

PRESERVING OPEN SPACE REQUIRES FOLLOW-THROUGH

Tom Wharton

The Salt Lake Tribune. Salt Lake City, Utah: December 5, 1995. pg.D.1.

Copyright The Salt Lake Tribune December 5, 1995

When it comes to outdoor and wildlife issues, Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt has a nasty habit of coming up with good ideas and then -- apparently -- abandoning them.

Early in his term, the governor held a wildlife forum, offering a statewide television audience a chance to comment on wildlife issues. It accomplished little. A citizens' report on the forum made some excellent recommendations, most of which were ignored.

The same thing happened on the wilderness debate. A few months before formal public hearings on the Bureau of Land Management's wilderness bill convened, Leavitt came up with an intriguing proposal for the Escalante region that would have created four distinct land-management designations. This was a creative approach to managing Utah's wild spaces that could have been easily used as an ecosystem-management approach to other important wildlands.

But the governor quickly left the proposal in favor of the abysmal wilderness bill, which is currently rolling around Congress.

Growth Summit: Now comes the open-space portion of this week's Growth Summit. Leavitt deserves praise for realizing that growth threatens farmlands, trail systems, riverways and wildlife habitat. Saving open spaces for recreationists, wildlife enthusiasts, farmers and ranchers now can help future generations enjoy a quality of life.

But there already are indications that the governor is running from the issue. At an open-space conference on Oct. 30, Leavitt said cities and counties should not plan on any financial help from the state as they try to preserve open space. And he said planning and zoning must be left to local agencies.

Guidelines for the summit make the effort seem even more useless. They maintain preservation efforts can't be anti-growth, must be voluntary and can't reduce the amount of privately owned land.

Given those parameters, saving open space looks like another empty public-relations gimmick.

Trail systems such as the proposed Bonneville Shoreline Trail or a proposed trail from Coalville to Utah Lake traverse many cities and several counties. The state needs a strong commitment to planning and financing such multijurisdictional efforts -- or they won't work.

Wildlife pays no heed to city or county boundaries. Preserving summer range for a big-game herd that winters in another county does little good. And, with rare exceptions, it is difficult to believe that local governments are going to purchase or zone for wildlife habitat. Without leadership and funding from the state, it simply won't happen.

Open-Space Suggestions: Here are some suggestions about how the state should be involved in preserving open space:

- Scrap the proposed wilderness bill. Set a one-year deadline for a new bill. Reintroduce the Escalante Eco-Region concept on a statewide basis and use new hearings on wilderness as a means toward determining which lands should be developed, which should be managed as multiple-use and which should be left wild.
- Identify the most critical wildlife and farmlands as part of the process.
- Establish a 1/16-cent state sales tax on all outdoor equipment, which would be used to help local, state and federal agencies and private landowners preserve open space and improve wildlife habitat.
- Provide matching state funds to local governments interested in preserving wildlife habitat and open spaces for parks similar to the fund now being used to finance riverways and trails.

Mostly, though, preserving open space requires commitment and leadership.