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Stakeholder Report for the Town of Springdale

Southern Utah is home to many people, organizations, and groups, looking to use the land for everything from preservation and recreation to industrial development. State and National Parks are preserving the land for all future generations to enjoy, as unaltered as possible. The Bureau of Land management is tasked with determining how the land can best be split between preservation, development, and use, in order to keep everybody happy. Others, like mining companies, can see all of the resources that are available to be utilized, and make it their goal to get those resources and spur the economy. While each goal is a noble one, land is limited and it is impossible for every interest to get things exactly how they want them. As such, everyone must come together and find common solutions that will benefit the majority of each organization’s benefactors.

In managing 23 million acres of land, the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management – Utah realizes that public input is critical. According to their website, they work with local, State and Tribal governments, the public, special interest groups, and various industries in order to identify appropriate use from the land. Their mission is “to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the public land”, and “land-use planning is vital to our mission.” With so many different interests, Southern Utah is split among natural resource preservation, natural resource use, and development. Some areas are classified as “Areas of Critical Environmental Concern”, in which biological resources must be conserved. Other areas are leased for oil and gas drilling and mining. Some areas are designated as recreational, designed for off-highway vehicular use, watershed for public consumption, or even commercial development.

In 1859, Springdale was founded by a group of Mormon Pioneers, and the census in 1880 determined that the town had a population of 50. Around the turn of the century, travelers began to routinely visit and enjoy the canyon and in 1909, the area was designated as a national monument in order to preserve the beautiful landscape, which brought an increase in tourism to the town. “Parkitecture” was the common architectural style, merging natural themes with building styles, which was part of the allure of the small town. In 1992, however, the town revamped its building style to come more in line with the buildings in Zion National Park. Since then, there has been a balancing act between keeping the small town feel while merging the architecture and style with Zion National Park.

Now a city of 550 that sees nearly 4 million tourists per year, Springdale faces some especially unique challenges in southern Utah. Zion National Park blocks expansion on its North, East, and West borders, with Rockdale blocking expansion to the South. With no room to grow, and an ever-increasing flow of tourists and citizens, Springdale has to balance its natural resource and land usage and keep its “small town” feel while adapting to cope with the increasing tourism in the area.

The increase in tourism has put a strain on water and energy use, creating the need for the city to upgrade its water treatment plants. Previously, the plant can handle over 400,000 gallons per minute, but during recent years, peak summer periods have put a strain on the plant’s ability to clean the town’s water. This increased water usage has also decreased the amount of available water that flows down the Virgin River, making livestock farming more difficult for farmers who rely on the Virgin River.

Additionally, the massive number of people who are visiting the town has created a huge traffic problem. On busy days, there have been massive lines leading to the entry of the park, which can take hours to get through, only to be told that there is no more parking available within the park. Visitors were then routinely parking along the street, blocking entire driveways or parking lots and making locals late for work or unable to go to the grocery store, or even leave their houses. This prompted city management to enact new ordinances that prohibited parking within a minimum distance from driveways and parking lots, but the town is soon banning parking on the street altogether in order to allow U-DOT to come in and make renovations along the entire main street of Springdale. These renovations will expand sidewalks and implement cycling lanes on both sides of the street. Once these upgrades have been completed, parking will no longer be allowed, instead having been moved to a parking structure that is in the process of being built.

These upgrades are not without drawbacks, however. During the construction period, traffic is expected to get worse, and fewer spots will be in the parking structure than were in the town. This will ultimately create a larger issue in lack of parking, in exchange for cars to be parked off the road and keep the roadway clearer. However, if the city is to keep up with the problem, they are going to have to get creative.

Currently, city ordinances require buildings to be built in a certain architectural style. While there have been exceptions to this rule, generally, locals do not enjoy new buildings built in a way that does not fit with the overall theme of the town. Among other buildings, a parking structure is something that the town does not want to see, because they are afraid of losing the small town feel. Because of this, it has been difficult to find a common solution for the parking problem. Locals want parking to be moved away from their homes and businesses, but are not keen on creating mass parking spaces that make the town look bigger than it is. The parking garage that has been proposed is on a plot that is surrounded on 3 sides by hills, so it will be mostly hidden, but that is a Band-Aid solution.

As a compromise with the locals, the city could consider underground parking garages. This way, the locals don’t have a massive structure that is an eyesore on the natural landscape and takes away the feel of the small town, while at the same time, providing thousands of parking spaces for the crowds of tourists. According to Jeff Bradybaugh, the Zion National Park Superintendent, one day in the park in 2015 saw over 3,300 cars. If six parking structures that were primarily built underground had about 500 stalls each, the majority of the parking issue could be solved. Because some of the 3,300 cars were simply passing through the park, not staying, the number of cars needing the parking spaces are decreased as well.

According to the University Of Tennessee Institute Of Agriculture, a typical parking stall is 18 x 10 feet, or 180 square feet, and an acre of land can accommodate 242 stalls, assuming there were no lanes. However, that same acre of land could fit 150 parking stalls in 6 rows plus the lanes required for the cars to get to the spots or exit the garage. According to Tom Dansie, there are a number of undeveloped, commercially zoned plots in the town. These plots could be used for the very purpose of underground parking garages. According to fixr.com, a website dedicated to construction advice and estimation, an average parking garage of 145,000 square feet costs roughly $8.56 million. Their estimate assumes a 5 story garage with each floor measuring in at 10 feet in height. If we take the numbers from the Institute of Agriculture, 150 parking stalls out of a maximum of 242, and then multiply that by the maximum number of stalls you could fit in a 145,000 square foot garage, 805, we end up with 499 stalls and the necessary lanes for entry and exit.

Prices may vary from location to location, but the approximate cost to build 6 parking garages, or 2,994 parking stalls, would be $51.36 million. According to Tom, the garage currently being built is a public-private enterprise, where a private company is investing most of the money into the project, and in exchange, will charge a fee to each car to use the garage in order to make its money back. According to the Washington County Financial Statements for 2015, their end of year net position was $79,645,897. Springdale could request a grant from the county to help offset the cost of new garages, ask for funding from Zion national Park on the basis that the new garage will help keep more cars out of the park, and find a private company to invest in another portion of the project to successfully fund the building of new underground parking garages. To sweeten the deal, a building could be built above ground on top of the garage to house a business that will then bring in even more revenue for the backers of the project. This building and the garage could be outfitted with Tesla’s Solar Roof and Powerwall technologies to further offset the long-term operating cost of the project.

Having built these garages, there will be a much smaller issue relating to parking and overcrowding in the town of Springdale, Zion National Park, and even Rockville, the neighboring town. While this may not necessarily help reduce traffic, it can redirect and disperse it away from the main road toward the parking garages, where people can then walk through town and take the shuttle system to enter the park, or spend time in the town itself, utilizing the new sidewalks and bike lanes that will be built by U-DOT in the coming year. If the garages are spread evenly throughout the town, traffic will be split among the garages, increasing traffic slightly in the more quiet areas away from the main road, but it will keep the main road much clearer, allowing for shorter wait times to enter the park and less congestion. Additionally, the garages will be hidden underground, in order to fit in with any above-ground building ordinances that the town has, keeping the locals pleased with the appearance, and providing much more organized parking for anybody in and around Springdale. The large hotels in the town could also consider investing in underground structures under their buildings, to provide at least 1 parking stall per room. All that would remain are parking areas for locals and people visiting the businesses in the community. Residential areas could then be zoned for locals living in the community, so revenue could be made via parking tickets.

Another solution that was envisioned about 17 years ago is a shuttle system, running from Springdale into the Zion visitor center. While this project has been quite successful, it has been facing issues in recent seasons. First, the buses have been working for 17 seasons, and most have mileage nearing or exceeding 300,000 miles and are in need of replacements. To replace the shuttles, the park is looking at a price tag of $30-40 million, which neither the park nor the town has. Second, the increase in visitation has required the park to work harder at getting their seasonal bus drivers to come in earlier in the season and stay later. Last year, for example, they had to recall a number of drivers to extend the season from October 30th to November 30th, and this year they plan on opening the season 2 weeks earlier and keeping it running 3 weeks later. Third, the shuttles can barely keep up with the number of visitors as it is. The shuttles running between Springdale and Zion have the problem that they fill up completely on the first stop, making it impossible to pick up more people on the way into the park. The town and park have tried different solutions, like adding half-way stops along the route to pick more people up in the middle and adding more stops overall, but the problem seems to be persisting.

In order to keep locals happy with resource management, crowds, building ordinances, and traffic, the town and park must work together to find innovative solutions that will please the largest number of people.

As far as resource management goes, there are a number of different possible solutions. For energy, solar is an incredible resource. Solar Energy had been considered, but a similar problem to the parking garage persists. Many of the locals don’t want to see hundreds of solar panels, especially in or around a National Park where the emphasis is on natural beauty. Even though Southern Utah receives ample sun through the majority of the year, it is not a popular idea.

The easiest place to mount solar panels would be on top of houses and other buildings, where there is a guaranteed flat area. Tesla, an electric car and renewable energy company, recently unveiled a project called “Solar Roof”, a rooftop made of solar panels designed to look like normal roof tiles that costs less than a traditional roof when energy savings are taken into account. Tesla has also created a number of technologies designed for use in homes, such as the “Powerwall 2”. One single Powerwall has the capacity to power a 2 bedroom home for an entire day, and costs only $7,000 to purchase and have professionally installed. A Powerwall 2, coupled with Tesla’s new Solar Roof product, could effectively take the town off the electrical energy grid for 9 months out of the year.

In addition, Springdale is located inside a canyon. In personal experience, wind can get very strong through the canyon, and if placed correctly, wind turbines could also generate a substantial amount of power, year round. General Electric Energy is a leading provider of wind turbine technology, and has begun to get into water treatment as well. A public-private enterprise between the town or park and these companies could make the town and park completely renewable and independent of fuel sources like coal and oil, and save them money once the initial investment had paid itself off. If homeowners, many of whom are on their second or third vacation home, invested in the solar energy themselves, that would drop the price of the project on public buildings for the town. Alternatively, with a large enough project, the two companies might be willing to offer package deals to lower the overall cost, with the town charging its citizens in tax money over the next few years to recoup the investment, leading to a win-win-win situation for all parties involved. The city gets essentially unlimited renewable energy, solving its energy needs, homeowners’ electric bills essentially cease, or even begin to bring in revenue if the town makes more energy than it needs, and the companies that provide the infrastructure gain a solid contract in order to expand renewable energy sources.

This would solve the need for electricity and greatly help the issue with water usage. In addition, a city entirely powered by clean, renewable energy is a Public Relations tool that could be exploited to bring in more tourists, leading to an increase in revenue to help pay off the investment.

With hope, the town will include Zion National Park in much of their planning, as the entire reason Springdale is a successful town is because of its proximity to Zion, and its economy depends almost entirely on the tourism generated by the park. For example, when the Government came to a standstill for 2 weeks, and all the National Parks shut down during that time, Springdale suffered a loss of over 200,000 visitors in that period of time. Luckily, the state of Utah was able to get the parks up and running again within 7 days, so the tourism loss for Springdale could have been double or worse, had the break continued. Because of its proximity and reliance on the park, any change, no matter how small, in Park policy affects the town.

Superintendent Bradybaugh also attends every town meeting, has various staff on many of the town’s panning commissions, and is extremely available to the community. He does this because the two entities, Zion National Park and Springdale, are so entwined that their borders even overlap. The town’s boundaries invade Zion, and Zion controls land that falls within town boundaries. This forms a natural partnership between the two organizations that necessitates cooperation.

While these suggestions may not be a total solution for the many problems that Springdale faces, they provide a much needed pathway to success for the city. Every year, the number of tourists increase, and Springdale is having difficulty handling them all. Some business owners even wish there were fewer tourists, opting for a figure closer to 2 million than 4 million, and a major complaint of theirs is the traffic in front of their parking lots and along their way to and from work. If the town can spread the traffic out across the city, provide adequate parking areas, and create an energy independent town, the issues they face will become much more manageable for the foreseeable future.

Sources

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