

Guest Commentary: Economic growth of Wasatch Front a region-wide issue

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By Erin Flynn and Wilf Sommerkorn

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The Wasatch Front is a region with tremendous assets. Urban, suburban and rural dwellers alike cherish these physical attributes and consider them integral to the region's high quality of life. The region is also home to three outstanding research universities: University of Utah, Brigham Young University and Utah State University. These physical and intellectual assets, along with a supportive business climate and low cost of living, make the Wasatch Front a desirable place to live and work.

Currently, the Wasatch Front is experiencing substantial growth. In order to accommodate this growth, economic activity throughout the region must expand dramatically. We are well poised to build from our physical and intellectual assets to attract and grow industries that provide high-quality jobs for residents.

A key challenge facing economic-development practitioners and civic leaders from the 10 counties and 98 municipalities that make up the Greater Wasatch Front area is how to promote much-needed economic and business development while simultaneously preserving the quality of life that Utahns prize. An important key to striking this balance is for government officials and economic-development practitioners to begin thinking, acting and planning for growth as a unified region.

Regional thinking and action are essential to successful economic development in our increasingly competitive economy. While the bulk of employment opportunities remain clustered in and around Salt Lake County, new and more complicated patterns of commuting and job location are emerging across the Wasatch Front as the population and urban boundary expands.

Our daily patterns -- in both work and social life -- are regional: We live in one community, work and run errands in another, visit friends and family in another, and dine out in yet another.

Regions also reflect how the market economy operates. Metropolitan regions -- as opposed to central cities -- are now the main unit of economic activity in the global economy. Businesses tend to cluster in metropolitan areas where they can draw upon resources provided at the regional level such as transportation, research and technology, skilled labor, and supplier networks. Working relationships are created at a regional level among business partners that can be difficult to achieve on a global, national or even state level. The growth of the computer and software industry in northern California's Silicon Valley, or the businesses of the Research Triangle in North Carolina's Raleigh-Durham metro area are prime examples of the success of a cooperative, network model fostered by geographic proximity.

In the context of the Wasatch Front area, it is important for economic-development officials to recognize that the essential level of competition they face is regional. It is not a question of Sandy competing with Ogden, or Salt Lake City competing with Provo; rather, it is a question

of the Wasatch Front competing with Denver, Portland and Phoenix for high-skill, high-wage employment. The primary goal is to build and promote the region as an exceptional place to do business.

Building and maintaining a healthy, vibrant region with efficient transportation, strong workforce and education systems, affordable housing, robust research and innovation mechanisms, and ample opportunity for residents is challenging work. It requires cooperation and collaboration between business, government and community.

This is challenging because a fundamental disconnect exists between how the market operates and how we govern. Our economy operates regionally, but our units of government operate locally. This is especially the case with economic development where towns and cities often compete with one another for tax revenue generated by new business.

Regions concerned about quality of life and competitiveness issues are developing regional initiatives and mechanisms to spur greater municipal coordination and cooperation. In Chicago, for example, Mayor Richard Daley established the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus to unite the region's 272 mayors and develop a common vision for the region. In Northern California, the Bay Area Alliance for Sustainable Communities has established 10 Commitments to Action to address regional challenges. In St. Louis, the Regional Chamber and Growth Association has partnered with the Council of Governments and the region's leading citizens group to form the St. Louis Metropolitan Forum, a regional leadership mechanism addressing job growth and tax policy.

It is important that new job creation proceeds in the future in a way that will maintain the Wasatch Front's high quality of life -- one of our chief competitive advantages in a global economy. Economic-development officials need to work together to determine which locations across the region should be developed and/or preserved for future job sites. The goal of this regional approach is not to pick winners and losers; rather, it is to develop a multiplicity of desirable, high-functioning locations where people will want to live and work.

To achieve the quality job growth the region seeks, consideration should be given to labor-force location and quality, land supply, infrastructure, and community amenities when contemplating the location or expansion of new and existing businesses.

The scope and scale of regional-development issues facing the Wasatch Front pose daunting challenges for public officials. Because of their complex and interrelated nature, solutions are unlikely to be created by individual governments or agencies. Thoughtful planning and coordination and steadfast cooperation between public and private actors is required to integrate quality growth into economic development practice on a region-wide scale.

Erin Flynn is vice president of FutureWorks, a strategy and policy development firm consulting with Envision Utah on development of its Economic Development Toolbox. Wilf Sommerkorn is director of the Davis County Department of Community & Economic Development, and a member of the Envision Utah Steering Committee.