Mountain Accord is a most unusual transportation project since it is much more than a transportation project. It is a multi-phase initiative that seeks to make critical decisions regarding the future of Utah’s central Wasatch Mountains. It will evaluate and address issues and goals centered on four topic areas: environment, recreation, transportation, and economy. Mountain Accord is a collaborative effort between public and private interests, including state and local governments, federal agencies, businesses, and grassroots organizations. Stakeholder engagement is an important component of this effort.

BACKGROUND

Utah’s central Wasatch Mountains and canyons are a significant natural resource that enhance the quality of life for more than one million nearby residents and visitors. However, continued population growth in Salt Lake, Summit, and Wasatch counties means the availability of efficient transportation, clean air and water, recreation resources, and land use will be threatened unless steps are taken now to balance these equally important resources.

This is not a new topic for the region. Studies dating back to the 1960’s have attempted to capture long term actions for the future of the central Wasatch Mountains. However, they were limited in their scope, only applying to a specific jurisdiction or area. Mountain Accord is a decision making program that will collectively decide on specific proposed actions and projects to be implemented now to shape the future.

UNIQUE PROCESS

The process is customized for the unique nature of these regional challenges.

Mountain Accord is a process initiated to gather input from residents and stakeholders regarding the future of the central Wasatch Mountains and surrounding communities. By using public input and previous research as a framework, the project team and active participants will evaluate four major topic areas that correspond with the project goals and how they relate to each other in the region:

Topic areas/goals

- Transportation – enhance regional transportation systems
- Environment – preserve the environment
- Economy – strengthen the regional economy
- Recreation – ensure high quality recreational experience
The process consists of two phases:

### Phase One – scenarios

During this ongoing phase, the project team will study current and projected conditions within the study area in Salt Lake, Summit, and Wasatch counties. This process will draw from public input, existing plans and studies, and collaboration among Mountain Accord’s participating agencies and key stakeholders. Using this information, the project team will develop potential future scenarios for the central Wasatch Mountains and canyons that address transportation, environmental, economic, and recreational goals.

The process for arriving at a preferred scenario is as follows:

Four systems groups have formed:

- Recreation
- Transportation
- Economics
- Environmental

Each systems group, with membership across the stakeholder spectrum, is led by two co-chairs (one from the Wasatch Front and one from the Wasatch Back). Their charge is to optimize their respective area without regard for the other systems. The systems groups will then meet to overlay their optimized solutions. There will be common outcomes and areas of conflict. The systems chairpersons will negotiate the conflict areas with the goal of a mutually agreeable preferred scenario. Alternative scenarios may be needed should a preferred scenario not be unanimous.

Phase One—scheduled for completion December 2014—will culminate in the selection of a preferred scenario and a proposal of specific actions to shape the future of the central Wasatch region. The proposed actions, carried forward into Phase Two, will address transportation, environmental, economic, and recreational goals, and other potential land use changes.

### Phase One outcomes:

- Purpose and need
- Locally preferred transit scenario including mode, route, termini, and concept costs
- Broad stakeholder agreement on watershed/environmental protection, areas suitable for development, and transportation corridors
- Economic funding analysis
- Clearer understanding of potential federal actions, and therefore which federal agencies will be involved in advancing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process

### Phase Two – environmental

During Phase Two, the Mountain Accord project team will work through appropriate agencies and entities to implement the proposed actions identified in Phase One.

Some of these actions will require federal funding or federal agency approvals and will be subject to formal review under NEPA. This may require that detailed analysis of the actions and their environmental impacts be recorded in a document such as an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The NEPA process (or processes) in Phase Two may take two or more years to complete, depending on the nature of the proposed actions and their impacts.

One of the biggest challenges is advancing a NEPA process that satisfies potentially three or more federal agencies: Federal Transit Administration, Federal Highway Administration, and U.S. Forest Service. Each of these agencies has different methodologies and guidance for NEPA. The team is working with the federal partners to develop a mutually agreeable NEPA process that will satisfy all parties.

Other proposed actions that do not require federal agency approvals or funding will move forward under the authority of appropriate state or local agencies during this phase.

### Phase Two outcomes:

- Detailed environmental analysis
- Environmental mitigation, draft EIS/public meetings
- Response to comments/final EIS
- Record of decision
FEDERAL ENGAGEMENT

Federal agency involvement includes:

- Federal Transit Administration – lead agency for Phase One work
- Federal Highway Administration – supporting agency
- U.S. Forest Service – supporting agency
- Environmental Protection Agency
- Corps of Engineers

A broad-based agreement could lead to a single NEPA process, or it could identify multiple projects which could be studied in separate NEPA documents. Considerations for grouping or separating actions into single or multiple NEPA documents include:

- Timing of actions
- Dependency of one action upon others (connected actions)

Mountain Accord is likely to end up with multiple actions. There will also be state, local, and private decisions. Alternatives for memorializing broad-based agreements could include memoranda of understanding (MOU) or legislation to assure that the broad-based consensus is captured in one enforceable document.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

This project is not lead by any one agency, rather, it is a collection of public and private entities that have formed an organization to advance mutual goals. An Executive Committee was formed consisting of:

- Cities/counties
- Utah Governor’s office
- Utah Transit Authority
- Utah Department of Transportation
- Environmental groups
- Outdoor industry and ski industry
- Salt Lake City Chamber of Commerce
- Utah legislators
- Metropolitan Water District of Salt Lake and Sandy

The Executive Committee created an organization that is driven from the bottom up by public, private, and other stakeholders. The structure is shown here:

A charter was developed by the Executive Committee to codify the process. The charter states the goals, organizational structure, decision-making and conflict resolution process, and communication protocols. All Executive Committee members signed the charter.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Every interested public or private group is invited to the process. The goal is a truly open, publicly driven process to develop the preferred scenario. The initial public process was launched with a series of media blitzes to attend two public meetings. Three hundred and forty people attended the two meetings. These open house-style meetings provided information to the public on the proposed process, and solicited their input on both the process and what they considered important issues to resolve. Elected officials, the staff of involved agencies, and technical consultants staffed the event.

Other public engagement tools include:

- Project website (www.MountainAccord.com)
- Public meeting info posted online
- Comment form on website
- Sign up for email updates
- Past studies and existing plans on the website
- Agency and elected officials making presentations to interested groups
PRIVATE-PUBLIC PARTNERSHIP

In addition to a comprehensive blueprint for the Wasatch Mountains, this program is also an economic development project. It requires significant involvement from the private sector. During these initial phases, the business community—the Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce and individual companies—will be involved as active participants and contributing funding to these planning efforts. The business community recognizes the enormous economic potential of an agreed upon comprehensive transportation and environmental blueprint for the Wasatch Mountains.

In parallel to the planning and environmental work, a group will be formed to explore how this project could be executed, including a governance structure, funding, financing, operations, and maintenance.

TRANSIT ALTERNATIVES

There is a decades-long history of proposing transit to the Wasatch Mountains. The two latest studies—Wasatch Canyons Tomorrow and Mountain Transportation Study—make the case to advance transit planning towards actually implementing a transit system.

Although all transit modes and corridors are on the table, the focus has been on a route up Little Cottonwood Canyon, and then either stopping at Alta, or continuing up (aerial) or through (tunnels) to the top of Big Cottonwood Canyon and then to Park City.

The transit mode, corridor, and termini will be determined, optimized, and recommended by the transportation systems group. The group will then collaborate with the economic, environmental, and recreation groups to mutually determine the preferred scenario. The transportation system group is focusing on aerial, bus rapid transit, and light rail as the most likely transit modes.

All of these modes have their pros and cons, and it may end up a combination of modes.

FUNDING

Whatever private-public scenario is developed to advance towards implementation, it will most likely be expensive. No funding sources have been identified for design, construction, operations, and maintenance, but it will most likely be a mix of:

- Federal
- State
- Transit agencies
- Cities/Counties
- Private investment/development rights

CONCLUSION

This undertaking is unique in the United States as it attempts to integrate and balance large-scale environmental stewardship, transportation solutions, and recreational/economic opportunities into a comprehensive agreement. The process of idealizing each system goal, then blending the idealized goals into a consensus program of projects, is daunting but achievable when organized and managed properly. This process could prove to be a model on how to more quickly and effectively reach consensus on multifaceted issues, while simultaneously complying with the NEPA process.