

UTAH RECREATION & TOURISM MATTERS

Utah State
UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

Institute for Outdoor Recreation and Tourism

October 2002

No. NR/RF/007

Utah's Rural Communities: Planning for the Future

Judith Kurtzman, Joanna Endter-Wada and Dale J. Blahna

Background

Two of the biggest concerns facing rural communities in the Intermountain West today are the contrasting problems of rapid growth and development as opposed to economic decline and stagnation. Communities confronting either of these problems must deal with many challenges.

For many of Utah's rural communities, the problem of either growth or decline has been compounded by dependency on public lands and the changing perceptions by the general public of how these lands should be used. Utah communities whose economies have revolved around farming, ranching, and extraction of natural resources have depended upon access to and use of public lands, but use of these lands for tourism, recreation, wildlife habitat, military operations, and other public purposes have increased user competition and decision making conflicts. Planning for the future of their communities is difficult as decision-makers face changing and increasingly diverse public perceptions about public re-

source issues. The viability and sustainability of many rural communities depends upon their ability to harmonize their traditional uses of these lands with new economic opportunities.

Recreation and tourism are important components of Utah's contemporary economy. For some of Utah's rural communities, recreation and tourism have brought about rapid growth and its associated concerns. Other communities in Utah, especially those facing stagnation or decline, have attempted to develop recreation and tourism opportunities in their area as a means of diversifying their economies, while at the same time attempting to maintain traditional forms of employment. Still other communities are wary of embracing recreation and tourism at all, out of concern for the changes associated with them.

Purpose

The purposes of this project were to identify strategies used by rural communities to successfully cope with concerns related to rapid growth or stagnation and decline, and to look at the role recreation and tourism has played in those strategies. We were also interested in understanding what those communities have done to make recreation and tourism compatible with other economic activities, and what tactics they have drawn upon to preserve a small town atmosphere and the characteristics that make their communities unique. We hope that understanding the success of these strategies will help other rural communities facing similar circumstances to integrate tourism and recreation into their economies and to avoid some of the economic and social pitfalls that can be associated with such change.



Sign on the road to Springdale, one of the study sites.

Research Design

Study Sites

This project examined four rural Utah communities: Escalante, Randolph, Springdale, and Vernal. Escalante, Randolph and Vernal have attempted to diversify their economies with recreation and tourism development, while maintaining other important areas of their economies such as agriculture, ranching, mineral extraction, manufacturing and other related services. Springdale's economy is based primarily upon recreation and tourism, but continues to include a small amount of agriculture. Many of its residents commute to jobs in nearby communities.

Springdale and Vernal have experienced rapid growth in the past, but the trend has slowed significantly. Both are presently growing, but at a more manageable pace. Escalante and Randolph have experienced stagnation and decline. However, due to the designation of a national monument on federal lands adjoining the community, Escalante has the potential for experiencing rapid growth.

Five criteria were used to select each of the four study communities: 1) close proximity to state or federal lands, and, consequently, an ability to attract tourists and recreationists to use that land; 2) a diverse economy which includes at least some tourism, or the community was attempting to encourage tourism to help diversify its economy; 3) an attempt had been made to maintain the community's rural atmosphere and unique characteristics through local land-use ordinances, regulations, and land acquisition programs aimed at conserving and preserving natural resources and cultural heritage; 4) a population of less than 10,000 people, and location in a non-metropolitan county; and, 5) an existing master plan or the community was in the process of developing a plan for the future.

Data Collection

"Chain-referral" sampling was used to identify people to interview in each community. One or more key individuals within the community were located, interviewed, and then asked to name others who would be knowledgeable respondents for the study. Individuals interviewed included: political leaders (mayors, city council members, county commissioners, planning and zoning committee members, and board of adjustment members); business leaders (Chamber of Commerce presidents and members, real estate development interests, and owners of local businesses, especially those related to tourism and recreation); public land managers; and, city employees (planners and managers). In-depth interviews were conducted with at least 10 individuals in each community. The interviews were designed to encourage open-ended discussion guided by a standard protocol of interview questions. The use of open-ended questions and a conversational format allowed respondents the opportunity

to elaborate on those areas in which they had the most knowledge and expertise, and to decline answering questions on which they did not feel qualified to comment. A qualitative approach was used to analyze themes in the data.

The main topics addressed during the interviews included:

- an assessment of the community's past and present economic activities;
- their community's planning process, including the motivation behind it, who was responsible for creating and implementing it, and how those responsible solicited citizen involvement;
- strategies used to integrate tourism and recreation into the economy and life-style of the community and what type of social and economic concerns the community encountered as a result of the integration;
- strategies used to maintain the community's unique characteristics and rural atmosphere;
- types of conflicts commonly encountered by the community pertaining to growth and economic diversification, and how residents have or are trying to manage them;
- sources of government aid and funding used;
- recommendations for other communities in similar situations.

Key Findings

The four communities used in this research either already have, or are in the process of, integrating tourism and recreation into their economies. The two communities that have had the most time and experience with this process, Vernal and Springdale, also appear to have been the most successful in this undertaking. ("Success," for the purpose of this study, is measured by the extent to which tourism and recreation plays a role in the community's economy, while at the same time the town has maintained its integrity and uniqueness.) After Vernal suffered through an oil bust in the 1980s, its leaders created a future vision that involved ensuring the community would no longer be reliant on one industry, and they have succeeded in making this vision a reality. Vernal's economy is the most diverse of the four study communities, incorporating energy extraction industries, retail trade, a few manufacturing companies, and tourism and recreation.

Springdale's leaders, on the other hand, set their visions on something entirely different. They are the gateway to Zion National Park and receive the most visitors, yet they have been the most successful at keeping the integrity of their community intact. They have been very careful about passing regulations that will ensure Springdale retains its rural character and natural amenities, despite thousands of visitors each year and significant development in the surrounding area.

In both these communities, the leaders and decision makers within the community had a vision for the future. They did more than just put together a plan for their community; they had foresight into what would help their communities thrive and then they developed a plan to make that happen. Researchers in community development have stressed the importance of a community creating a vision and a plan for the future, and these two communities are evidence of how this element contributes to a successful community strategy.



Local church in Randolph, one of the four study sites

Another important element in determining how successful a community will be in its development efforts is that individuals within leadership positions are able to devote time, knowledge, and skills to move their community in a positive direction both economically and socially. In all four of the study communities, city and town officials are volunteers and the majority of them work full-time in another occupation. While this poses a serious problem for Escalante and Randolph, it is not a significant concern for officials in Springdale and Vernal, who secured funding to hire two full-time staff persons to work on managing and planning for their communities' future. This, in turn, resulted in the communities having much better knowledge of and access to funding and programming geared toward assisting rural communities in their development efforts. Also, attitudes of community leaders in Vernal and Springdale tend to be more positive about the future of their communities, and those leaders appear to be more active in making plans for the future than leaders in either Randolph or Escalante.

A third element in community development strategies that is deemed important by researchers is "community capacity." This has been defined as the ability of various factors within a community to promote well-being among residents, and to enable a community to pull through hard times. Community capacity consists of four components: physical capital, human capital, social capital, and capital goods. Particularly

important to rural communities is the "physical capital" component, which is defined to include the physical elements and resources found within a community (e.g., sewer systems, open space, business parks, housing stock, schools, etc.), as well as the financial capital or revenue the community is able to generate. Our results suggest that physical capital must be in place before a community's well-being can be completely realized. In all four of the study communities, housing affordability and availability were a serious concern for community leaders at one time. In two communities, the availability of water was also a significant problem. Housing concerns can be addressed through a change in zoning and building ordinances, but water scarcity is a more difficult problem to solve, and needs further research.

Strategies for Managing and Planning for the Future

While communities are unique, this research has identified a few common strategies used by community leaders in their efforts to successfully diversify their economies and integrate tourism and recreation. The first is that it is important for a community to have a vision for the future. Community leaders and residents in all four of our study communities had taken the time to develop a master plan. Without this first step, it is difficult for a community to know which strategies will be most effective in helping them to implement their vision.

Secondly, leaders within these four communities recognized the importance of citizen involvement in the planning process. They solicited and received involvement through the formation of committees that they felt truly represented their residents. They also conducted resident surveys to gain a better understanding of their citizens' preferences. Through this type of citizen engagement, community leaders felt they not only developed better plans, but also that community residents had a better understanding and acceptance of their city's master plan.

Lastly, the community leaders recognized their own limitations, and hired outside consultants to aid them in their planning process, which included help with writing planning documents and also with conducting resident surveys. By receiving assistance from experts in the field of community development, most of the respondents felt they had done a much better and more thorough job on the planning process than if they had attempted to do it on their own. In addition to helping in the planning process, the consultants could also serve as mediators in managing community conflicts. In recognition of the importance of these outside consultants, federal, state, and county governments, as well as some private organizations, have developed funding sources to assist communities in paying the costs of professional consultants. A partial list of those organizations may be found on the next page.

Sample of Government Programs for Economic and Community Development

State Programs

Utah Department of Community and Economic Development
324 South State Street, Suite 500
Salt Lake City, UT 84111
Phone: (801) 538-8700
Web: dced.utah.gov/

The Governor's Rural Partnership Office
21st Century Communities
355 West Center Street
Cedar City, UT 84720
Phone: (435) 586-7738
Web: utahreach.usu.edu/comm21/index.htm

Utah Center for Rural Life
Southern Utah University
351 West Center Street
Cedar City, UT 84720
Phone: (435) 586-7738
Web: utahreach.usu.edu

Utah Rural Development Council
351 West Center
Cedar City, UT 84720
Phone: (435) 586-7852
Web: utahreach.usu.edu

Utah League of Cities and Towns
50 South 600 East, Suite 150
Salt Lake City, UT 84102
Phone: (801) 328-1601
Web: www.ulct.org/

Regional Programs

Wasatch Front Regional Council
295 N. Jimmy Doolittle Road
Salt Lake City, UT 84116
Phone: (801) 292-4469
Web: www.wfrc.org/
Counties: Weber, Morgan, Davis, Salt Lake, and Tooele

Six County Association of Governments
250 North Main
Richfield, UT 84701
Phone: (435) 896-9222
Web: www.sixcounty.com/
Counties: Juab, Millard, Sevier, Sanpete, Piute, and Wayne

Uintah Basin Association of Governments
855 East 200 North
Roosevelt, UT 84066
Phone: (435) 722-4518
Counties: Daggett, Duchesne, and Uintah

Mountainland Association of Governments
586 East 800 North
Orem, UT 84097-4146
Phone: (801) 229-3800
Web: www.mountainland.org
Counties: Summit, Utah, and Wasatch

Bear River Association of Governments
170 North Main
Logan, UT 84321
Phone: (435) 752-7242
Web: www.brag.dst.ut.us/
Counties: Box Elder, Cache, and Rich

Five County Association of Governments
906 North 1400 West
St. George, UT 84771-1550
Phone: (435) 673-3548
Web: www.fcaog.state.ut.us/
Counties: Beaver, Iron, Garfield, Kane, and Washington

Federal Programs

USDA Rural Development
Stop 0705, 1400 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-0705
Phone: (202) 720-4323
Web: www.rurdev.usda.gov

Economic Action Programs
USDA Forest Service
Federal Bldg. 234 25th Street
Ogden, UT 84401
Phone (801) 625-5259
Web: www.fs.fed.us/r6/coop/programs/rca/economic

Community Development Financial Institution Funds
U.S. Department of Treasury
601 Thirteenth Street NW, Suite 200 South
Washington, D.C. 20005
Phone (202) 622-8662
Web: www.cdfifund.gov/

You can get a copy of this and other IORT publications at our website:

www.cnr.usu.edu/iort

Or contact us at IORT, College of Natural Resources, Utah State University, 5220 Old Main Hill, Logan, Utah 84322-5220

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions. Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities. This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jack M. Payne, Vice President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University.