

Dixie's future: Vision for managed growth can become reality
[The Salt Lake Tribune](#). Salt Lake City, Utah: [Jul 13, 2007](#). pg. 1
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At last. Somebody is proposing that a growth plan might be a good thing for Utah's fastest-growing county. And, even better, it seems a majority of Washington County's residents agree.

Now if city and county officials can just figure out how to make it happen.

Until now, the county has had plenty of growth - nearly 35 percent in the past six years - but precious little planning. The business district of St. George, its biggest city, has changed from a pleasant town with quiet neighborhoods and tree-lined streets into a spectacularly ugly array of big boxes and strip malls.

Enter Vision Dixie. Seeking public input on what residents want for their community, the group talked to 3,000 people in the county through workshops, open meetings, an online survey and a Dan Jones poll.

They support clustered housing, land conservation, mixed-use walkable villages, public transit and little or no public land made available to developers. Interestingly, their priorities often ran counter to the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2006, sponsored by Sen. Bob Bennett and Rep. Jim Matheson, that would allow the sale of up to 25,000 acres of public land to private builders.

Vision Dixie is modeled after Envision Utah, a group that has helped focus attention on the problems and challenges of growth along the Wasatch Front since the early '90s.

The Washington County version is taking the same approach: listening to citizens, business owners, government and advocacy groups to come up with voluntary, market-based answers to the problems of sprawl, air pollution, traffic congestion and dwindling open space. It's a strategy that has been largely successful elsewhere in Utah.

It is encouraging that so many Washington County residents rank air and water quality, water conservation and preservation of scenic areas and wildlife habitat ahead of such categories as "keep neighborhoods with larger yards."

But the real test will come as Vision Dixie presents managed-growth scenarios to city councils, planning boards and county officials. It will be up to them to set policies that can blaze a better future for Washington County.

Armed with information and public support, these elected officials will have a rare opportunity to make this vision the new reality. They should not let it pass.