

# Salt Lake County Government: Creating Synergy, Success, and Efficiency for the Next Ten Years

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## INTRODUCTION

When it comes to Salt Lake County government, the majority of the county's 950,000+ residents hardly even know that they have a county mayor—much less that Salt Lake County's chief executive office was formerly occupied by three commissioners. Yet with a few reminders, citizens recall voting in favor of the change at the ballots in November 1998.

Change at the top was never meant to affect services to residents. No survey or opinion poll ever taken at the local level showed discontent with county services. Still, for much of the past three decades there have been a series of efforts to change the face of local government in Salt Lake County. Most were unsuccessful.

In the 1970s there was a failed attempt to consolidate Salt Lake City and Salt Lake County governments. There was a vote to incorporate the unincorporated area. It failed. There were more than a dozen reports and reviews prepared on local government in Salt Lake. They included a report on unification of Salt Lake Police and Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office (Unification Study 1978), and two reports to streamline and increase the efficiency of Salt Lake County government (Booz et al. 1977, 1979).

While reports mainly called for functional consolidation, the reality became increased service segmentation as significant portions of the unincorporated area incorporated into cities. Some of the new cities decided to contract with the county for services (police, fire, snow removal). Others self-provided.

Since the mid-1970s, the geopolitical map of the county has changed significantly. In the 1970s, West Valley City, Taylorsville, Holladay and Cottonwood Heights did not exist. Portions of Midvale, Salt Lake City, West Jordan and Riverton were unincorporated, as were urban areas in Midvale and the City of South Salt Lake. In fact, Salt Lake County provided city-type services to the largest single local population in Utah. Today, it still does.

The evolutionary tale of county government includes creation of new cities, annexation of unincorporated areas

and, finally, a successful general election vote to change the form of Salt Lake County government.

Where Salt Lake County is today and how it got here is an interesting bit of history.

## HISTORY OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT

After several failed attempts to consolidate, incorporate or otherwise alter Salt Lake County government, commissioners took action to fully review the government. In 1983 it began a cooperative relationship with the Salt Lake Area Chamber of Commerce creating the Business/Government Alliance to study local government.

In the spring of 1985, commissioners appointed four committees to examine County Operations, Management Procedures and Structures (COMPS). The committees studied the tax system, criminal justice system, administrative structure and the roles and revenues of Salt Lake County government. By October of 1985 the recommendations were presented and they were published in January 1986.

Many of the recommendations became the backbone of the vote 10 years later to change the form of Salt Lake County government. The COMPS study determined that the three member commission, elected at-large was "unable, fairly and accurately, to represent the county..." ("County Operations Management Procedures and Structure [COMPS] Task Force Reports" 1985, 2).

This nearly 20-year-old report, recommended changing the form of Salt Lake County government from the commission form of government to Executive/Council as "authorized by Utah Code Annotated (17-35-14). ("A Report on Recommended Action on the COMPS Task Force Reports" 1986, 7)

Also included among the 17 major recommendations:

- Eliminate redundant overhead costs ("A Report on Recommended Action" 1986, 5).
- When the Legislature assigns a specific function to county government, it should provide sufficient funds to deliver the service or grant the county the ability to raise sufficient funds to insure service delivery ("A Report on Recommended Action" 1986, 1).

- The county should seek authority to coordinate all local government activities and developments which originate, extend or terminate beyond the boundaries of single local governments (“A Report on Recommended Action” 1986, 3).

Further recommended in the study was construction of a medium/minimum security jail facility. That became the 500-bed Oxbow Jail in the City of South Salt Lake that has been for sale for several years since the opening of the 2,000 bed Adult Detention Center (ADC) in January 2000. There is now pressure to re-open Oxbow since the ADC is functionally at its prisoner limit.

In the criminal justice section of the report, it “actively encouraged functional consolidation of law enforcement service among political entities.” Sheriff Aaron Kennard has suggested this year a Unified Police Authority to consolidate many of the functions of our myriad of local police agencies in the county. The Sheriff’s plan would keep local patrols in the communities, while consolidating investigations, gang units, communications and other administrative functions.

A Dan Jones and Associates 45-question survey taken in 1985 indicated 65% of the respondents favored special user fees instead of normal taxes to provide certain county services (recreation, building permits, paramedic service).

The COMPS report also made some dramatic recommendations concerning the executive structure. Besides having a chief executive, the report recommended elimination of seven elected positions including the sheriff, auditor, assessor, treasurer, clerk, recorder and surveyor. The only elected official the report determined should be retained as “elected” rather than appointed was County Attorney (District Attorney).

By fall of 1986, Commissioners appointed “County Government for the Next Century: A Community Task Force.” The task force assignment was to “determine whether to change” the form of county government. One year later the report was issued. Grant Holman, Chair of County Government for the Next Century Task Force, wrote in his cover letter to commissioners “...the ultimate solution to meet the problems of expected growth in Salt Lake Valley can only be met by a consolidated government for the total area.” Mr. Holman decried the fragmentation of government “that now exists...particularly in the public safety area.”

Many of the recommendations mirrored the COMPS study and also suggested that county government assume the role of becoming the low-cost producer of services that are countywide in nature.

## SALT LAKE COUNTY TODAY

Today we have a Mayor-Council form of government. The executive branch of government includes not just the mayor, but eight other elected executives that have responsibility for

important countywide operations. I am the second elected County Mayor in a system that is in its fifth year of existence after nearly 150 years of being served by a three member Board of Salt Lake County Commissioners.

Salt Lake County’s challenges today are exactly the same as commissioners faced in the mid-1970s. The county anticipates continued growth in both population and demand for services. A further challenge is to provide the best services at a reasonable cost to taxpayers.

The citizens and elected officials must make critical decisions regarding growth. These decisions affect quality of life, ability to create jobs and how to retain those jobs. As Salt Lake County grows, decisions affecting transportation affect economic development, decisions affecting economic development will affect land use; decisions affecting land use will affect how our governments grow. As Mayor of Salt Lake County, I look forward to these challenges and how we as a community will plan for our future.

With years of recommendations behind us and continued growth before us, there are a few key issues to consider.

### POLICE & FIRE

Police and fire service are two areas of government provided service that are critically affected by growth of Salt Lake County. The following are two examples of how multiple public safety providers in the county negatively affect the services we receive as citizens:

1—Earlier this year, one of the cities in Salt Lake County faced a bomb scare at a business. When the public safety officers arrived they asked the employees to look underneath their desks for something that might be a bomb. When one of the employees questioned why she should have to look under the desk, the Public Safety Officer replied “because we do not have our own bomb squad.” The reason this city did not have its own bomb squad is due to a modest city budget and a low crime rate.

2—Criminals know no boundaries. In past crime sprees, criminals have robbed a bank or convenience store in one city then moved on to another and another. Each city responded appropriately but was not always aware of prior incidents.

The obvious solution is to coordinate law enforcement efforts. There is no doubt the tax paying public expects professional law enforcement. The public also expects professional police departments to talk directly with one another, thoroughly investigate crime and protect citizens.

In the past couple of years the cities of Draper and Taylorsville created their own police departments. The Salt Lake County Sheriff’s office thereby became smaller. This causes stress on the remaining Sheriff’s jurisdiction as economies of scale decrease while the countywide gang and investigation needs increase.

The solution to the deadly combination of increasing costs and reduced capabilities is the Unified Police Authority (UPA) that will at first consist of unincorporated areas and

partner cities that contract for Sheriff's services. Other cities within Salt Lake County would also be welcome. Each city and the unincorporated county would have local police patrols, but they would share the costly, highly technical services like homicide, gang units, etc.

Meanwhile the Sheriff's Office would continue to provide those services that are mandated to be provided under state law and are already countywide including the jail (Adult Detention Center), court services, etc. The expected result would be the expansion of services available to cities.

The role model for the Unified Police Authority is the Unified Fire Authority. The UFA was created in 2004 to maintain fire services in a major portion of Salt Lake County under the control of one organization. The UFA consists of unincorporated Salt Lake County, Taylorsville, Holladay, Draper, Herriman, Riverton, Alta and Cottonwood Heights. The UFA brings centralized control of fire protection for the benefit of those citizens within its service area. In the past the municipalities contracted with the former Salt Lake County Fire Department for fire protection and paramedic service. Under the UFA model, the unincorporated county and the cities are represented on the Board and each entity is fully invested in the future of the fire service.

#### TRANSPORTATION

The Legislature made public transportation a priority in the 2005 Legislative Session. Tens of millions of dollars are earmarked for improving our public transportation system in Utah. Since 90% of the state's population lives along the 90-mile long Wasatch Front corridor (Weber County south through Utah County), every resident in Salt Lake County is likely interested in just what will be done to improve this multi-modal system.

The Wasatch Front Regional Council (WFRC) is one of the state's metropolitan planning organizations (MPO). These organizations were created in response to a federal requirement that states set up transportation growth plans in order to get federal funding. The WFRC projects that under current funding mechanisms, average commute times will dramatically increase everywhere along the Wasatch Front. Even in the west, where the mantra has been "one horse (car), one rider," gradually the west is beginning to accept the urban fact of mass transportation.

I-15 has been expanded, the initial light rail (TRAX) line is proving to be wildly popular, commuter rail is expected to be in place sometime in 2007 and our primary state highway system is due for a makeover.

Light rail ridership has greatly exceeded expectations. Light rail is primarily used as a commuter tool for those commuting to work into Salt Lake City or those coming to Salt Lake City for sporting events, theater, etc. In the future light rail spurs should serve the south and west and the airport. By the end of last year, more than 42 million passenger trips had been taken and more than 10 million service miles logged on TRAX.

Commuter rail will one day stretch from Brigham City to Payson, roughly the I-15 corridor. The first scheduled segment, from Weber County to Salt Lake, should be completed by late 2007.

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) may also come to Salt Lake County. It is a new phenomenon to many U.S. cities, but is used globally. BRT mainly consists of express bus routes; there are two types: The routes can run either in their own dedicated lanes or they can flow with other vehicle traffic. BRT offers convenience and low cost plus the flexibility of quick, easy route adjustments. The WFRC Transportation 2040 Long Range Plan identifies dozens of potential BRT Service Areas. UTA is conducting three transit studies that include BRT service.

#### LAND USE

Salt Lake County continues to grow; the majority of this growth, however, is not coordinated countywide. Most of the population growth is in the southern portion of the county, in communities like Herriman, Bluffdale, Riverton, South Jordan, West Jordan and Draper. Farm after farm is converted into subdivisions or big retail developments. Driving down State Street, or Redwood Road, or 700 East it is hard to differentiate between one city to the next. Many cities have altogether lost their community identities. They have lost or have no town centers.

In South Jordan, Kennecott Land is undertaking the largest development ever seen on the Wasatch Front. Residents in these homes will need, and deserve, both private and public services. Schools, transportation, police and fire must plan for the day when the new area is fully developed.

Salt Lake County is working with Envision Utah and the WFRC to plan for future growth through Wasatch Choices 2040. Unlike other planning efforts, this effort looks at many facets of planning. It includes land use, transportation and recreation. Salt Lake County government will also work with all the cities in the county to coordinate growth, rather than each city planning for its future in a vacuum.

#### PARKS & RECREATION

The Salt Lake County Parks and Recreation Division has completed a Draft Master Plan. When finally adopted, it will succeed the existing Parks Master Plan adopted in May 1994. The new plan acknowledges that "during the 10 year period since that plan was published much has changed in Salt Lake County to influence the political, geopolitical and recreational conditions in the County." It outlines how the county will work with local communities to address recreation and park needs throughout the entire county. This document has been prepared with a great deal of public input and will now be taken into the county's five recreation planning areas for public meetings to comment on the plan.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Salt Lake County currently has over 25 different organizations that are involved with economic development. They include Chambers of Commerce, the State of Utah, the Economic Development Corporation of Utah and many of our cities' own economic development departments. These government efforts, all well-meaning, are uncoordinated. Salt Lake County's role is to facilitate contact between all our partners within Salt Lake County. Collaboration is required to create jobs. The county is committed to holding Economic Development Summits, where various economic development entities can interact with their counterparts about projects that will affect the county as a whole.

The county role should be as the primary driver of business retention and expansion of existing business within the county ("Salt Lake County Economic Development Plan" 2004).

Salt Lake County Government will also continue to support Government Business Coalition trainings. Salt Lake County holds free trainings to educate local businesses about how they can improve themselves. The county also promotes the training programs of other business groups by acting as a clearinghouse for their instructional programs.

Salt Lake County Government will also team up with our economic development partners at the state to visit our local businesses to learn from them.

## CONCLUSION

Providing for current and future local government needs must include consideration of what kind of quality of life our citizens want and just how much they want to pay to achieve it. There are always more needs than dollars. Salt Lake County employees are known for making ends meet by working harder and smarter. The Mayor/Chief Executive Officer should continue to be a strong advocate for the continued effective service delivery, efficient use of tax payer dollars, finding ways to fine tune internal controls while cooperatively working with and supporting each of our county's municipalities and their elected officials.

As county and municipal officials, we are on the front lines of providing primary government services to our citizens. Residents of the cities are also residents of the county. Cooperation between the municipalities and the county is key to serving the public.

Salt Lake County has one truly consolidated public service: the Salt Lake Valley Health Department. SLVHD provides public health services for the entire county. In addition, the Salt Lake County Library System provides library services everywhere with the exception of Murray and Salt Lake City. The jurisdiction for Salt Lake County Animal Services includes Salt Lake City, the unincorporated area, Taylorsville, Cottonwood Heights and Herriman. All three of these agencies provide services to an enormous segment of our county

residents. These organizations demonstrate that multi-jurisdictional services can be successful.

Traditionally county governments provide senior centers, substance abuse, mental health and many other human services that are mandated by state government. There will always be county government. If the county ever becomes geographic wall-to-wall cities, there will still be needs for most of what the county does: Park planning and operation, recreation programs and facilities, libraries, cleaner air, clean water, restaurant inspections, arts facilities, the Clark Planetarium, marriage licenses, elections, conventions, criminal prosecutions, jails, real property assessment, tourism promotion, jail services, solid waste disposal and flood control and economic development.

No matter where a business locates or expands in our valley, all of us benefit. That is why the county can successfully act in the role of coordinator and that is why creation of a countywide master plan is a good move. "Businesses need to know where Salt Lake Valley is headed 5 – 10 – 15 years down the road" ("County Government for the Next Century: A Community Task Force" 1987, 142).

As the state's most populous county, Salt Lake County government services are available to 43% of Utah's residents. With up to 7,000 employees and a \$750 million dollar budget, we must strive to grow and provide services in a smart and efficient manner.

## REFERENCES

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