

'Vision Dixie Summit' tonight in St. George

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ST. GEORGE -- Washington County Commissioner Jim Eardley hopes for a crowd at tonight's "Vision Dixie Summit," which will help kick off a series of public planning workshops scheduled throughout the county on land use.

"This summit will introduce people to the virtues of the planning process from different perspectives," Eardley said of the summit, slated to begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Dixie Center in St. George.

Vision Dixie is a comprehensive land-use planning project initiated by the Washington County Commission, the Nature Conservancy District, Oquirrh Institute and Envision Utah. Supporters of the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2006, introduced into Congress this past summer by Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, and Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, tout Vision Dixie as a vital element of the proposed legislation.

Bennett and Matheson, along with local supporters of the bill, have said Vision Dixie would provide the local planning process for the potential sale of public lands. But the bill's detractors point out that the bill contains no specific mention of Vision Dixie.

"The test of Vision Dixie will be whether this process legitimately gives the public a chance to comment and form their own opinion, or whether it is used as a means to justify the backroom, closed-door decisions that led to the lands bill," said Scott Groene, director of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance in Salt Lake City. "We would hope that this process ends up with a healthy, positive vision of what the community wants its future to be."

The measure, which continues to draw criticism from various environmental groups and others, would set aside public lands for wilderness and recreation, protect sections of the Virgin River and endangered species, establish utility corridors, and allow for the sale of up to 24,300 acres of public lands.

The bill is scheduled for a hearing on Nov. 16 in the Senate Subcommittee on Public Lands and Forests. The proposed legislation received its first hearing before the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health in September.

Lin Alder, director of Citizens for Dixie's Future, expressed concern about linking Vision Dixie to the lands bill.

"The Vision Dixie process has the potential to be a serious, meaningful and inclusive dialogue about growth and our future," Alder said. "Passing this bill before completing the Vision Dixie process would seriously undermine Vision Dixie itself. The bill makes most of the critical decisions. If the bill passed first, the vision part of Vision Dixie will be meaningless."

Members of Vision Dixie's executive, steering and technical committees come from various local, private enterprises and numerous public agencies. The group's primary goal is to develop a set of common goals when it comes to Washington County's future, Eardley said.

"One of the criticisms we've had is maybe we were too hasty, maybe we haven't involved enough of the general citizenry," said Eardley of the county's push to get the public lands bill passed. "We're trying to engage the public and get their input by their involvement in Vision Dixie. It'll be interesting to see how this turns out."

County commissioners recently passed a resolution in which they pledged to support any decisions made by Vision Dixie on the sale of up to 20,000 acres of public lands under the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act.

"We all have questions about the future," said Eardley. "The resolution binds the commission to the outcome of this new planning process. It's our way of showing people we're sincere and that we won't act without a large consensus."

Washington County is the fastest growing county in the nation's fifth fastest growing state. According to a news release Monday from the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, Washington County's population increase for 2005 was 8.4 percent over 2004. More than 125,000 people now call Washington County home.

For more information about Vision Dixie and a list of meeting times and locations go to visiondixie.org.