

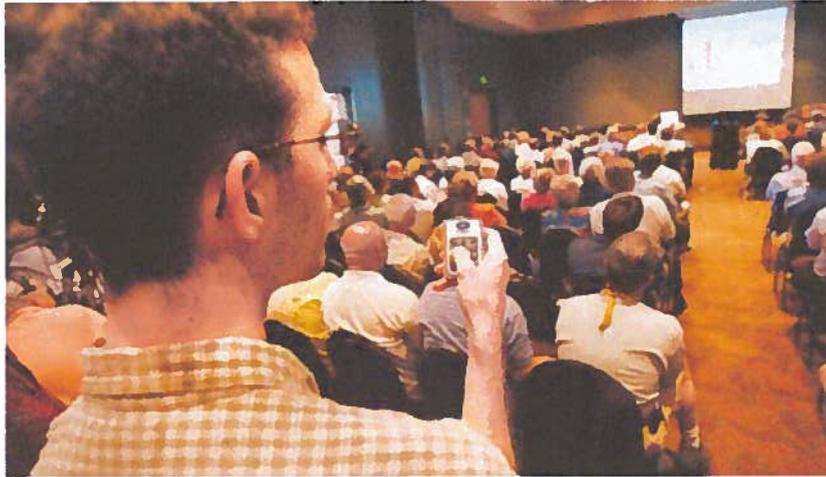
Vision Dixie: Process more than a mirage in the desert

Cooperation key to seeing plan materialize

8:13 AM, Jan. 9, 2012 | Comments

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Ben Edwards and other community members respond anonymously to questions regarding growth in Washington County using wireless transmitters at a Vision Dixie dialogue meeting May 29, 2007. / Christopher Onsiott/The Spectrum

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When Washington County residents and local government leaders met in late 2006 to begin hammering out an agreement on how the region should develop during the next 30 years, there emerged a plan for where new housing and businesses would be built, where transportation grids would be located and where water - the lifeblood of any civilization - would come from.

Many of the people who helped shape the visioning process with input from county residents regard the Vision Dixie process as something that is still important for the county, even as they sometimes disagree about how it will translate into specific policies for their municipalities.

If You Go

What: 2012 Vision Dixie report at the Washington County Economic Summit

Where: Entrada rooms B and C of the Dixie Center, 1835 S. Convention Center Drive, St. George.

When: Wednesday at 2 p.m.

Cost: Free.

"The whole point of Vision Dixie was not to look forward to what the community is going to look like in three, five even 10 years. It was to look out three decades," said Scott Hirschi, the director of the Washington County Economic Development Council and a former Vision Dixie steering committee member. "There's no policing power, no

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ordinances for a visioning process. It's all done by cooperation."

Kenneth Sizemore, another steering committee member and the executive director of the Five County Association of Governments, an agency that works with Southern Utah cities and counties to enable economic development, said regional growth has obviously not been the same since the economic downturn, but he believes change is in the wind.

"We're coming out of the recession, and things are picking up again ... and Washington County will become an attractive place for development," he said.

"Every jurisdiction - the county and all the municipalities - have formally adopted the Vision Dixie principles into their documents," he said. "The unanswered question is, 'How will development patterns change to accommodate ... (and) conform with Vision Dixie principles?'"

Just a memory?

During the four years since Vision Dixie was formally completed, St. George has built a new municipal airport that will allow for increased tourist and commercial traffic from outside the region, new interstate highway access points to handle an increased number of drivers, and new roads or road-upgrade projects with the same purpose.

Other communities, such as Ivins and Santa Clara, also have taken advantage of reduced labor costs during the downturn, using government grants and low-rate bond loans to improve sewer systems and city sidewalks connecting pedestrians to local businesses.

An orientation toward pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods where homes and core businesses are within relative proximity of each other is an underlying principle of Vision Dixie, Sizemore said.

But in spite of the changes made during recent years, many of those who were involved in the visioning process agree Vision Dixie has already become something of a pushed-aside memory about community cooperation.

"It hasn't been paid a whole lot of attention to lately," said Paul Van Dam, the former executive director of Citizens For Dixie's Future, a local coalition of citizens advocating smart-growth planning that also participated on the steering committee.

"I don't think the county and the cities are committed to it," Van Dam said. "They signed on to it, but the proof is in the pudding. I don't think much has been done."

Dan McGuire, a Rockville Town Council member who was mayor from 2002 to 2009 and also a member of the Vision Dixie board, said he agrees the visioning process isn't foremost on people's minds these days, using his own community as an example. But McGuire said the lack of attention isn't a concern in Rockville.

"We reviewed all of the principles with the Town Council and the Planning Commission, and we decided we're there. ... We've been living Vision Dixie right along," McGuire said. "The citizens who came out to the meetings - and of course we had them here. ... A lot of people expressed what they wanted - to limit growth and maintain a small-town atmosphere."

Hirschi said although there is less happening with the process these days, the Association of Governments' annual report at What's Up Down South during the Washington County Economic

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Summit shows there is at least an organized system for providing vital information to the community on a regular basis.

"Those (annual economic summits) have been relatively well attended," he said.

Participation

In calling the summits "relatively well attended," Hirschi acknowledged that those who show an interest in community planning are a small fraction of the overall population.

"Three thousand (people) out of 140,000 isn't adequate," he said, referring to the number of residents who actively contributed to the initial Vision Dixie report.

"But you could make the same argument about the municipal turnout on any of the elections. For example, at the most recent municipal elections, only a small percent of the people showed up, and they made decisions for the rest of the residents," Hirschi said. "Using that as a guideline, I think 3,000 is kind of remarkable. I'd say it's a very respectable number."

Sizemore said most people are busy enough with the day-to-day realities of taking care of their homes and families that they don't become interested in the planning process until it impacts them directly in some way.

"When they do show up, it's the people who perceive their way of life might be threatened," he said.

But the annual economic summit - the next one will be Wednesday in St. George and the Association of Governments' presentation is free to the public - ensures residents and economic professionals from across the state can keep a hand in ongoing developments with the visioning process.

"If somebody was planning (your) future, you would be there. You wouldn't leave that to somebody else," Hirschi said.

Cooperation

Despite the best of intentions, or perhaps because of them, arriving at a common consensus in the planning process can be difficult to come by.

Hirschi said the 18 incorporated communities in Washington County have responded to Vision Dixie in 18 different ways.

"I think every one of them has a different attitude about Vision Dixie - from 100 percent acceptance to 100 percent rejection," Hirschi said.

"Vision Dixie is a visioning plan without any teeth. This is what we think our community should look like in the future, and we hope those in authority will pay attention and put it in place with zoning ordinances that only the government has the ability to apply."

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The visioning process provides a roadmap, but isn't designed to answer questions about specific issues, he said. Those are handled by the municipalities as they interpret what the visioning process means for them.

Hirschi said the economic slowdown gave municipalities a much-needed breather to catch up on their transportation goals, using available government money to hire contractors that didn't have a lot of competing interests.

"A lot of transportation projects were done that were needed and will be needed. But, of course, when growth resumes - and it will resume - it won't be very long before our capacity will be met," Hirschi said. "There will be an ongoing demand."

But one of the more difficult things to plan for has been the increased need for water in a growing population.

Perhaps the most controversial project to spin off from the visioning process was the proposal to bring new water to the center of the county by building a pipeline from the Colorado River to Hurricane's Sand Hollow Reservoir.

The Washington County Water Conservancy District, which supplies much of the water for the larger municipalities like St. George and Hurricane, has spearheaded efforts to publicize the proposal and keep it on residents' minds.

"That's what the primary job of the water district is - to make sure there's an adequate water supply for the future," water district General Manager Ron Thompson said.

Water

The Lake Powell Pipeline would bring additional water to Washington County by taking it from the Colorado River, which flows through the eastern part of the state - and through several other states as well.

The expense would be enormous - close to a billion dollars as of the last estimates, plus financing costs, and officials acknowledge those figures are likely outdated. Taxpayers would shoulder the costs of the pipeline project, and proponents and opponents disagree over vital questions such as how much the pipeline will ultimately cost, whether the future population will be able to afford the cost, and whether having a population big enough to pay for the water supplying the large population is desirable or something that can even be managed.

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"There's lots of reasons people want to come," Thompson said. "I think it (the pipeline) is the most economical way to accomplish that. ... We'll eventually have to get (the cost estimate) more updated. My guess is it's probably going to go down, not up, because the last one was at the height of development."

Not everyone agrees.

"Taxes are not going to get cheaper. All the negatives appear after the profits have been taken," Van Dam countered, drawing on southern Nevada's Snake Valley pipeline project as an example of how plans for such a large project can prove inadequate when faced with current economic realities.

"(Vision Dixie) certainly plays a part in how we see the whole need for water in this county," Van Dam said. "I think the people who will really benefit from horrendous growth are the people who own property that can be readily sold, developers and the business owners."

Hirschi said he disagrees with arguments that the pipeline would invite unwanted growth rather than providing a necessary response to growth.

"It is obviously something not needed today," Hirschi said of the Lake Powell Pipeline.

"The debate seems to be do we need it at all, and I think that's a useless debate. This community has a ... record of growth. This community has a record of needing water," he said. "The real debate should be, 'When do we need the pipeline?'"

Whether growth is inevitable also has been debated, he said.

Hirschi said he disagrees with residents who want to set a cap on growth by stopping the population from exceeding a certain point.

"That is a reasonable, fair position for them to take. It is not my position. That's not a philosophy I could subscribe to or even understand," Hirschi said.

"Having seen what's happened in Salt Lake City and Park City, and of course Las Vegas, growth may be inevitable," Van Dam added. "But it ought to be smart growth."

To grow or not

McGuire said Rockville's community plan bucks the idea that growth has to happen, in part as a response to the geographical limitations of developable water and land in the Zion Canyon corridor.

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Rockville's water is owned by two companies that have issued 152 shares to stockholders, and the town has identified limited possibilities for increased water delivery but doesn't expect to pursue them.

"At the moment, we're on buildout (limits) as far as water," McGuire said. "We completed an application for diversion, but the water diversion was just to augment (what we have), not for additional growth. ... There hasn't been any votes saying, 'Let's go get more water.'"

McGuire said as mayor he initially was a proponent of changing Rockville's zoning to smaller lot sizes, which would allow for an increased population.

"But the problem's still water," he said.

Rockville has not discussed tying into the proposed Lake Powell Pipeline. New water source proposals that have been discussed have generally been too costly or would provide poor quality water, he said.

Sizemore said he anticipates a shift toward smaller lot sizes and smaller homes in the rest of the county as the population continues to grow, in large part because social demographics indicate a shift toward later marriages and smaller families with less disposable income than what former generations had.

"All these things result in a very different development pattern," Sizemore said.

"The visioning process is going on across the nation and Utah led the way," he said. "We were very fortunate to have a group of very qualified planners. ... We received the premier available expertise ... to make Vision Dixie happen. The only regret I have is that the recession hit right as we were concluding the Vision Dixie process and impeded our ability to (put it in motion)."

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