




Progressive Planning in Conservative Communities

Participatory Regional Planning in Salt Lake City, Utah

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Utah is becoming a leader in comprehensive, communicative regional planning in the United States through an innovative process known as Envision Utah, even though many observers view Utah as the least likely state to pursue progressive planning practices. As many urban issues spread across multiple jurisdictions, regional approaches are often needed. In a highly conservative state with a strong belief in limited government, regional planning initiatives would seem especially unlikely. Instead, Envision Utah succeeds in engaging the region's stakeholders in the planning process without creating a new layer of government. Utah's model fills a key gap in how planners engage communities on regional planning issues. In this study, I analyze Envision Utah as participatory regional planning in the Salt Lake City region and identify components planners might reproduce in other regions.



Utah is quickly becoming a leader in comprehensive, communicative regional planning in the United States through an initiative known as Envision Utah, even though many observers view Utah as the least likely state to pursue progressive planning practices (Scheer, 2012). Envision Utah is a highly innovative program, especially in the United States where regional planning efforts are uncommon and varied. As urban issues such as environmental sustainability, spatial dislocation, inequality and other challenges spread across multiple municipalities, regional approaches are often needed. Metropolitan areas sometimes address this need by pursuing new layers of government, with only a handful of success stories. In the case of Utah, a highly conservative state with a strong belief in limited government, regional planning initiatives would seem especially unlikely. Instead, Envision Utah succeeds in engaging nearly all regional stakeholders in the planning process without creating a new layer of government. For the planning profession, Utah's initiative and process could fill a key gap in how planners engage communities on regional planning issues. In this case study, I analyze the history, processes, and effects of the Envision Utah participatory regional planning model in the Salt Lake City metropolitan area, also known as the Greater Wasatch Area. I conclude by identifying components planners might reproduce in other metropolitan regions and organizations.

Nature of Problem

Regionalism is an environmental, economic, political, or social identity that reflects the scale of an entire metropolitan area and contrasts with local, state, or national identities. How a region is defined is somewhat nebulous, involving environmental, economic, administrative, or many other factors. The scale at which regionalists act, however, is usually defined as the administrative boundaries formed by the counties surrounding a central city. Regional planning, more than many other brands of urban planning, has had a difficult legacy and limited implementation in the United States. Fishman (2000, p. 108) argues that the planning profession has had a checkered history of "badly conceived, imperfectly implemented, or wholly ignorant initiatives," exemplified by the Urban Renewal projects of the 1970s and similar failures. He argues that the root of these failures lies primarily in their top-down, technocratic implementation instead of a bottom-up, communicative origin (Fishman, 2000). Planning in the post-war years approached many urban issues in an analytical and rational manner,

seeking clear answers to clear problems. The reality is that, as Rittel and Webber (1973) would argue, urban issues are seldom clear or quickly solvable. Instead, urban issues, or 'wicked problems' as they refer to them, involve many interrelated variables acting on one another, creating unique, contextual, and temporal issues requiring comprehensive action. For regional planning, this includes operating across multiple competing jurisdictions simultaneously.

For contemporary regional planning, Fishman summarizes three key lessons from planning's failure: to doubt "grand design" initiatives, to incorporate local interests and diversities into the larger framework, and to approach planning as a "regional conversation" rather than a top-down imposition of policies (2000, p. 119). Other scholars have reinforced this argument, stating that planners should be "openly inviting [of] political and social values" into the planning debate (Davidoff, 2012, p. 191). In response to these lessons, some urban areas have implemented regional governance structures to address regional challenges, such as regional councils, city-county consolidations, or special service districts, with mixed success. These endeavors require a strong buy-in from residents to state-level action, as they are inherently state-level interventions. The remaining question then is what becomes of regional action in states where large-scale government action is often distrusted or limited. This is where Utah's model may help fill a gap in the current regional planning tool-kit.

History of Envision Utah

The driving force behind Envision Utah is the Coalition for Utah's Future, a non-profit organization formed in 1988 by a collection of public and private community leaders to address metropolitan issues. The Coalition's original mission was to attract businesses to Utah and spur economic growth through engaging local community interests and providing a forum for consensus building (Coalition for Utah's Future, 2009). As Utah's economic condition picked up in the early 1990s, local leaders and residents began raising questions about how the Salt Lake City metropolitan area (Greater Wasatch Area) would accommodate future economic and population growth without compromising the area's character, values, and goals (Coalition, 2009).

As a result, the Coalition created a task force to research and report on growth in the region, headed by local industry leader Robert Grow. His approach to the problem was to gather as

much public input as possible, thereby fleshing out the region's interests and piecing together common themes for Utah's future (Coalition, 2009). In what he referred to as the "Sherlock Holmes" model, Grow argued that the leadership should never assume it knows the complete story in a community, but instead should ask many questions and listen intently to sort out the truth (Coalition, 2009). In other words, Envision Utah is premised on the notion that a vision for the region is nested in the residents' values, and only through conversation and dialogue can planners conceptualize this vision. This model is not unique in theory and has been practiced under other names in many municipalities in recent decades. As I

of consensus-building endeavors, the Utah Model does not even rely on inter-municipal agreements to implement goals (Scheer, 2012).

Instead, Envision Utah relies on two interdependent stages of input and implementation. In the first stage, as discussed above, researchers collect extensive public input on what residents want to see for their children and grandchildren (Scheer, 2012). This process includes translating convoluted planning language into contextual, easy-to-understand language. Rather than defining 'social justice,' for example, concepts like 'neighborliness' were more tangible. Similarly, Drawing on local traditions of large family size, this model worked within an existing cultural framework where residents think of adjacent communities as part of their extended families rather than competing jurisdictions. This means concepts like neighborliness and preserving natural beauty are benefits shared by all of one's family across the region, instead of by one municipality at the expense of another. Approaching regional visioning from a family-oriented approach, rather than a jargon-heavy planning approach, translates planning goals into the goals of the local population. This is not sleight of hand on the part of planners, but instead translates intangible concepts into tangible features of the community. The second stage is to engage regional stakeholders, including developers, politicians, planners, environmentalists, religious leaders, and many others in the implementation strategy.

Envision Utah's initial product was the Quality Growth Strategy (QGS), which outlined a series of regional goals based on community input and, more importantly, an implementation tool-kit for communities to pursue projects they choose (Envision Utah, 2011). As Brenda Scheer (2012) of the Brookings Institute makes explicit, none of Envision Utah's initiatives were adopted in communities that did not wish to conform to the QGS. Although the QGS has been entirely voluntary, it is supported in nearly all of the 91 cities and 10 counties of the Greater Wasatch Area (Envision Utah, 2009).

Key Challenges to Replication

In spite of its broad acceptance, the Utah Model of regional planning has been a unique success story under largely unique circumstances. Demographic homogeneity, cultural nuances, and dominance of the central city over the metropolitan area set Utahns apart from much of the nation, including neighboring states with similar political and demographic histories.

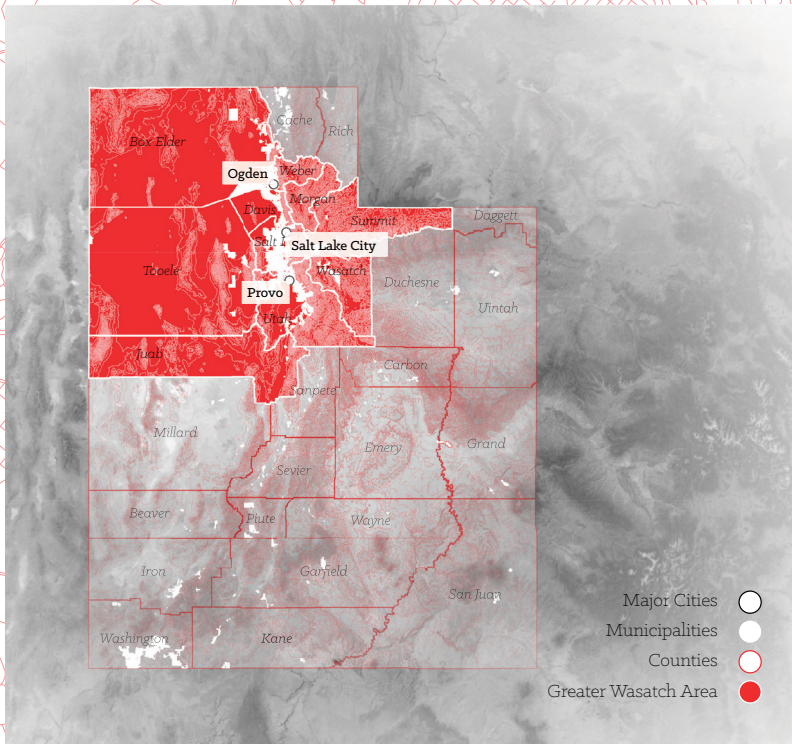


Fig 11: Utah Context

illustrate in the following sections, however, the geographic scope of Envision Utah and the lack of political coercion necessary to implement it are truly unique.

Regional Planning in Two Phases

Many regional planning interventions propose a governance model with the power to influence important decisions at the local level to bring them in line with the goals of the region (Scheer, 2012), yet in the Utah model this is entirely absent. The Utah Model categorically rejects regional governance as a component of the planning process. After over two decades

According to the US Census Bureau (2013) and other agencies, Utah is composed of a nearly 92 percent white and 60 percent Latter Day Saint church population (Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life, 2010). This highly homogeneous population presents a unique advantage to Envision Utah proponents and a disadvantage to many other areas looking to replicate the Utah model. In Utah's case, building consensus based on shared morals, values, and vision is not especially difficult as most households share similar beliefs and experiences. As Scheer (2012) notes, states like Louisiana, Montana, Texas, and Wyoming have all attempted to replicate pieces of Envision Utah in their own states with mixed success. While each of these has higher church membership than Utah, membership is divided into a greater number of denominations, resulting in a much more diverse population (Infogroup, 2010). Similarly, none, save Wyoming, have the ethnic or racial homogeneity of Utah (US Census, 2013). In short, the ability to create a broad-based consensus to the degree Utah has achieved is less likely in other states due to more diverse value systems reflected in greater ethnic, racial, and religious heterogeneity.

Scheer (2012) further underscores Utah's contrast to the neighboring states in relation to property

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rights. Like many western states' residents, Utahns strongly value private property rights. Unlike their neighbors, however, Utahns have a legacy of community cooperation handed down from the state's Mormon founders; this has helped bolster consensus building over competition. For private property owners, this means a greater focus on shared or communal responsibility for social, economic, and environmental issues at the potential expense of private interests. Even in more liberal and progressive urban areas like Portland, Oregon this is a difficult practice to accept, much less in states like Texas and Wyoming.

Lastly, I speculate that Salt Lake City's cultural and economic dominance enables greater consensus, albeit a Salt Lake City-oriented consensus. Salt Lake County, in which Salt Lake City is the largest municipality, comprises 37 percent of Utah's entire population, the state capital, the headquarters of the Mormon Church, and the single most recognizable geographic feature in the State of Utah: the Great Salt Lake. Salt Lake City is not only the economic and political center of Utah, but also its cultural center. As Fishman (2000) notes, metropolitanism, or the cultural, economic, and political dominance of the region by the urban center, is often mistaken as a synonym for regionalism, but the two should be distinguished. In Utah's case, rather than taking a truly regionalist approach to urban issues similar to that of urban areas of comparable size, perhaps Salt Lake City exerts a cultural and identity pull similar to that of the urban areas of the Chicago School of urban studies.

In the Chicago model, the central city is a densely populated regional nucleus, surrounded by satellite cities decreasing in population density and social, economic, and political influence (Judd, 2011). These satellite areas are fundamentally subordinate to and dependent upon the urban core in nearly all respects. Urban areas in this model include Chicago, as well as perhaps Portland, Oregon and other metropolitan areas with a disproportionately large central city. In contrast, urban areas of the Los Angeles School exhibit categorically opposite characteristics, with a polycentric region consisting of multiple urban nuclei acting independently of one another. In the Los Angeles metropolitan area, for example, five of California's 15 largest cities all vie for influence and economic development in the region. To foster regional solutions in the Los Angeles model, policy makers would need a truly collaborative regionalism that emphasizes the interests of these lesser urban nuclei alongside those of Los Angeles. The literature measuring these relationships is rare or of questionable design, however. In order to further evaluate these ideas in the detail they deserve would require research beyond the scope of this case study, but I raise the question regardless. In the case of Salt Lake City, I doubt that suburban municipalities are large or influential enough to effectively counter Salt Lake City's interests, or that their interests are all that different from those of the central city.

Implications for the Planning Profession

Scheer (2012) argues that four key, replicable lessons should be pulled from Utah's model. First, implement capacity-building measures as a valuable alternative to new layers of governance. By working through existing institutions, Envision Utah avoided contested election or referenda battles and instead strengthened already-respected actors. Second, provide the public with usable relevant data. By tailoring information and data to issues Utahns could relate to, Envision Utah proponents ensured greater and more educated buy-in from the region's communities. Third, as illustrated earlier, appeal to shared community values. Lastly, maintain the proper political composition. In this regard, Envision Utah sought broad support from regional stakeholders first to develop the QGS and then to sell the plan to political leaders (2009). Scheer (2012) concedes that the Utah model is unique in its context and content, and thus difficult to replicate in its entirety. Due to Utah's demographic and cultural homogeneity, large-scale export to other urban areas is not likely in the near future.

I argue, however, that broad-based action through existing institutions is viable in most states. Just as the Coalition was a non-partisan growth advocate prior to Envision Utah, most states already have respected institutions capable of engaging communities across social cleavages in a similar fashion. Envision Utah proponents ensured that any planning arrangement involved all of the stakeholders necessary to put the plan into practice.

State municipal leagues, non-profit consortia of concerned residents, or land-grant university extension programs could act as viable mediators between cities, synthesizing and moderating community interests into regional goals. For example, the Michigan Municipal League has recently stepped outside its role as a research and data dissemination agency to consult Michigan communities in creating or redeveloping community assets such as public spaces. This has created best practices for struggling communities across Michigan to address disinvestment in downtown areas (Michigan Municipal League, 2013). Similarly, the Center for Michigan promotes itself as a "think and do tank," touting their commitment to broad-based community research as well as

lobbying and advocacy (Center for Michigan, n.d.). Its three-stage model of "engage, inform, and achieve" reflects Envision Utah's model in that it solicits input from a wide audience, providing tangible and relevant data, while synthesizing input into actionable goals it can lobby to state policy makers. Lastly, land-grant universities have a mandate from both state and federal governments to conduct applied research in communities, deriving best practices, building local capacity, and above all advising local leaders. In Oregon, for example, Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Services has a program called Citizen Participation Organizations (CPOs). In this program, OSU

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helps build community organizations that can speak for their respective areas and connect to statewide resources. OSU uses community-development best practices from across the state to advise CPOs on how to manage growth, voice regional concerns, and connect to a larger regional growth-management conversation in Oregon.

These three examples from Michigan and Oregon are not unique; every state has similar reciprocal organizations. These nonpartisan institutions are respected and have the resources to conduct research and advocacy similar to the activities of Envision Utah. Organizations engaged in communicative planning in conjunction with statewide action may not achieve consensus on the scale Envision Utah has, but they can provide coordination between and advocacy for a wide spectrum of community interests and needs. By working through organizations like these, regional planners could implement aspects of the Utah model and, most importantly, advance planning as a comprehensive regional conversation rather than state-level imposition of policies. ■

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