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The Better Beehive Files

Healthy Communities: Enhancing Open Space

-HEALTHY COMMUNITIES- ENHANCING OPEN SPACE

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The Utah Foundation's mission is to produce objective, thorough and well-reasoned research and analysis that promotes the effective use of public resources, a thriving economy, a well-prepared workforce and a high quality of life for Utahns. The Utah Foundation seeks to help decision-makers and citizens understand and address complex issues. The Utah Foundation also offers constructive guidance to improve governmental policies, programs and structures.

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Utah Foundation Project Staff

John Salevurakis, *Research Analyst, lead author*
Shawn Teigen, *President, author*
Ashley Marshall, *Research Intern*
Marguerite Spaethling, *Research Intern*

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INTRODUCTION

Utah's population has more than tripled between 1980 and 2020. Utah was also the fastest growing state in the country between 2010 and 2020.¹ About one-third of this population growth is from people moving to Utah from other states. These people may be choosing Utah for its relatively low crime rates, good job prospects, and cost of living. That said, people also move to Utah to enjoy the outdoors.² Indeed, many Utah cities and towns provide nearby outdoor opportunities, as well as good access to parks, rivers, golf courses, trails, and other open space to enhance residential quality of life.

Utah's natural resource endowments and its past cultivation of urban and suburban open spaces will likely continue to spur population growth in the future. As a result, additional stress will be placed upon existing endowments. Doing nothing in the coming years threatens to decrease the quality of life that Utahns – both newcomers and long-timers alike – have come to expect and value.

The Wasatch Front Regional Council specifically aims to preserve open space as one of the Wasatch Choice Vision's four primary goals. The goal looks to "preserve sufficient and easily accessible open lands that provide us with recreational opportunities."³

This report focuses upon that goal. It provides an understanding of why open space is important, looks at the population growth that is complicating access to open space, and describes the availability of open space. The report then offers a menu of options for local governments and communities to improve the use and allocation of open space. These include improved and additional parks, trails, recreational access points, transportation

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES SERIES



The Utah Foundation's Healthy Communities series of reports explores policy options contributing to Utahns' quality of life in an environment of increasing populations, increasing scarcity of open space, rising prices, food insecurity, and the need to create safer, more equitable streets and infrastructure. This series is part of the Utah Foundation's Better Beehive Files.

KEY FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT



- Under multiple measures, Utahns have a dearth of open space access and availability. With Utah's population growth, this will become more of an issue.
- Utah spends proportionally more on parks and recreation than other states. That number had been declining since 2008 until trending back up beginning in 2019.
- Governments have leverage to ensure the inclusion of open space in small and large projects that are at least partially under public control.
- Opening new parks is an obvious way to increase the availability of open space, though other options will be needed, such as additional trails and improving or repurposing existing space such as schoolyards, golf courses, and other pockets of fallow land.
- It is becoming more urgent to address overcrowding in some open spaces but at the same time improve transportation to many of those spaces.

1 U.S. Census Bureau, *Utah was the Fastest-Growing State from 2010-2020*, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/state-by-state/utah-population-change-between-census-decade.html>.

2 Izzy Howell, *Bay Area Companies are Moving to Utah (Here's Why)*, Utah Business, October 14, 2020, <https://www.utahbusiness.com/satellite-offices-are-coming-to-utah/>.

3 Wasatch Front Regional Council, *Wasatch Choice Vision*, <https://wfr.org/wasatch-choice-regional-vision-wrcv/>.

systems, and other infrastructure necessary to encourage public space utilization. The report also includes spotlights on large-scale neighborhood projects.

This report uses Salt Lake County and the Wasatch Front as a focus for discussion. This is simply because Salt Lake County constitutes about one-third of Utah’s residents while the Wasatch Front constitutes roughly 80% of the state’s residents. That said, many of the proposals for improved use and allocation of open-space resources could be implemented in any of the state’s communities.

BACKGROUND

What is Open Space?

When the Utah Foundation references “open space” in this report, we are referring to parks and traditional open space in the most formal sense, such as large regional parks and small neighborhood parks enjoying varying degrees of amenities. However, we are also referring to spaces such as trails, dog parks, school and church yards, urban plazas and walkways, small pockets of land in neighborhoods, and golf courses. The open space in this report includes active spaces that are more oriented toward sports and exercise, as well as passive spaces for that tend to be more oriented toward relaxation.⁴

Open space in this report does not refer to public lands generally, such as the various state and federal lands that cover most of Utah. However, the report does include nearby mountain ranges and deserts – those adjacent to Utah communities – in the definition of open space. These areas serve almost as neighborhood trails and recreation areas, some a short distance away or even walkable to those Utahns fortunate to live near the state’s great outdoors.

Why Open Space is Important

Physical Health. While open space is obviously beneficial to the ecosystem and serves to increase biodiversity, there are numerous other objectively measurable, and economically rational, reasons for open space to be valued in society and funded by state and local governments. First, readily available open space increases the rate of physical activity thus decreasing the incidence of cardiovascular disease, stroke, high cholesterol, and maladies that are more likely to affect inactive and overweight Americans.⁵ An obvious societal benefit of this would be a reduction in stress upon health care systems and a parallel reduction in the associated costs.⁶

Similarly, pediatric benefits of open space are also noted in medical literature. Many of these studies highlight a positive correlation between open

4 American Planners Association, *LBCS Activity Dimension with Descriptions*, <https://www.planning.org/lbcs/standards/activity/>.

5 Elizabeth Moxley, *Green Space and Heart Health: What’s the Connection?*, Preventative Cardiovascular Nurses Association, March 7, 2022, <https://pcna.net/green-space-and-heart-health-whats-the-connection/>.

6 Stephen K. Van Den Eeden et al., *Association Between Residential Green Cover and Direct Healthcare Costs in Northern California: An Individual Level Analysis of 5 Million Persons*, Environment International, May 2022, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0160412022001003>.



Celebration of Life Monument. Credit: Wikipedia User Another Believer under license (CC BY-SA 4.0)

space accessibility and early childhood health. Similar studies observe that a positive relationship exists between access to open space and childhood cognitive development.⁷

Open space also contributes to physical well-being via its opposition to the impacts of urbanization. Reducing paved surface areas moderates summer temperatures in “heat islands” – where the localized environment is warmer than the surrounding area. Heat islands contribute to heat related deaths and illnesses such as respiratory difficulties, heat cramps and exhaustion, and heat stroke.⁸ Further, open spaces have the ability to filter out pollutants and improve health.⁹

Finally, in a 2017 Envision Utah survey, respondents were asked to think about the things that their local community or public policy could do to influence their health in a positive way. A top answer was to “support land use development policies that preserve and promote open spaces for recreation, physical activity, and community gardens.” Over 45% of respondents said that this would have a good amount of impact and another 32% said this was one of the most impactful/influential things.¹⁰

Mental Health. Equally important is the reality that open spaces promote mental well-being which accompanies high levels of physical activity. Open spaces are also shown to improve cognitive function-

7 Hayley Christian, et al, *The Influence of the Neighborhood Physical Environment on Early Child Health and Development: A Review and Call for Research*, Health and Place, May 2015, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1353829215000155>.

8 United States Environmental Protection Agency, *Heat Island Impacts*, <https://www.epa.gov/heatislands/heat-island-impacts>.

9 Arnt Deiner et al., *How Can Vegetation Protect us from Air Pollution? A Critical Review on Green Spaces' Mitigation Abilities for Air-borne Particles from a Public Health Perspective - With Implications for Urban Planning*, Science of the Total Environment, November 2021, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0048969721036779>.

10 Envision Utah, 2017, p.43, <https://gethealthyutah.org/images/pdfs-docs/Get-Healthy-Utah-Health-Values-Study-Retreat-Presentation.pdf>.

ing and promote physical and mental health via the formation of “health protective” social connections.¹¹

Veterans and non-veterans alike coping with past traumatic events also benefit from open space access. In fact, research shows that the more time a veteran or someone with post-traumatic stress disorder spends outdoors, the more substantial the decrease in their symptoms.¹² More generally, a long-term study between 1985 and 2013 has shown that a person’s proximity to parks, forests, and rural lands in childhood significantly reduces their likelihood of developing a variety of psychological disorders in adolescence and adulthood.¹³

Equity. From a social-equity perspective, the measurable benefits described above are more likely to accrue to higher income groups due to the inverse relationship between income and available open space.¹⁴ Open spaces in lower income areas are also generally smaller and less well-equipped than the spaces in higher income neighborhoods.¹⁵

Further, heat islands are disproportionately present in lower income neighborhoods. More specifically, a 2021 Nature Conservancy study shows that 92% of low-income neighborhoods have an average of 15% less tree cover than high-income neighborhoods. This absence of tree cover in low-income areas resulted in higher observed temperatures.¹⁶

Therefore, municipalities seeking to provide open space, particularly in lower income environments, can achieve social equity outcomes while potentially decreasing health care and other social costs associated with physical and mental ailments. It therefore follows that the social benefit of spending on open space will have the greatest economic benefit in the areas most deprived of it in the past.

Quality of Life. Beyond objectively measurable physical and mental health benefits, the Utah Foundation Quality of Life Index shows that Utahns place high value upon their natural surroundings and access to parks and recreation. In fact, “the attractiveness of the natural surroundings” and “the availability of good parks, open spaces, or places for recreation” are two of only four of the Index’s 20 factors that have been deemed a “success” – or above average in terms of importance and performance – since the survey began in 2011.¹⁷

11 Mental Health America, *4Mind4Body: Social Connections and Recreation*, <https://mhanational.org/4mind4body-social-connections-and-recreation>.

12 Joanna E. Bettmann et al., *The Effect of Time Outdoors on Veterans Receiving Treatment for PTSD*, *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8405544/>.

13 Kristine Engemann, et al., *Residential Green Space in Childhood is Associated with Lower Risk of Psychiatric Disorders from Adolescence into Adulthood*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1807504116>.

14 Robert I McDonald et al., *The Tree Cover and Temperature Disparity in US Urbanized areas: Quantifying the Association with Income Across 5,723 Communities*, *PLOS ONE*, April 28, 2021, <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0249715>.

15 Brandon Withrow, *Changing America, Lack of Green Space in Under-represented Communities is a Health Crisis that Can’t Wait*, May 27, 2021, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/opinion/555500-lack-of-green-spaces-in-under-represented-communities-is-a-health/>.

16 Rob McDonald, *Mapping Tree Inequality: Why Many People Don’t Benefit from Tree Cover*, *Cool Green Science: Stories of The Nature Conservancy*, <https://blog.nature.org/2021/04/28/mapping-tree-inequality-why-many-people-dont-benefit-from-tree-cover/>.

17 The Utah Foundation, *The 2022 Utah Community Quality of Life Index Is a Booming Economy Making Life Better?* June 2020, <https://www.utahfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/rrr802.pdf>. The other two “success” factors are “The Level of Safety in Your Area and Security from Crime”

Further, when survey respondents were asked what would improve their quality of life, people very often made reference to open space. Responses included: “plant more trees,” “more wild open space,” and “more parks.”¹⁸ Similarly, a 2014 Envision Utah survey shows that outdoor recreation is a major contributor to quality of life and valued by Utahns as it encourages health and time with family.¹⁹

How Much Open Space is Needed?

The World Health Organization recommends that, for physical and mental well-being, people should live within a five-minute walk of at least 1.25 acres of public open space.²⁰ This is equivalent to the distance of the length of three football or professional soccer fields to an area the size of about one of those fields.²¹ Similarly, the Trust for Public Land notes that, of large cities setting the standard for park access by distance, most of those (61%) define “close” as within a ten-minute walk.²² That is about one-half mile. Our report focuses on the Trust’s distance, but “close” certainly means different things for different Utahns.

Open space is also measured by the number of acres available per person. Some research suggests that in large urban areas, “urban green space” should at minimum be about 100 square feet per person, with an ideal amount of over 500 square feet per person.²³

In reality, a combination of the above measures is likely necessary to get a clear picture of open space accessibility. While large regional parks obviously contribute nicely to available acreage in general terms, they may not be as accessible to those living outside of a particular radius from the park itself. Conversely, a collection of smaller neighborhood parks might not efficiently serve to increase open space per person for a large suburban or urban area, but might possibly improve access to open space for a large number of people living far from a larger regional park. Simultaneously, these definitions of open space vary. Should paved urban trails count as open space? What about nature trails outside a city?

Further, a broader definition of open space and the embrace of more widely distributed (but smaller) spaces could avoid issues of “green gentrification” that might accompany new, large regional parks and other open spaces with coveted amenities. This is important as research indicates that homes fronting or abutting urban parks experiences an 8% to 10% increase in value.²⁴ This can be good for some residents while harming others – especially those on fixed incomes and renters. In response, the concept of “just green enough” seeks to ensure that open space planning does not

and “How Much People Support and Help Each Other.”

18 The Utah Foundation, 2022 Quality of Life Index survey response analysis.

19 Your Utah Your Future, *How we Created a Vision: People and Process*, <https://yourutahyourfuture.org/topics/recreation/item/18-how-we-created-a-vision-people-and-process>.

20 World Health Organization, *Urban Green Spaces: A Brief for Action*, https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/342289/Urban-Green-Spaces_EN_WHO_web3.pdf.

21 Football fields are shorter and smaller than soccer fields – 330 yards and 1.25 acres is between the two.

22 The Trust for Public Land, *Parks on the Clock: Why we Believe in the 10-minute Walk*, February 25, 2016, <https://www.tpl.org/blog/why-the-10-minute-walk>.

23 Alessio Russo et.al., *Modern Compact Cities: How Much Greenery Do We Need?*, International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, October 5, 2018.

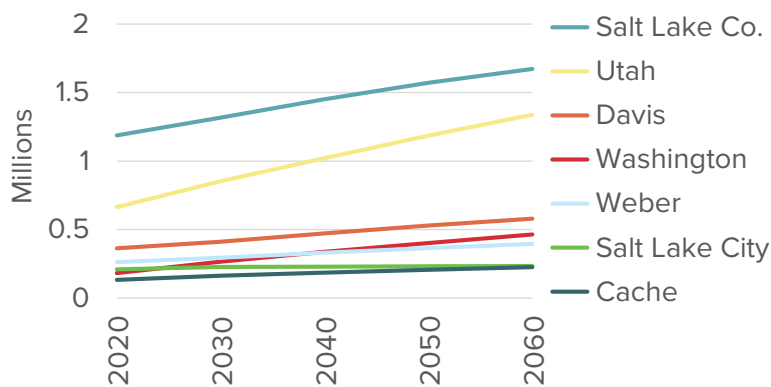
24 John L. Crompton, *How Much Impact Do Parks Have on Property Values*, The National Parks and Recreation Association, March 26, 2020.

only focus on developing grand projects that could result in the possible displacement of locals.²⁵

This type of gentrification might be a concern regarding the new Glendale Park development in Salt Lake City, highlighting that discussions of open space quantity and access are not as simple as totaling up the number of acres and dividing it by the population to arrive at an optimal quantity of open space.²⁶ As usual, qualitative factors come into play – but the stresses of population growth clearly remain prominent in the discussion.

Utah population growth expected to continue – though unevenly.

Figure 1: Population Growth Over Time by County



Source: Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute.

Pressures of Population Growth.

An essential part of ensuring that communities in Utah have enough open space is understanding how they will change in the future.

Utah's population is expected to grow by 2.2 million people between 2020 and 2060. This represents a 66% increase.²⁷ Obviously, this population growth will not be evenly distributed in geographical terms. That means different communities will face different challenges. As shown in Figure 1, Salt Lake County is expected to grow by roughly 41% and Utah County is projected to grow by more than 100%. Another extreme case in percentage terms is that of Washington County's population which is projected to swell by about 155% – or 282,000 residents. Less dramatic population increases are projected in Davis County (60%), Weber County (51%), and Cache County (69%).

Population growth is not simply a long-term problem. Cache, Weber, Davis, Salt Lake, Utah, and Washington counties will see populations from 2020 and 2030 increase by between 11% and 46%. Even the relatively moderate 11% projected population increase in Salt Lake County over the next seven years is likely to put a substantial strain upon public open space and the means by which visitors access it.

In addition, population growth does not solely represent more people with needs for open space – it also means that open space will be more expensive for municipalities to purchase due to an increasing demand for land. Further, population growth can encourage sprawled development and increased land usage without center-based development targets and an eye toward higher levels of density. Therefore, the optimized utilization of existing space and the occasional modification of extant infrastructure to make

25 Trina Hamilton, *Sustainable Cities Need More Than Parks, Cafes and a Riverwalk. They Need Equity Too*, The City Monitor, May 22, 2018, <https://citymonitor.ai/environment/sustainable-cities-need-more-parks-cafes-and-riverwalk-they-need-equity-too-3771>.

26 Alizel Cabrera, *Big New Salt Lake City Park is Certainly Good for Neighbors-Or Is It?*, The Salt Lake Tribune, March 20, 2023, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2023/03/20/big-new-salt-lake-city-park-is/>.

27 Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, *Utah Population to Increase by 2.2 million People Through 2060*, January 19, 2022, <https://gardner.utah.edu/utah-population-to-increase-by-2-2-million-people-through-2060/>.

currently owned space more ripe for development becomes imperative even in the intermediate and short terms. This should be undertaken in concert with the potential acquisition of additional land for this purpose as unforeseen opportunities might present themselves.

Utah's Current Open Space

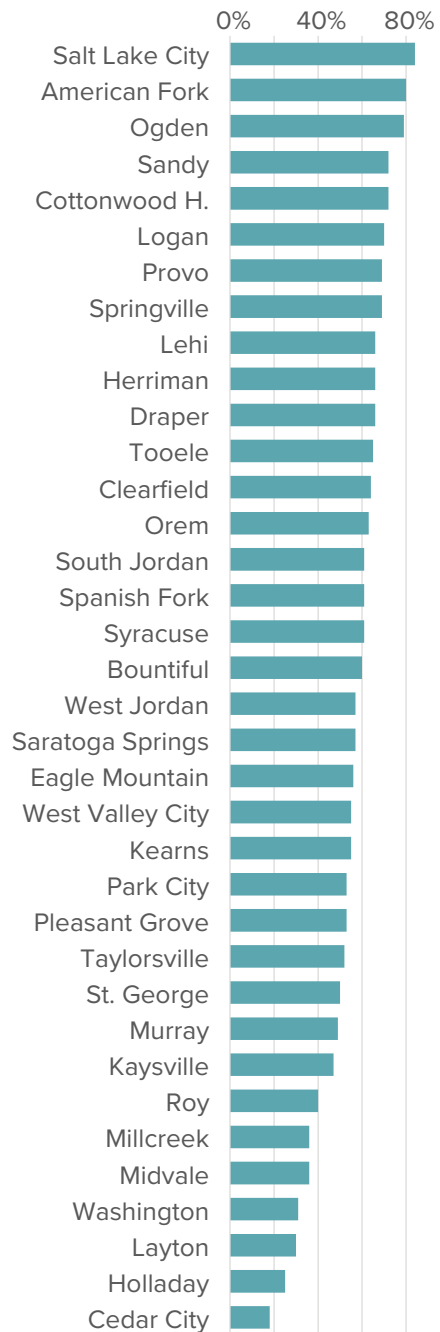
The Trust for Public Land's Park Score provides the percentage of city and town residents that live within a ten-minute walk of a park. One-in-three U.S. residents do not live within a ten-minute walk of a park.²⁸ The percentage is even worse for the 100 largest cities in America – 45%. Many Utah cities are better than that average, though the differences among cities are stark. For instance, Salt Lake City and American Fork have 80% or more residents near parks, while Holladay and Cedar City have only 25% or fewer.

Naturally, access to trails provides another critical open space resource. The Wasatch Front Regional Council developed the Wasatch Front Park and Trail Accessibility interactive map – an online tool for exploring the ten-minute walking ranges for parks as well as paved paths and trails.²⁹ This tool can provide some of Utah's counties and cities with a closer look at where access could be improved.

Finally, as is discussed at length below, school yards provide another park-like opportunity for neighborhoods across the state, especially for those with limit-

The difference among Utah cities' open space access is enormous.

Figure 2: Percentage of Population Within a Ten-Minute Walk of a Park or Open Space, Utah Cities of over 35,000 Residents



Note: See the appendix for Utah communities with populations under 30,000.

Source: The Trust for Public Land, Park Score.

²⁸ The Trust for Public Land, *10-Minute Walk*, <https://10minutewalk.org/>.

²⁹ Wasatch Front Regional Council, *Wasatch Front Park and Trail Accessibility*, <https://wfrc.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=3132c740d147403d8257ad277dc000dc>.

Park space is eclipsed by trail space in Salt Lake County.

Figure 3: Public Space in Salt Lake County by Type

Salt Lake County	Total Public Open Space Acres
Large regional parks	1,275
Medium-sized regional parks	2,341
Special-use regional parks	956
Neighborhood parks	739
Open space and trails	8,540
Golf courses	3,326
Total	17,178

Source: Salt Lake County Parks Department.

ed park and trail access. Another Trust for Public Land tool maps out ten-minute walks to parks and school yards.³⁰

Salt Lake County Open Space Spotlight

A 2015 Salt Lake County Parks Department inventory reveals that there were 17,178 acres of publicly owned open space in the Salt Lake Valley.³¹ Just under a third of that land was devoted to parks, with approximately 20% occupied by golf courses and almost half was unmanicured open space and trails. (See Figure 3.) Salt Lake County owns 46% of the inventoried land, with the remaining acres owned by cities, recreation service areas, and the State.

Salt Lake County's population, according to recent census projections, increased by just under 129,000 residents – roughly 12% – between 2014 and 2022.

To maintain acreage per capita, Salt Lake County would have had to increase the area of public parks, trails, and golf courses by nearly 2,000 acres. Similarly, if we accept estimates that Salt Lake County's population is likely to reach 1.7 million by 2060, this means that to maintain the same public space per capita, the total acreage must increase by over 46% – nearly 8,000 acres. Given the county's relative shortage of available land, this seems highly unlikely unless the rationalized use and repurposing of municipally owned land takes place.

Of course, this also assumes that the 2014 acreage was deemed sufficient. According to the Salt Lake County Parks Department, it was not.³² The department saw a shortfall of 1,362 public acres in 2014 with a projected shortfall of 2,941 acres by 2030. (See Figure 4.)

Given Salt Lake County's estimates, and given the estimated population growth in many Utah counties by 2060, it seems unlikely that a sufficient amount of public land and parks will be made available to maintain available acres per capita stability over the long term without substantial strategic changes to address open space sufficiency.

Salt Lake County park acreage has seen a shortfall that will continue to grow.

Figure 4: Salt Lake County Public Open Space Need, Based on Five Acres per 1,000 People

	Total Acres	Population	Needs	Shortfall
Existing in 2014	4,354	1,143,289	5,716	1,362
Projected in 2030	4,354	1,459,026	7,295	2,941

Note: Totals do not include open space, trails, or golf courses.

Source: Salt Lake County Parks Department.

30 The Trust for Public Land, *ParkServe*, <https://parkserve.tpl.org/mapping/index.html?City-ID=4967000>.

31 Salt Lake County, *2015 Parks & Recreation Facilities Master Plan*, Approved September 1, 2015.

32 Ibid.

How to pay for open space

Looking at local investments over time and compared to other states can also help understand trends in Utah's broader investment in public open space.

Utah's relative public investments in parks and recreation have generally been in decline. While those investments were at \$5.65 of public spending per \$1,000 of Utahns' personal income in 2008 and peaked above \$6 in 2012, they had declined below \$4 by 2018.³³ However, spending recovered somewhat in 2020 to \$4.35. (See Figure 5.)

Utah has consistently outspent the nation on parks and recreation. However, the gap is narrowing. Utah spent nearly double the national average a decade ago. Since then, national spending relative to income stabilized, while Utah's relative spending generally continued to decline until 2019.

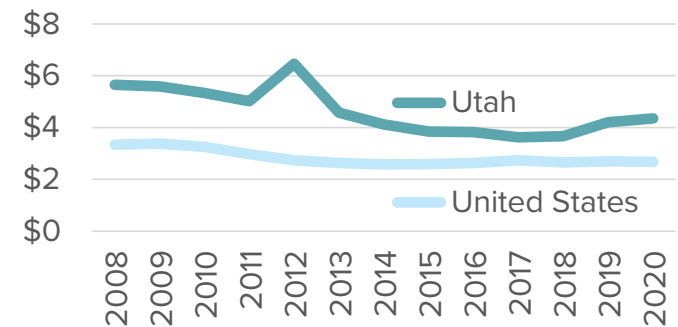
Still, Utah remained among the top five states in terms of relative spending on parks and recreation in 2020.³⁴ Four of the eight Mountain States ranked in the top 10 nationally for parks and recreation spending per \$1,000 of personal income. Nevada and Colorado were with Utah in the very top tier in 2020, with Wyoming and New Mexico also spending relatively aggressively. Montana spent below the national average.

There are numerous ways this public investment is financed or required. These in including bonding, development pressures, taxes and fees, tax increment, and grants.

Bonding. Perhaps the most immediately obvious way of funding open space would be bonding or, perhaps more interestingly, bonding in combination with other sources of funds. A prime example of this would be Park City's acquisition of Bonanza Flat several years ago. Voters in Park City approved a \$25 million dollar bond before additional funds had been committed and before a sales price had been agreed upon. Governmental institutions, corporations, and private donations ultimately closed the \$13 million dollar gap between the bond amount and the final \$38 million purchase price to acquire 1,350 acres of open space. This included contributions from 3,500 people to accomplish the goal.³⁵ This use of bonding (and public/private partnerships) seems an ideal approach to be used in both urban and suburban environments over coming decades to acquire and develop both large and small open spaces across the state.

Utah's parks and recreation investments have not kept up with income.

Figure 5: State and Local Expenditures on Parks and Recreation per \$1,000 of Personal income, Utah and the United States, 2008-2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Economic Analysis, Utah Foundation Calculations

33 The Utah Foundation, *The Flowering of Youth: The Next Generations in Utah*, May 2022, <https://www.utahfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/rr800.pdf>.

34 Ibid.

35 Jay Hamburger, *Park City Acquires Bonanza Flat, Grandest of all Land Deals*, Park Record, June 16, 2017, <https://www.parkrecord.com/news/park-city/park-city-acquires-bonanza-flat-grandest-of-all-land-deals/>.

Development, Property Taxes, and Impact Fees. It is important to consider that publicly owned infill lands do not necessarily represent, in and of themselves, a potential source of urban or suburban open space but rather a means by which open space might be funded. Obviously, not every piece of land is best suited to becoming a downtown or neighborhood park. However, these lands might represent a source of funds to afford open space elsewhere or even possibly enable the incorporation of open space on site. This is particularly the case if the land is urban such that permitting building density upon it becomes a means by which its taxable value might be increased in order to fund open space. Further, nearby open space can enhance taxable valuations of other nearby properties. Finally, urban development, especially if high density, should be generating ample impact fees to fund open space. Again, use of impact fees in this way could increase the taxable valuation of the properties in question and thus further increase municipal revenue.

Tax Increment Financing. Tax increment financing is also an important source of funding for open space development. Tax credits or reimbursements are the primary means by which local governments use the new tax revenues generated by developments to incentivize those developments. At the local level, these credits are typically funded through the capture of new tax revenue generated from the site (tax increment financing, or TIF).

While incentives can be structured in numerous ways, local governments often have limited funds to offer incentives. Generally, local governments use the new tax revenue generated from a new economic development site to provide the incentive funds for the project through the TIF mechanism.³⁶

Division of Outdoor Recreation Grants. The Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation is well equipped to fund a variety of projects. The Division offers Outdoor Recreation grants for infrastructure projects in support of local development from \$15,000 up to \$750,000. Simultaneously, among several other opportunities, the Division offers Recreational Restoration Infrastructure grants as well as Off Highway Vehicle Recreation grants and Recreational Trails Program grants. The grants are available to municipalities, state and federal agencies, tribal governments, and non-profit organizations.³⁷ The Division also administers the Land and Water Conservation Fund offering technical assistance to communities to plan for future recreation projects via Outdoor Recreation Planning Assistance.

SOLUTIONS

Many of the types of open space described in this report may not be effectively operationalized. For example, while Utah has abundant mountain ranges, trail access can be limited and therefore the effectiveness of the open space is questionable. Similarly, school yards might sit empty except during recess. Pockets of urban space might simply sit unused. Golf courses also almost always cater exclusively to those who golf and not often to hikers, skiers, or bird watchers. Given the above, our research is focused upon operationalizing overlooked spaces as well as possible ways of expanding the availability of new ones.

³⁶ See: <https://www.utahfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/rr760.pdf>.

³⁷ Utah Division of Outdoor Recreation, *Grants and Planning*, <https://recreation.utah.gov/grants/>.

Do governments need to increase or at least maintain the availability of and access to open space? Is there truly a shortage? The Utah Foundation does not answer these questions.

That said, there are certainly differences in availability and access across counties, municipalities, and other community geographies. Someone living next to a regional park is likely more satisfied with their access to open space than is someone who must drive to visit a small park that has very few amenities. The former might have a relatively better quality of life than the latter given this access. However, the former might rarely or even never visit that park and so would have no tangible benefit from it. Public officials need to make that determination by engaging with local communities to assess unique needs and specific community desires. If there is a deemed need, officials should work to satisfy it.

How might governments seek to increase availability of and access to open space? The simplest answer is more parks and trails. In addition, governments might seek to improve or repurpose existing space. They might address current overcrowding or improve transportation systems to provide new access to existing open space.

Each of these strategies is addressed in this portion of our report. Figure 6 details these approaches and highlights examples of specific policies and projects that are either currently being undertaken or that may be implemented in the future.

Some of these approaches are relatively easy and inexpensive while others are going to be logistically difficult and costly. All are worthy of some consideration since, over the next 40 years, increasingly costly land will likely highlight the value of even more expensive proposals to increase the availability of and access to open space.

Governments have numerous options for open space expansion and use in Utah.

Figure 6: Potential Open-Space Projects

Project	Scope	Scale	Actors	Likelihood
Additional parks				
	Narrow	Small to Large	Public	Medium
Additional trails				
Trails expansion – hiking and biking	Narrow	Small to Medium	Public	High
Trails expansion – paved resources	Narrow	Medium	Public	High
Improving or repurposing existing open space				
Community schoolyards				
Schoolyards - shared use	Narrow	Small to Large	Public	Medium
Schoolyards - greening	Narrow	Small to Medium	Public	Medium
School closures	Moderate	Small	Public	High
Community orchards	Moderate	Small to Large	Public	Medium
Golf courses				
Golf course repurposing	Moderate	Small to Medium	Public	Low
Golf course multi-purposing	Moderate	Medium	Public	Medium
Publicly & privately owned infill opportunities	Broad	Small to Medium	Public/private	Medium
Publicly owned space				
Project spotlight: Ballpark Revitalization	Narrow	Small	Public/private	High
Project spotlight: Station Center	Narrow	Small to Medium	Public	High
Project spotlight: The Rio Grande Plan	Moderate	Medium	Public/private	Medium
Project spotlight: The Point	Broad	Large	Public/private	High
Addressing overcrowding				
Congestion pricing	Moderate	Medium	Public	High
Pay-to-play	Broad	Small	Public	High
Rationing	Broad	Medium	Public	Medium
Transportation systems				
Buses and trains	Moderate	Large	Public	Medium
Shuttle	Moderate	Small	Public/private	High
The gondola	Narrow	Large	Public	High

Note: In this table, “scope” is understood to mean the breadth of the project in terms of its relative diversity of components necessary to accomplish a given objective. A project’s “scale” is determined by its possible breadth of application or sheer size if more localized. Therefore, “likelihood” is inversely related to a combination of its scope and scale in relation to its perceived cost and directly related to our perception of its relative necessity and ease of implementation.

SOLUTION: ADDITIONAL PARKS

Many communities can meet their open space needs by creating additional parks or more fully using the parks that they currently have. A full answer to the question of how to draw people to existing parks is outside of the scope of this report, but is discussed in the following report in this series.

More established and built-out communities may find it difficult and expensive to create additional parks given land constraints. Nonetheless, Salt Lake City and its residents have recently made some major plans to improve their open space situation – including the addition of new parks. This might be considered a model approach for communities facing increasing costs and land scarcity.

Salt Lake City voters recently approved the \$85 million SLC Parks, Trails, and Open Space bond and the Salt Lake City Council approved a \$67 million Sales Tax Bond.³⁸ Collectively, these bonds will fund the new Glendale Regional Park, Jordan River Corridor augmentation, improvements to the recently acquired Allen Park area, the addition of public space at Fleet Block, Fairmont Park improvements, a \$10 million addition to the \$3.4 million in existing funds to improve Pioneer Park in the downtown area, and provide funding for the Folsom Trail to formally connect 500 West to the Jordan River Parkway Area.³⁹

Three of these projects will result in new, public open space. The new Glendale Regional Park is the largest at 17 acres. It is being undertaken on land already owned by the city, thus eliminating a massive expense associated with public open space expansion.⁴⁰

The recently acquired Allen Park acreage is small and, in spite of costing the city \$7.5 million, was purchased precisely on the cusp of its value likely rising substantially and thus becoming unaffordable as municipally provided open space.⁴¹ Evidence of this is to be found in the fact that smaller lots to the south and north of Allen Park now hold townhomes with values into the seven figures.

Additionally, the Fleet Block development in the Granary District will include a new park, ensured by the fact that the city owns much of the land and can therefore guide plans for the area.^{42,43} The area currently has very little open space.

38 Salt Lake City Council, *General Obligation Bond and Sales Tax Bond: It's Your City, It's Your Business*, <https://go-and-sales-tax-bond-fy-23-slcgov.hub.arcgis.com/>.

39 Salt Lake City. *Salt Lake City Voters Resoundingly Support Parks, Trails & Open Space Bond*, November 22, 2022. <https://www.slc.gov/blog/2022/11/22/salt-lake-city-voters-resoundingly-support-parks-trails-open-space-bond/>.

40 Alixel Cabrera, *At Last, a "Liberty Park" for Salt Lake City's West Side: What Will it Have?*, August 30, 2022, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/2022/08/30/last-liberty-park-salt-lake/>.

41 Seven Canyons Trust, *Allen Park: Celebrating Dr. Allen's Legacy and Restoring Emigration Creek*, <https://sevencanyonstrust.org/allen-park>.

42 Taylor Anderson, *Fleet Block Rezoning on its Way to Extending Salt Lake's Urban Core*, Building Salt Lake, August 29, 2019, <https://buildingsaltlake.com/fleet-block-rezoning-on-its-way-to-extending-salt-lakes-urban-core/>

43 Salt Lake City. *Salt Lake City Voters Resoundingly Support Parks, Trails & Open Space Bond*, November 22, 2022. <https://www.slc.gov/blog/2022/11/22/salt-lake-city-voters-resoundingly-support-parks-trails-open-space-bond/>.



Murray City Park, Murray, Utah. Credit: Flickr User Jere Keys under license (CC BY 2.0)

Salt Lake City has recently taken advantage of similar opportunities. For example, the Three Creeks Confluence Park was economically viable as it is quite small, required only the acquisition of small nearby properties, and was a relatively inexpensive (\$3 million) matter of “daylighting” extant waterways.

SOLUTION: ADDITIONAL TRAILS

Utah residents and visitors have access to roughly 35 million acres of federal land. This amounts to nearly two-thirds of the entire state. However, given land mass, terrain, and distance from population centers, a large proportion of this land is very difficult to access. Further, it might often be cost prohibitive to improve access to some of these areas. Therefore, it is intuitively economical to improve access to public land for the most people at minimum cost. This would most likely be in the closest proximity to larger population centers.

The busiest spot for enjoying the outdoors is on the Salt Lake County trail system via the area composed of Big Cottonwood Canyon, Little Cottonwood Canyon, and Millcreek Canyon. These canyons experience more annual traffic than all of Utah’s national parks combined. Donut Falls in Big Cottonwood Canyon alone hosts 61,000 hikers per year with an average of 2,000 people per day on mid-summer Saturdays.⁴⁴ With Utah’s expected population growth, it seems quite likely that these numbers will continue to increase in the coming years and decades. This will

⁴⁴ Brian Maffly. *Crowded Wasatch Canyons Finally get a Trails Plan*, The Salt Lake Tribune, February 3, 2023, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/environment/2023/02/03/central-wasatch-trails-undergo/>.

necessitate an expansion of trails, as well as fee systems for developed infrastructure use and possibly even the rationing of use for undeveloped areas as discussed later in this report.⁴⁵

Trail Expansion – Hiking and Biking

As populations rise and technology evolves, particularly the increasing popularity of e-bikes, it also seems clear that more and more people are going to be using trails. It also seems likely that people will use trails not exclusively as a means transportation to open space along the Wasatch Front but will also be using trails as the open space. This demand will put pressure on cities and counties to develop more trails.

Indeed, evidence of the increasing demand for Utah open space is to be found in recent controversies surrounding trail construction. In early 2020, the construction of 65 miles of new trails and the integration of 45 miles of existing trails into the system was initiated above the Avenues and Capitol Hill in Salt Lake City.⁴⁶ While some stakeholders expressed excitement at new trails, others expressed concerns. Different factions of the outdoor community and across Avenues residential groups halted the project and requested that their concerns be addressed.⁴⁷

Construction was delayed due to deficient public engagement prior to initiation of the project, unrealistic expectations on the part of trail users, a fundamental difference between the preferences of cyclists and hikers, and the reality that long-term users of the extant trail system were overwhelmingly older hikers accustomed only to traditional trail traffic. It seems likely that vehicular traffic and parking concerns at trailheads in residential areas also spurred residents to encourage delays in the process. Plans for construction were only recently reinitiated after additional community engagement.

Nonetheless, efforts remain underway to develop new trails around the state. For example, the City of Draper, Summit County, and Davis County – to name a few – are becoming mountain biking destinations. Draper in particular offers 117 miles of trails, the most of any city along the Wasatch Front. In a broader sense, the Bonneville Shoreline trail nicely highlights the long-term nature of trail construction and maintenance in Utah with just over one-third of the 280 miles of proposed length of the trail having been constructed since 1990.

Further, Salt Lake County recently made steps to increase open space access in the Oquirrh Mountains in the western part of the Salt Lake valley. The county, Rio Tinto, and The Bureau of Land Management partnered to allow a lease agreement relating to 17 acres of land. This acreage will increase available open space within Butterfield Canyon, Rose Canyon, and Yellow Fork Canyon. The 12 miles of planned trails will augment recent land purchases by the county totaling 145 acres.⁴⁸

45 Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, *Utah Population to Increase by 2.2 Million People Through 2060*, <https://gardner.utah.edu/utah-population-to-increase-by-2-2-million-people-through-2060/>.

46 Salt Lake City Parks and Public Lands, *Foothill Trail System Plan*, March 2020, <https://www.slcdocs.com/openspace/Foothill%20Trail%20System%20Plan/FTSPPart2.pdf>.

47 Brian Maffly, *Work on SLC Trails Halted Until at Least October*, The Salt Lake Tribune, May 24, 2021, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/environment/2021/05/24/work-slcs-foothill-trails/>.

48 Salt Lake County, *SLCo and Rio Tinto to Improve Outdoor Recreation*, <https://slco.org/newsroom/salt-lake-county-and-rio-tinto-partner-to-provide-improved-outdoor-recreation-options-in-butterfield-canyon/>.

Trail Expansion – Paved Resources

Access and expansion of open space is set to make big strides in the coming years. Governor Cox allocated \$100 million in his fiscal year 2024 budget – with additional ongoing funding – for a statewide trail network development and maintenance. The Utah Legislature followed suit. It passed a bill for ongoing trail funding as a percentage of overall transportation funding – starting at \$45 million in 2024 – as well as \$45 million in one-time support.⁴⁹ This funding will work to connect paved trails around the state, a boon to active transportation and recreation.

Similarly highlighting the value of paved trail resources, in May of 2023, the temporary and partial implementation of a long discussed “Green Loop” trail system around the urban core of Salt Lake City will take place. This pop-up version of the proposal will operate between 300 and 400 South on 200 East. Badminton courts, seating, food trucks, 190 trees, after-work concerts, and Saturday events will offer a palpable idea of the larger concept’s potential while maintaining traffic flow. Certainly, this represents a very small fraction of what appears to be a 40 linear block proposal, but the temporary application of these urban open space strategies illustrates how the city (and perhaps the state as a whole) is likely envisioning changes to Utah’s urban spaces.

SOLUTION: IMPROVING OR REPURPOSING EXISTING OPEN SPACE

Given the importance of open space, the state’s growth, and current trends in the availability and investment in open space, creative policy formulation becomes important as a way of more efficiently allocating open space in Utah.

The recent allocation of \$10 million in funds to Pioneer Park clearly highlights the reality that many existing public spaces are underutilized because their features are either dated or non-existent, or perhaps because the surrounding areas have yet to develop sufficiently to guarantee usage.⁵⁰ This allocation also highlights that revamping existing public spaces is likely much cheaper than augmenting the supply of such spaces, particularly in an urban context.

Community Schoolyards

In keeping with the need for rationalizing the use of open space in Utah, the reality of school grounds as somewhat inefficiently used space should be a topic for discussion. Approaches to this problem include sharing the use of school grounds, converting blacktop to open space, and capitalizing upon demographic changes to repurpose the land under permanently closed schools.

49 Utah State Legislature, S.B. 185, Transportation Amendments, <https://le.utah.gov/~2023/bills/static/SB0185.html>.

50 Salt Lake City. *Salt Lake City Voters Resoundingly Support Parks, Trails & Open Space Bond*, November 22, 2022. <https://www.slc.gov/blog/2022/11/22/salt-lake-city-voters-resoundingly-support-parks-trails-open-space-bond/>.



Rees Pioneer Park, Brigham City, Utah. Credit: Flickr User Ken Lund under license (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Shared Use of Schoolyards. While offering the public access to school fields during school hours would be inappropriate, school land remains largely abandoned for months every year, for hours every afternoon, and obviously on weekends.

This, it turns out, is not a reality that has been lost on the Trust for Public Land, a non-profit active in assisting the formation of “shared use” agreements between school districts and municipalities to increase access.⁵¹ The Trust asserts that if all schoolyards in America were made publicly accessible outside of school hours, 20 million Americans lacking close access to open space would now effectively live within a short distance from a park.⁵²

It also seems that the process of optimizing playground utilization has an impact on how neighborhoods and cities address climate change. The Trust for Public Land notes that roughly 36 percent of the nation’s nearly 51 million public school students attended school in “heat islands.” It is further noted that, as a subset of the above, over four million students go to a school in a severe heat island of seven degrees or more and over one million attend school in a heat island of 10 degrees or more.⁵³ The Trust also highlights that, in America’s 100 largest U.S. cities, neighborhoods populated predominantly by people of color on average have access to 44% less park acreage than predominantly white neighborhoods.⁵⁴ Given the above, it would seem that “enhanced access” should likely be combined with a “greening” of school grounds.

51 The Trust for Public Land, *Community Schoolyards Projects: A Game Changing Solution to America’s Park Equity Problem*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.tpl.org/community-schoolyards-report-2021>.

52 Ibid.

53 Adele Peters, There’s a Simple way to Give 20 Million Americans Access to Parks: Let Them Use School Playgrounds, Fast Company, August 7, 2019. <https://www.fastcompany.com/90386583/theres-a-simple-way-to-give-20-million-americans-access-to-parks-let-them-use-school-playgrounds>.

54 Ibid.

Schoolyard Greening. The OASIS Program, which is an acronym for “Openness, Adaptation, Sensitization, Innovation and Social Ties” is a “schoolyard greening” program transforming schoolyards in Paris into more attractive and less “sealed” (in both soil and community access terms) open spaces. OASIS makes school yards available to both the schools and local populations outside of school hours. The uniform distribution of schoolyards creates a circumstance in which their “greening” distributes cooler and more open space without regard to socioeconomic status or other demographic factors. OASIS is quick to note that the spaces are also available not only to children, but “the elderly, people in poor health, or mothers with babies” and are also used as tools to teach students about nature, conservation, and gardening.⁵⁵

School Closures. Another approach to utilizing schools to accomplish open-space goals might be the rationalized employment of disused schools. For instance, declining enrollment in Salt Lake City schools has made some ripe for closure.⁵⁶ Just three schools exhibit enrollment numbers in excess of 75% of capacity while eight schools are operating at below 50% of student capacity. All of the latter are elementary schools. Given the above total enrollment numbers, the current number of schools, and the Interim Superintendent’s stated desire to have each open school housing roughly 550 students, it would seem that at least four schools will be closed after the 2023-2024 school year following further study and the hearing of public comment.

Given this, there will obviously be questions relating to how communities might employ the existing structures and land given the future population growth expectations. It seems reasonable for the districts to maintain ownership of these properties as the future acquisition of large school-suitable land would likely prove prohibitively expensive. It also seems likely that current physical infrastructure on these sites might necessitate replacement when a new school is demographically viable. Therefore, the conversion and maintenance of these sites into parks or other less infrastructure-intensive open spaces seems to make good sense from an ecological and economic perspective. It also seems likely that similar situations exist elsewhere in the state and that the idea could be exported to these locales as well.

While schoolyard policies do not represent a substitute for investment in dedicated open space, they do represent an economically rational use of funds in an environment where land is becoming prohibitively expensive or simply unavailable.⁵⁷

Community Orchards

One potential use for small, abandoned, or undevelopable lands – or indeed even park strips and road medians – could be their employment as small to medium scale community orchards. Such spaces could come about with public

55 Megan Clement, *Green Space in Every Schoolyard: The Radical Plan to Cool Paris*, The Guardian, August 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/aug/16/could-greening-every-paris-schoolyard-cool-the-city>.

56 Courtney Tanner, *How Soon Will Salt Lake City Close Schools*, January 10, 2023, The Salt Lake Tribune, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/education/2023/01/10/this-is-timeline-salt-lake-city/>. Note: The Salt Lake City School District has seen its enrollment decline by 13% – 3,000 students – over the last five years across the district’s 39 schools.

57 The Trust for Public Land, *Community Schoolyards Projects: A Game Changing Solution to America’s Park Equity Problem*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.tpl.org/community-schoolyards-report-2021>.

entities working in agreements with private firms or non-profits to maintain, harvest, and distribute resulting fruit products.⁵⁸

Simultaneously, there is no reason that the fruit from these trees should not be available to the public before commercial harvest takes place. It seems unlikely that a high percentage of agricultural output would be taken given the potential height limitations as fruit trees mature. Further, the health benefits on very-low-income populations could be substantial in countering the prevalence of vitamin C deficiencies.⁵⁹

In Utah, Green Urban Lunchbox contracts with landowners to fertilize, prune, and harvest privately owned trees while allocating the harvested resource to food banks and pantries, senior centers, local businesses, volunteers, interns, and apprentices.⁶⁰ They provide products at market rates, at low cost to low-income clients, or at no cost to local food banks. Such a firm could contract with municipalities to accomplish similar goals. The land in question need not even be public to participate in partnership with a municipality – such as under power corridors and other fallow land.

Such programs are in fact scalable. In 2021 there were 3,779 trees registered with the Green Urban Lunchbox. They hosted 75 volunteers who contributed 575 hours of labor to harvest 33,457 pounds of fruit. Green Urban Lunchbox indicated that municipal contracts would enable hiring additional labor to scale up their efforts.

Examples of community orchards also exist abroad. Specifically, the Orchard Project in the United Kingdom has planted over 540 orchards since its founding in 2009. Their work has resulted in the planting of thousands of fruit trees thriving in urban areas across England, Scotland, and Wales, addressing the food security needs of local populations, increasing urban biodiversity, creating habitat for wildlife, building community, and contributing to urban cooling.⁶¹

Golf Courses

Given the scarcity and resulting financial premium existing upon land in Utah, it seems appropriate to inquire regarding the extent to which any municipally owned land employed for other purposes might be materially refashioned and used more efficiently. This could include public golf course land. Any such discussion may center around the golfers, the real estate, and the water.

First, it is expensive to take up and master golf from both financial and time perspectives. Note that pickle ball is gobbling up tennis real estate due in large part to the comparative ease of the sport. Further, golf serves a very specific demographic on the basis of class, age, race, and gender. In

58 The Green Urban Lunchbox, *Fruit Tree Services*, <https://thegreenurbanlunchbox.com/fruitshare-tree-care/>.

59 Karen D. Brown, *Scurvy is a Serious Public Health Problem*, State, November 20, 2015, <https://slate.com/technology/2015/11/scurvy-is-common-and-should-be-diagnosed-and-treated.html>; Yazmeen Tembunde et al., *Scurvy: A Diagnosis Not to be Missed*, Cureus, December 28, 2022, <https://www.cureus.com/articles/123374-scurvy-a-diagnosis-not-to-be-missed#!/>. The prevalence of vitamin C deficiency in low income and homeless populations is between 10% and 17% while the percentage of this population “at risk” of scurvy is roughly 40%.

60 The Green Urban Lunchbox, *Fruitshare*, <https://thegreenurbanlunchbox.com/programs/fruitshare/>.

61 The Orchard Project, <https://www.theorchardproject.org.uk/>.



Memory Grove. Credit: Wikipedia User Another Believer under license (CC BY-SA 4.0)

fact, the majority of annual golf rounds are played by individuals over the age of 65 and only 22% of golfers are women.⁶²

An estimated 250,000 Utahns golf, representing less than 8% of the total population. Since this 8% includes all types of golf activities – from driving ranges to golf simulators – the percentage of people who actually play rounds on golf courses with regularity is much less than 8%.⁶³ That said, Utah’s population growth could more than make up for any decreasing percentage of people playing the sport. In fact, one course opened in 2022 in Ivins, Utah, and another is planned for 2025 in Wasatch County.

Nonetheless, in terms of real estate, golf is not a high-density land use activity. The Utah Foundation estimates that, averaged over a year, fewer than 100 people enjoy the daily use of each of Utah’s golf courses.⁶⁴ Salt Lake City golf courses average 169 acres each, which is 53% larger than the city’s Sugarhouse Park. In other words, Salt Lake City offers 1,016

62 The River’s Edge, How Many People Play Golf and Who Plays it?, <https://riversedgegolfbend.com/bend-oregon-golf-blog/demographics-of-golf/>.

63 Ethan Bauer, *An Illogical Oasis*, The Salt Lake Tribune, March 22, 2022, <https://www.deseret.com/2022/3/22/22988989/an-illogical-oasis-golf-course-water-usage-st-george-golf>.

64 If the average golfer plays 18.2 18-hole rounds of golf per year that means that there are roughly 4.8 million rounds of golf played on all of Utah’s roughly 140 courses with most of them likely being played in the southern part of the state where play can take place year round. Even ignoring this climatic difference between Southern Utah and Salt Lake City, that means that only about 35,000 rounds are played annually on each of Salt Lake City’s courses. This means (even assuming 365 days of availability and assuming golfers play no more than one round per day) that less than 100 people enjoy the daily use of an average of 169 acres on each of six public courses in Salt Lake City. This is taking place in an environment where 27% of total city managed public lands are dedicated to the sport and where the average 150 acre golf course in America uses approximately 200 million gallons of water per year...enough to supply 1,800 residences with 300 GPD of water.

acres of golf courses, which surpasses all of the city's park land by about 17%. Finally, golf courses represent more than a bit of an ecologically dubious land use due their water consumption.

Two approaches to increasing the usage or revenue of public land may be repurposing courses or simply multi-purposing them.

Repurposing. The conversion of golf courses to parks has become a somewhat common occurrence nationally as the sport has decreased in popularity over recent decades.⁶⁵ There are in fact 8% fewer courses existing today compared to 2006, and closures have been exceeding openings every year since.⁶⁶

Nationally, economically and ecologically unviable courses have been turned into wildflower preserves, wildlife habitat, public parks, and wetlands to support migratory birds.⁶⁷

Public golf courses obviously generate no property tax revenue but do provide general funding to municipalities. Repurposing the space for mixed-use housing and commercial development, however, could be a net positive for municipalities with an increase in tax revenues exceeding present course revenues. In addition, and more importantly for the purposes of this report, this revenue boon could incentivize municipalities to include development-integrated open space that could generate more daily usage than the golf course that has been replaced.

Given the current and future housing and open space needs in Utah to support an increasing population over the next 40 years, repurposing golf courses from both an ecological and economic standpoint may be prudent.

Multi-purposing. All that said, the wholesale repurposing of many local golf courses is not a likely policy outcome. Accordingly, the "multi-purposing" of them is an attractive second-best alternative.⁶⁸ The "re-wilding" of areas outside the fairways and greens and tee boxes seems a very rational start to this process. This might be referred to in part as "resetting the natural topography of existing courses."⁶⁹ Completely re-wilding half or more of an existing course and converting the remainder to a lower impact "pitch and putt" facility also contributes to more publicly accessible open space while making golf as a sport more accessible to beginners.

In most of Utah, making cross country skiing available during winter months would also democratize golf course access. Publicly accessible urban trails around the perimeter of existing courses would also result in more efficient land usage.

65 Golf Inc., *U.S. Golf Course Supply Levels Off, but Course Closures Expected to Continue*, October 6, 2021, <https://golfincmagazine.com/content/us-golf-course-supply-levels-course-closures-expected-continue/>.

66 Golfpass, *Golf Course Closures*, <https://www.golfpass.com/travel-advisor/closed-golf-courses-history>.

67 Adele Peters, *Need Land for Parks and Housing? There are Plenty of Useless Golf Courses to Repurpose*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90315242/need-land-for-parks-and-housing-there-are-plenty-of-useless-golf-courses-to-repurpose>.

68 Piza Golf, *How to Make a Positive ROI with a Multipurpose Golf Course*, <https://pizagolf.com/how-to-make-a-positive-roi-with-a-multipurpose-golf-course/>.

69 Ibid.

Publicly and Privately Owned Infill Opportunities

A recent Zions Bank study noted that Salt Lake County alone is in possession of \$150 billion in publicly owned land, \$10 billion of which could be viable for development. In looking at Figure 7, it seems quite likely that even – or perhaps especially – smaller pieces of land not noted as ripe for development for commercial purposes might be extremely valuable as open space if near suburban or urban areas. It is obviously wise for different cities within Salt Lake County to complete an inventory of these lands in order to prevent municipal waste and to capitalize on rising land values since the study took place. It also makes sense for these lands that serve a less commercial purpose to be considered for transformation into small neighborhood parks with even the most minor of amenities.

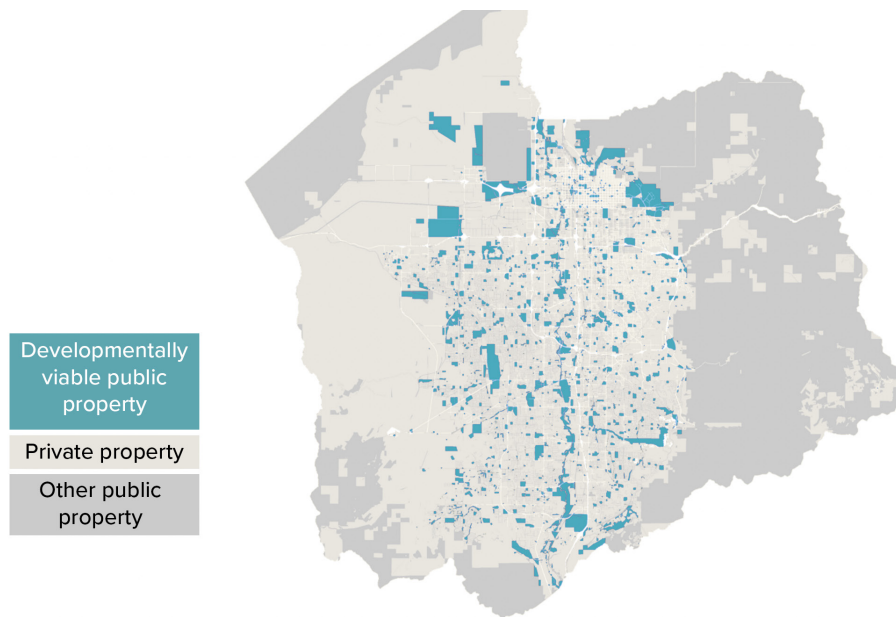
Naturally, the most obvious first step toward implementing a policy to more efficiently utilize public land for any purpose is to fashion an accurate inventory of land ownership, as has been done in Salt Lake County. That step has been taken with the passage of H.B. 433 in the Utah State Legislature.⁷⁰ The objective of this bill will be the creation of a State Geographic Information Database of all public landholdings.

Similarly, smaller privately owned lands without a future for commercial or residential purposes exist throughout various counties. Municipalities might consider the purchase of these properties for open space develop-

ment. Properties currently zoned in such a way to preclude commercial development due to size, shape, or locale might be ripe for open space. If re-zoning is not possible, it seems unreasonable to allow the lands to sit fallow when they might become a playground, small neighborhood basketball court, pocket park, or small neighborhood orchard. The Utah League of Cities and Towns is currently exploring ways in which municipalities might allocate these lands to maximize returns for the public.⁷¹

Greening public land is an option for Utah.

Figure 7: Publicly Owned Property in Salt Lake County



Source: Zions Bank.

70 Utah State Legislature, *HB433 Public Land Geographic Data Amendments*, <https://le.utah.gov/~2023/bills/static/HB0433.html>.

71 Utah League of Cities and Towns, <https://www.ulct.org/resources/planning-and-zoning/your-land-your-plan>.

Publicly Owned Space: Spotlight on Open Space Potential in the Capital City

Municipalities and their redevelopment agencies around the state own large parcels of land that go far beyond small infill projects. This provides ample opportunity to include open space in the plans for large residential, commercial, and mixed-use development.

Ballpark. The recent announcement of the Salt Lake Bees relocating to Daybreak generates a risk of stalled planning for the area’s revitalization.⁷² There is the possibility, however, that recent events create an unforeseen opportunity for open space generation and coordinated mixed-use development – perhaps building on the periphery and retaining the field.⁷³ Salt Lake City owns Smith’s Ballpark as well as a large parking area to the north totaling roughly 13.5 acres of land that would otherwise be incredibly expensive to purchase. This project represents a rare opportunity to place substantial open space within an urban Utah environment *without the associated land purchase costs*. In fact, this proposed facility would nicely fill an existing gap in the neighborhood greenspace options between Liberty Park and the international Peace Gardens.

Creative options for old baseball fields.

Figure 8: A Rendering of Bush Field’s Redevelopment in Indianapolis



Source: The Bleacher Report.

72 Kevin Reichard, *Salt Lake City Eyes Smiths Ballpark area for Development*, Ballpark Digest, November 2, 2021, <https://ballparkdigest.com/2021/11/02/salt-lake-city-eyes-smiths-ballpark-area-for-development/>.

73 Creative development alternatives that have been employed for baseball stadiums. In England for example, Highbury Stadium, once home of the Arsenal Football club between 1913 and 2006, was not entirely torn down due to its historical status. Instead, it was repurposed into 711 residential flats with a communal garden occupying what was once the field. Similarly, Bush Stadium in Indianapolis stood as the home of the minor league Indianapolis Indians from 1931 until 2012 when work began to reconstruct the aging facility into an apartment complex. The development contains 138 loft apartments in the original stadium structure, 144 flats in a newly constructed facility nearby, and ample open space contributing value to the community. Under ideal circumstances, one might imagine this open space being publicly accessible. See: <http://www.camdennewjournal.com/news/2010/feb/highbury-square-developers-%E2%80%98stalling%E2%80%99-public-footpath-access>; <https://www.indystar.com/story/life/home-garden/2013/12/01/lofts-give-new-life-to-historic-bush-stadium/3799605/>; <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1594951-historic-professional-baseball-stadium-to-become-apartment-complex>.

Station Center. Similarly, the University of Utah Station Center “Innovation District” in the Rio Grande area is uncertain in its future but not in its potential. The Station Center project is something that has been discussed, often vaguely, since at least 2015.⁷⁴ The university has followed through with its previously published options to purchase various properties east of 600 West along the 400 South corridor and the Salt Lake City Redevelopment Agency owns a large percentage of the land in question.⁷⁵ (See Figure 9.) The agency could mandate that a percentage of their land be utilized for open space. Given this, it seems this project represents a valuable opportunity for open space expansion in one of the more urban areas of Salt Lake City.

Rio Grande Plan. Finally, encompassing Station Center, a larger proposal has circulated that addresses the manner in which the downtown area of Salt Lake City might expand west. A Rio Grande plan would seek to revitalize and restore the Rio Grande station and convert it back into a train station with the strategic movement of rail lines back to 500 West. It is proposed that these lines be moved below ground level for safety purposes, aesthetics, the elimination of inconvenient freeway onramps and offramps, and the elimination of railroad crossings in the area. The plan expands options for developing the roughly 14 square city block area between 500 West and I-15 and between 100 South and 700 South.⁷⁶ The uses for this land, and the exceedingly convenient re-purposing of the Rio Grande station as a permanent flagship

element of the downtown landscape, could unfetter downtown’s expansion to the west. What was once unsightly industrial and underutilized space could be repurposed into a long open promenade due west of the Rio Grande station, an abundance of commercial space, market rate and affordable housing, and abundant open space as directed by the Salt Lake City Council and Redevelopment Agency.

The Station Center project is likely proceeding, though slowly.

Figure 9: The Current Station Center Area



74 See: <https://www.ksl.com/article/34085220/plans-unveiled-for-slcs-station-center-a-mixed-use-urban-neighborhood>; <https://ihq.mit.edu/2022/04/20/utah-business-salt-lake-city-could-be-getting-its-first-innovation-district/>

75 In the immediate pre-pandemic era, there was a great deal of publicity about ongoing negotiations between the Salt Lake City Redevelopment Agency and the University of Utah to undertake the Station Center project together. The university would act as an anchor and single partner for the Redevelopment Agency’s broader plan for the area. Interestingly, by late 2022, these talks appeared to have stalled or “paused” as a leadership change in the university’s Real Estate Administration Office took place. There has been little evidence of progress on this project, and little forthcoming from the Real Estate Administration office, but property tax records imply that movement is taking place quietly. See <https://buildingsaltlake.com/u-presses-pause-on-slcs-innovation-district-in-rio-grande-while-insisting-theyre-still-committed-to-a-partnership/>.

76 A significant portion of this land is already owned by the Salt Lake City Redevelopment Agency, Salt Lake City Corp., UDOT, the Rio Grande Railway, Union Pacific, and the Western Railroad.

Publicly Owned Space: Spotlight on the Point

While Station Center and the Rio Grande plan appear massive in scope and scale, it is important to place those projects in the context of a more ambitious project currently underway.

“The Point” is a project currently under development on the former site of the Utah State Prison at the south end of Salt Lake County. The sheer scale of this project and the essentially blank slate upon which it will come to exist make this development incredibly important from an open space perspective.

The Point holistically integrates parks and trails.

Figure 10: Parks and Open Space at The Point and The Point Trail Network

Parks and Open Space

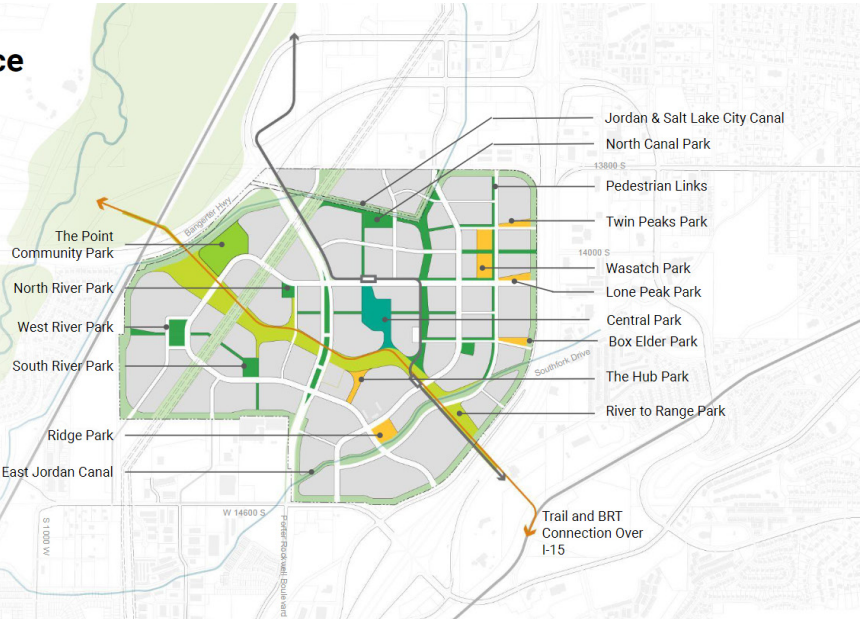
Park Types

Key Elements: 142.5 ac overall

- Central Park = 6.8 ac
- District Parks = 10.6 ac
- Neighborhood Parks = 7.6 ac
- River to Range Park = 36.3 ac
- The Point Community Park = 7.9 ac
- Buffers = 43.2 ac
- Pedestrian Links = 19.1 ac
- Canals = 11.0 ac

Park Types:

- Central Park
- District Park
- Neighborhood Park
- River to Ranger Park
- Sports Park
- Edge Park
- Pedestrian Links
- Canals



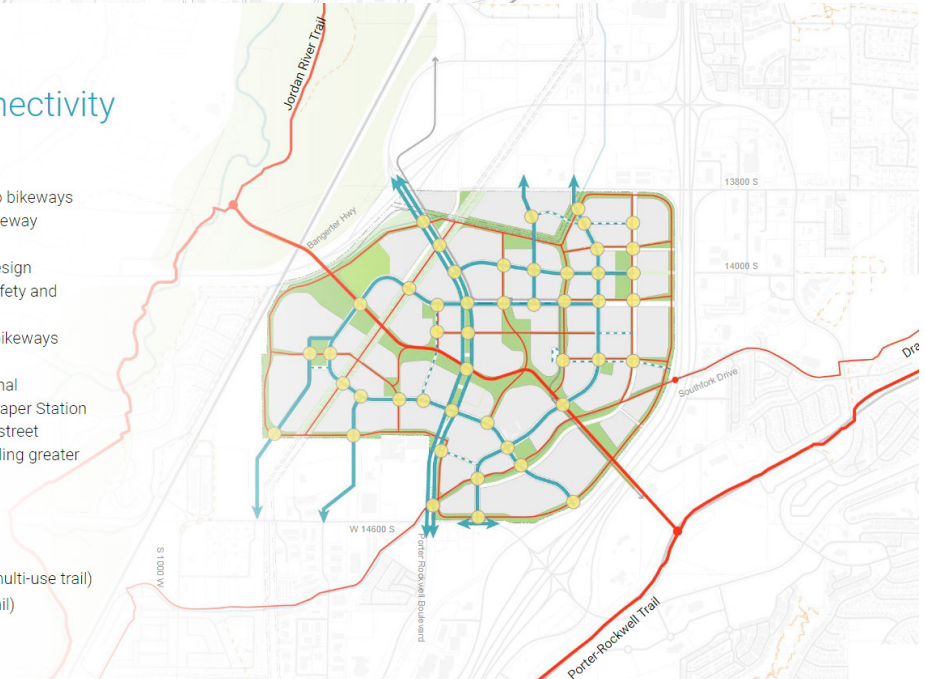
Trail Network

Bike & Trail Connectivity

Key Connections:

- Areas of focus where two bikeways intersect or a trail and bikeway intersect
- Additional intersection design considerations ensure safety and efficient movement
- Connections to existing bikeways beyond site boundaries
- Connections to key external destinations, including Draper Station
- **31** nodes connecting on-street bikeways with trails enabling greater permeability

- Mobility Nodes
- On-Street Bikeways
- River to Range Trail (14' multi-use trail)
- Trails (paved multi-use trail)
- - - Existing & Potential Trails
- Parks/Open Space



Source: The Point. Point Of The Mountain Framework Plan - Final Report, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill | Design Workshop | WSP | Great Basin | Sam Schwartz | Hales Engineering | SJ+A.

The project consists of 600 acres of state-owned land to be transformed into a multi-use project with open space in the form of parks and an internal trail system.⁷⁷ The development is being described as an “innovation community” which will “foster innovation and technological advancement, provide parks and open space, support economic growth, and enhance Utah’s quality of life.”⁷⁸

The project was initiated in 2018 when the Utah Legislature created the Point of the Mountain State Land Authority to plan, initiate, and guide the development of a community reflecting objectives identified through public processes⁷⁹ It is expected that construction will begin by 2025 after utilities infrastructure has been installed.

The proposed open space and its presence is made center stage in the project’s online marketing materials. The River to Range element of the project “is a 1.4-mile paved regional trail that will connect the Jordan River Parkway Trail to the west with the foothills of Draper’s Corner Canyon to the east” covering 36.3 acres.⁸⁰ Further, Phase 1 also incorporates a “Central Park” which will be composed of 2.5 acres of space “adaptive to accommodate seasonally appropriate activities year-round.”⁸¹ This is smaller than the Wasatch Front’s regional parks. However, this Point’s dispersed park land makes it more easily accessible for the vast majority of people to live and work within a short walking distance of open space. Collectively, according to a source affiliated with The Point, it is also estimated that between 21% and 25% of the total project area is open space which equates to roughly 2.6 acres per 1,000 people assuming 15,000 residents, 40,000 workers, and an open space allocation of 142 acres.

In addition to the park placement, a network of trails and bikeways links available open space with residential and commercial elements of the development, encircle it, and connect it to the Draper Canal Trail, the Jordan River Trail, and the Porter Rockwell Trail. (See Figure 10 on the previous page.) Naturally, the beauty of a large vacant property is the ability to move forward with a cohesive plan and integrate open space elements unencumbered by existing structures or previous planning.

The Point’s open space is a good example of the manner in which a large-scale development should be undertaken on state owned land in partnership with not just real estate developers but also stakeholders in possession of varying sorts of expertise. The project shows the cohesiveness and extent of the planning necessary to integrate the community with surrounding parks and trails.

SOLUTION: ADDRESSING OVERCROWDING

Even with the additions and improvements of open space around the state, it seems that more and more complex systems of regulation and allocation are going to become necessary to optimize the use and maintenance of this valuable public resource. In short, with the state’s expected

77 See: <https://thepointutah.org/>.

78 Ibid.

79 Utah State Legislature, *H.B. 372 Point of the Mountain State Land Authority*, <https://le.utah.gov/~2018/bills/static/HB0372.html>.

80 See: <https://thepointutah.org/river-to-range>.

81 See: <https://thepointutah.org/central-park>.

population growth, Utahns are likely to face a choice between degradation of nature or its rationed use. This is true of Utah's National Parks, the canyons along the Wasatch Front, and elsewhere.

Perhaps the most obvious way to address a shortage of open space in Utah is to begin rationing on the basis of "willingness to pay."

Congestion Pricing

Policy makers could consider a "congestion pricing" levy on ski-lift tickets on peak days and weekends to help address canyon overcrowding. In addition, any such revenues could revert back to the state budget or fund transportation and infrastructure improvements necessitated by canyon users. Indeed, the Utah Department of Transportation will begin implementation of a toll system in Little Cottonwood Canyon, but one can assume that perhaps sophisticated systems of allocation are also on the horizon elsewhere.⁸² There seems to be good reason to embrace setting these tolls according to a similar "surge pricing" model to encourage canyon usage on days that are less demanded than weekends and holidays. Algorithmically driven systems for pricing canyon access could possibly yield optimal results for both transportation professionals and outdoor recreation enthusiasts.

Pay-to-Play

In response to an expansion of demand for outdoor space, the state unveiled "pay-to-play" policies in 2022.⁸³ As noted by the state's proposal, many popular trailheads, campgrounds, and day-use picnic areas will now require a \$10 fee. The plan affects 119 sites in areas that are in high demand such as Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons and the Mirror Lake Highway in the Uinta Mountains. The areas covered by the plan constitute 2.2 million acres of national forest land and witnessed 13 million visitors in 2021.⁸⁴

Millcreek Canyon might also be enhanced via targeted policy and simultaneously foreshadow what might be necessary elsewhere in the future. Obviously, due to its proximity to high density urban areas, Millcreek Canyon is an incredibly popular destination for cyclists, cross country skiers, hikers, dog-walkers, and even horseback riders. Notably, the area is also quite small and the facilities quite sparse given the relative traffic that it attracts. This means that an incredible amount of pressure is placed upon the physical infrastructure of the canyon and the natural environment itself, necessitating a regulation to impose a daily user fee of \$5. Again, there seems little reason to avoid dynamic pricing models in funding canyon maintenance and service expansion.

As is the case with Millcreek Canyon, these pay-to-play policies could waive user fees for those who enter any canyon on foot or while cycling. In addition, if the policy seeks to reduce car traffic or ameliorate parking

82 UDOT. *UDOT Identifies Gondola B as the Preferred Alternative in Little Cottonwood Canyon*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.udot.utah.gov/connect/2022/08/31/udot-identifies-gondola-b-as-the-preferred-alternative-in-little-cottonwood-canyon/>.

83 U.S. Forest Service, *Intermountain Region - Recreation Fee Proposals*, <https://usfs.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapSeries/index.html?appid=85f1787bb35d4ccab7ae83cf5bc83fd8>.

84 Brian Maffly, *Pay to Play is Coming to Wasatch Trails, Including Big and Little Cottonwood Canyons*, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.sltrib.com/news/environment/2022/08/08/pay-play-is-coming-wasatch/>.

shortages as opposed to trail overuse, policymakers might consider waiving fees for vehicles with more than two or three people in each vehicle.

Rationing

A certainly less popular strategy to address overcrowding could include, for example, the rationing of access on the basis of “even or odd” systems relating to drivers’ license plates (though these types of policy constraints are easily skirted). Other options might include “even or odd” trail usage – prohibiting dogs, hikers, or mountain bikers on certain days. Millcreek and City Creek canyons in Salt Lake County each employ a related policy. As rationing is not likely to be welcomed by many canyon users, it is certainly a wise choice to improve access to open space or to create new open spaces to address current and future overcrowding.

SOLUTION: TRANSPORTATION SYSTEMS

Certain transportation approaches might be embraced to provide access to open space. The existing public transportation system is one. In addition, there are other approaches to further enhance canyon experiences, such as shuttles and the gondola project. These last two approaches are additional ways to addressing overcrowding – but from the perspective of accessing the open space.

There are also mechanisms to explore and fund transportation and open space solutions. One of these is the Wasatch Front Regional Council’s Transportation and Land Use Connection program, a partnership with the Utah Department of Transportation, the Utah Transit Authority, and Salt Lake County. This year, the program awarded \$2.1 million to local community projects which was augmented by \$260,000 in local matching funds.⁸⁵

Buses and Trains

Within an urban environment or between urban environments, it seems that the most efficient and cost-effective way to gain longer distance access to open space is via public transportation. Certainly, for municipalities with existing public transportation systems, helping people move between their neighborhoods and available open space is less expensive than providing and maintaining a certain constant ratio of publicly funded acreage in relation to rising population numbers over time. These linkages are already in place for a vast majority of Utahns. Utah Transit Authority provides bus and rail service all along the Wasatch Front. In addition, there are several other transit options, including with the Cache Valley Transit District, Cedar Area Transportation Service around Cedar City, and Sun-Tran in Washington County.

Shuttles

The National Park Service runs its own approach to public transportation. The Zion Canyon Shuttle System seeks to enhance the experience for all

⁸⁵ Wasatch Front Regional Council, *Transportation and Land Use Connection (TLC) 2023 Awards Announced*, March 31, 2023, <https://wfrc.org/transportation-and-land-use-connection-2023-awards-announced/>.

canyon users by eliminating traffic jams in the park. Further, private shuttles around the state transport mountain bikers to trailheads for one-way rides, thus eliminating the need to coordinate their own rides. Examples of this include the Wasatch Backcountry Alliance shuttling backcountry skiers in Little Cottonwood Canyon as well as the Transit to Trails program in which a partnership among Utah Open Lands, Park City Municipal Corporation, and the Central Wasatch Commission shuttles all recreational users.

There are other possibilities. Projects are currently underway in Millcreek canyon, such as an increase in road widths using \$15.3 million in federal funding.⁹⁹ That said, available sources describing the project note a removal of “informal” parking available to canyon users with little hope offered for more total parking. This will certainly make the canyon safer and slightly more convenient for users, but may do little to improve capacity.

In response, assuming the capacity of Millcreek Canyon from a human perspective is greater than the capacity for cars, a shuttle from a fixed parking area near the mouth of the canyon might be implemented to encourage canyon use and alleviate vehicle pressure. Further, it may be worth considering an expansion of the current park and ride area and combining it with medium-scale commercial space catering to canyon users.



Porter Fork Road up Millcreek Canyon, Utah. Credit: Wikipedia User Derrellwilliams under license (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The Gondola

The gondola concept has its roots in the 2012 Utah Legislative Session with a resolution “Supporting Utah’s Interconnected Ski and Snowboard Industry.” The initial object of this was to explore the possibility of connecting Salt Lake County and Summit County ski resorts.⁸⁶

Since the publication of its environmental impact statement in August of 2022, the Utah Department of Transportation has approved the gondola as the preferred long-term method of alleviating Little Cottonwood Canyon transportation issues. Phased implementation will take place with \$150 million being allocated in the 2024 state budget for increased bus service, tolling, a mobility hub, Wasatch Boulevard improvements, and restrictions upon winter roadside parking. Phase two of the plan will construct snowsheds and improve trailheads. Gondola infrastructure construction will constitute phase three of the process.

While the Little Cottonwood Canyon gondola is a controversial topic, it should be noted that TRAX – Utah’s light rail system – was controversial in its day as well. In fact, anti-TRAX arguments from decades past sound similar to anti-gondola arguments today. Nearly 30 years ago, there were concerns about TRAX bankrupting the transit system, spurring the development of cramped apartments along the lines, and potentially imposing a burden created by low usage of the system yielding minimal impact upon traffic and unabated pollution.

A governing reality of this scenario seems to be that, if one desires access to wilderness, one requires large roads, large busses, polluting cars...or a separate system of transport impacting views or local ecology. There is very little access to nature without at least some degradation. Failing to increase residential development of the resorts themselves, the mouth of the canyon will continue to represent a bottleneck in terms of lodging and dining for what is likely the majority of skiers in Little Cottonwood Canyon. Given increasing populations, it seems that residents in the area either need to embrace lower altitude development, higher altitude development, transportation solutions, or a combination of all three of these things.

The gondola has its own ecological impact. However, it may be, at least according to its supporters, more ecologically friendly than the cars traveling up and down the canyon and it prevents an environmentally dubious – and costly – road-widening project. Further, it presents an opportunity to foster commercial development in an underutilized area around the proposed base station, bolster real estate valuations in the area, and increase property tax revenues.

Perhaps most importantly, the potential use of this gondola for hiking, cycling, or other activities would surely increase access for area Wasatch Front residents and visitors alike. This single addition of a more effective mode of transport could increase the amount of available public land by decreasing the transaction costs for people wishing to enjoy it.

⁸⁶ Utah State Legislature, S.C.R. 10, *Concurrent Resolution Supporting Utah’s Interconnected Ski and Snowboard Industry*, <https://le.utah.gov/~2012/bills/static/SCR010.html>.

Finally, the unification of Summit and Salt Lake counties' ski resorts was the impetus for the gondola concept. Given this, is it possible that a problem with the gondola proposal as it stands currently is its moderation and lack of unification with a broader land use strategy? This is the object of the proposed "ONEWasatch" plan which is designed to unify Brighton, Solitude, Alta, Snowbird, Park City, the Canyons, and Deer Valley resorts into a "Single Pass" trans-resort skiing experience.⁸⁷ While the plan is largely focused on accomplishing this with additional runs, additional lifts, and wrangling through the revenue-sharing logistics, it seems that the Little Cottonwood gondola might substantially improve the situation if it were to extend to Brighton and Solitude or over the crest of nearby mountains nearer the upper reaches of the Park City resort. This would allow the cost of the project to conceivably be shared across a greater number of users and resort beneficiaries.

CONCLUSION

The open space in this report includes parks, trails, schoolyards, urban walkways, and even nearby mountains. Using multiple measures, Utahns often experience a shortage of open space access and availability – either because the spaces are small, far away, or overrun with visitors. With Utah's population growth, this will become more of an issue over time.

Opening new parks is an obvious way to increase the availability of open space. Nonetheless, given rising land costs, other options will be needed such as additional trails and the improvement or repurposing of existing space such as schoolyards, golf courses, and other pockets of currently fallow land.

Utah is already seeking to improve upon its open space quality and availability. The state and local governments spend proportionally more on parks and recreation than other states. Though that number had been declining since 2008, it has recently been trending back up. Governments also have leverage to ensure the inclusion of open space in small and large development projects that are at least partially under public control.

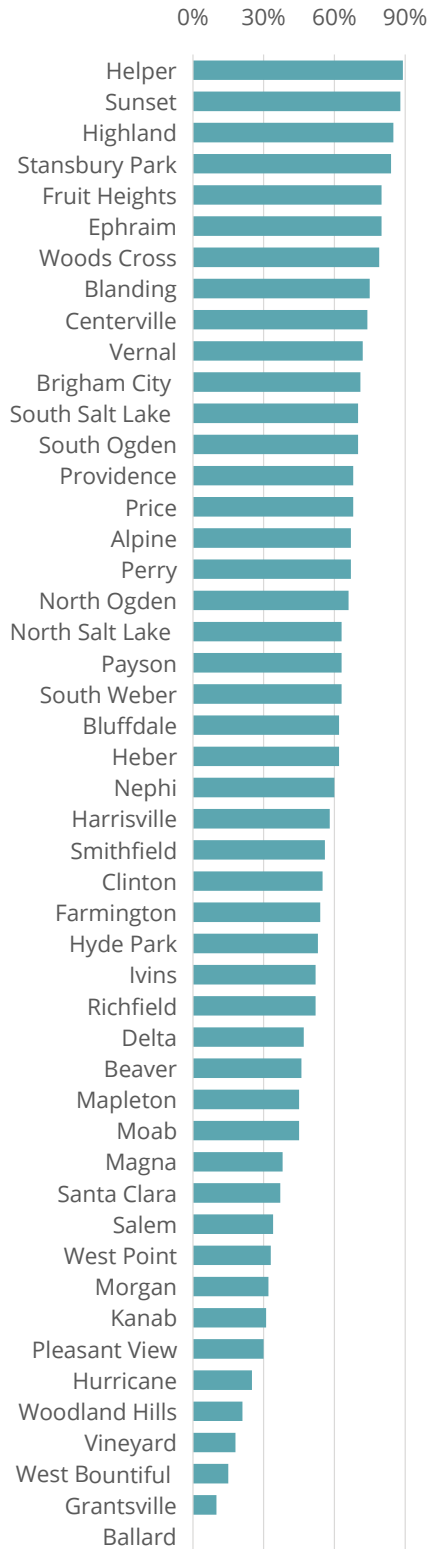
It is also becoming more urgent to address overcrowding in some open spaces but at the same time improve transportation to many of those spaces. One of the reasons that Utahns stay here – and others move here – is to enjoy the state's superior outdoor offerings. The goal of this report is to provide some suggestions and examples of ways to approach open space in a way that maintains Utahns' high quality of life into an increasingly prosperous yet crowded future.

⁸⁷ Izzy Howell, *The Case for Connecting Our Ski Resorts*, Utah Business, February 13, 2020, <https://www.utahbusiness.com/for-one-wasatch>.

APPENDIX

Percentage of Utahns within a ten-minute walk of a park in towns with population below 30,000.

Figure A: Park Score – Percentage of Utahns within a Ten-Minute Walk of a Park



Note: The average Park Score for the cities analyzed that have a population of less than 30,000 is 54.4%.

Source: The Trust for Public Land



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