer: "Envision Utah's emphasis on neutrality, inclusiveness, and its non-governmental voluntary nature enabled the organization to successfully navigate the state's regional planning agenda. Envision Utah represented a non-governmental group that was concerned about regional growth, but did not have an agenda for advancing particular solutions....Neutral leaders reached out to the public to discuss ideas about the place they wanted to leave for their children, not the problems of sprawl."

The importance of a clearly defined purpose

When Envision Utah set out on its journey, it had no predetermined outcome in mind, but it did begin with the shared purpose of addressing growth challenges in a way that preserves for future generations what Utahns care about—in a way that is chosen by Utahns, not by a group of advocates in a back room. All those who participated were asked to serve this purpose, with the common good in mind.

As the process moved forward, these goals came to the forefront as the focal points of the “Quality Growth Strategy:”

- Get us where we want to go – on time
- Preserve Utah’s natural beauty and recreational opportunities
- Provide desirable housing choices
- Maintain healthy air and conserve our limited water
- Stimulate the economy and keep taxes low

Simply said, it’s a strategy developed by the people of Utah to make our lives better—that provides more choices for how we, and the next generation, would like to live.

“It takes courage to trust the process,” Bruening says. “We have confidence in our process that as we inform and educate, people will make good decisions about how to achieve what they want for their children and grandchildren. We begin with two purposes in mind. First is to make certain the public is heard and has input into the growth planning process. Second is to share ideas with elected officials and have confidence they will follow through with the recommendations.” The goals and desires of the public become the rallying point for further collaboration and vision implementation.

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Getting all aboard the “Northbound Train”

Governor Mike Leavitt recognized the importance of creating a critical mass of support for the initial Envision Utah initiative. He contacted all of the major media outlets, along with regional public relations and advertising

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firms, and invited them to serve as civic partners in discussing Utah's growth issues to primetime audiences on all of Utah's major television and radio stations.

After more than a year of planning including an in-depth public opinion and values study, an unprecedented public awareness campaign was launched to educate area residents about the Envision Utah effort and involve them in the

decision-making process. Press conferences, press tours, radio and television ads featuring Governor Leavitt surrounded by children, and advertisements with other area celebrities or community leaders were used to appeal to a variety of community interests and to get the public involved.

The goals of the awareness campaign were to educate Wasatch Front residents about the growth challenges facing the area and invite people to participate in workshops where they sat in front of maps and did their best to accommodate the coming growth. The maps from the workshops were used to create four scenarios for the future, each of which was modeled for its impact on a variety of metrics like air quality, traffic congestion, land (including farmland) lost to development, construction costs, and water consumption. The public awareness campaign then educated people about the four possible growth scenarios and asked residents to complete a survey about the scenarios and/or attend "town hall" meetings.

The campaign's public launch event was held on January 5, 1999 at a restored Pioneer-era home at This Is The Place state park and "Brigham Young" made another appearance to voice his support of the process in conjunction with Governor Leavitt. The media loved the imagery and the campaign was off to a fast start.

The following Sunday, area newspapers included a printed Envision Utah supplement with a separate mail-in survey (the supplement was delivered

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to homes that did not subscribe to a newspaper and sent to area schools as part of the on-going Newspapers-In-Education program). A website was launched to explain the Envision Utah process and included an online survey. That same Sunday evening, KUED, Salt Lake's local PBS station, aired an hour-long documentary about Utah's growth. Throughout the month, 50 public meetings were held to discuss the growth scenarios and letters on the Governor's letterhead were sent to civics and history teachers as well as principals.

All totaled, nearly 17,500 Greater Wasatch Area residents filled out and returned the Envision Utah growth survey and nearly 2,000 attended one of the 50 town hall meetings. Envision Utah continues to foster the public input process in other places in the state through efforts like "Vision Dixie" and "Envision Cache Valley."

Envision Utah's "northbound train" is surely a long series of cars with nearly all the seats filled. As Mike Leavitt wrote in his recently published book, *Finding Allies, Building Alliances*, people wanted to be on the northbound train because "decisions that matter to me are going to be made and I need to be there. The train is headed north, and I want a seat on it."

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Sharing information, transparently

A common information base is one of the most important aspects of the Envision Utah collaboration. A committee made up of planning experts and technical support professionals developed a toolbox called "Envision Utah's Urban Planning Tools for Quality Growth." From a central location, community leaders, planners, and the public are able access data, analyses and documents that served as guides to help in planning for continued growth.

“When we embark on modeling of a scenario, the data is completely transparent,” explained Bruening. “All of the information sources are disclosed and we often use third-party experts for data validation.”

During the initial 1997 growth planning process, the “baseline” model was released to the public in September. This was a pivotal accomplishment for the Envision Utah effort. Not only did it bring together previously uncoordinated data for public review, it also served as a wake-up call to many Utahns. When Governor Leavitt was presented with the baseline data forecasting infrastructure costs, he exclaimed, “We can’t afford this!” Many others reacted similarly, and the conversation began to focus on the process of quality growth.

Similar modeling was done for other scenarios representing a wide variety of choices that Utahns could pursue, and residents chose a future that was quite different from the direction they were headed, as shown in the baseline scenario.

A legacy of collaborative leadership created a Value Enterprise

The 1999 Quality Growth Strategy focused on community values, the four growth scenarios, and “quality growth principles.” True to its stated purpose of allowing the public to choose its future, it did not set forth a conventional plan for land use, transportation, or open lands. It did publish seven principles: improving air quality, promoting housing options, creating transportation choices, encouraging water conservation, preserving critical lands, supporting efficient infrastructure, and exploring community development. Envision Utah’s statement of goals was widely publicized and many communities adopted those values.

Since 1999, Envision Utah has facilitated numerous collaborative efforts across the state of Utah and even into neighboring Idaho and Colorado. Among the projects were the Davis County Shoreline Plan; Ogden Wall Avenue Corridor Study; Envision Morgan: *Your Valley, Your Vision*; Wasatch

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Canyons Tomorrow; Vision Dixie: *Making a better Washington County*; and Blueprint Jordan River, and the Mountain View Corridor.

The Utah Transit Authority credits Envision Utah’s public education focus to reduce traffic congestion by 20% as critical in building the area’s light rail (TRAX) system that faced initial resistance and is now a national exemplar of a region-wide transit system.

Peter McMahon, Kennecott Land CEO, called the 95,000-acre Daybreak planned community development on the west bench of the Salt Lake Valley “an enduring vision of the Envision Utah principles.” Bruening noted,

“We helped change the dialogue on growth issues from a previous planning focus on large lot, single-family homes to a wider variety of housing choices that includes walkable communities and transit-oriented development.”

Today, the 10-person fulltime Envision Utah team has grown into a long-term Value Enterprise. Led by Robert Grow, Envision Utah is a permanent force for good, admired by many, emulated nationally, and focused on sustainable quality growth initiatives that will impact generations to come.

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