

Case Study: The Wasatch Front Regional Council's Visionary Approach to Transportation, Land Use, and Housing

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The Wasatch Front Regional Council (WFRC) uses a planning approach that considers housing, land use, and transportation to accommodate current and future travelers. This interdisciplinary methodology allows WFRC to optimize its planning processes by coordinating with partners and communities across the Wasatch Front in Utah.

To balance land use, transportation, and housing priorities during the development of its [2019-2050 Regional Transportation Plan](#), WFRC created different scenarios to demonstrate the costs and benefits associated with transportation and land use investment options. Planners then used project selection criteria to evaluate the impact of projects within each scenario and assembled a portfolio of projects that move the region towards the [Wasatch Choice Vision](#) – a future-oriented, shared planning effort to improve the quality of life for all in the Wasatch Front area.

Background and Demographics

Utah's population growth has consistently outpaced most other states. Over the next 30 years, Utah's population is expected to nearly double in size. Utah must accommodate both economic and population growth to manage employment opportunities, air quality, transportation needs, and affordability for its residents.

The Greater Wasatch Front area is a metropolitan region in north-central Utah. The area includes cities along the western side of the Wasatch Mountains, including Salt Lake City, Utah's largest city and capital. The region is characterized by valleys surrounded by mountains and lakes.

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

- [Envision Utah](#), a widespread public engagement and planning process, laid the foundation for creating a growth vision for the region.
- WFRC and its planning partners published the [Wasatch Choice 2050 Vision](#) in 2018.
- The [2019-2050 RTP](#) details how the WC2050 goals can be achieved through interdisciplinary projects and locally focused technical assistance efforts.

IMPLEMENTATION HIGHLIGHTS

- WFRC uses [Access to Opportunities](#) as a measure for determining connectivity to services, facilities, and amenities.
- WFRC developed the [ATO Calculator](#) to evaluate the potential access impacts and benefits of future planning projects.
- The [Transportation and Land Use Connection](#) program provides technical assistance at the local level to advance regional goals.

WFRC serves as the metropolitan planning organization for much of the Wasatch Front. The region experiences transportation issues, such as traffic congestion and air quality concerns. Planners must also contend with the geographic attributes of the area and the transportation network's ability to connect people efficiently and safely to employment, services, recreation, and housing. In the midst of topographic constraints and high growth, housing affordability, water quality, and accessibility have emerged as land use and transportation planning priorities.

Beginning in 1997, a group of engaged and concerned community members formed [Envision Utah](#), a consortium designed to create regional planning processes and decisions based on community needs and input. The organization creates scenarios to envision regional change amid economic growth, population change, and other external factors. The effort has carried out surveys, workshops, interactive mapping exercises, and interviews to bring over 18,000 Utahns into the regional planning process. This process laid the groundwork for WFRC to develop the regional, visionary Wasatch Choice plan.

Planning at the Nexus of Housing and Transportation

Wasatch Choices

Building upon the intent of the Envision Utah effort, WFRC works toward a multidisciplinary, planning-focused framework layering considerations for transportation, land use, parks, open space, housing, and economic development. The vision brings together all elements of the region into a coordinated framework. WFRC formally adopted the [Wasatch Choice Vision 2040](#) (WC2040) in 2005, and adopted the latest version in 2016. The Vision also aligns with [Senate Bill 34](#), enacted during Utah's 2019 legislative session, and subsequent legislation. SB34 encourages local communities to coordinate housing and transportation planning and to develop moderate income housing (MIH) plans. SB34 added MIH plans as criteria in the prioritization process for new transportation capacity projects administered by the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT).

The Wasatch Choice Vision is built on four key strategies: 1) provide transportation choices, 2) support housing options, 3) preserve open space, and 4) link economic development with transportation and housing options.¹ Public participation throughout the region, in addition to the framework itself, informed these strategies. As a part of the initial drafting process in 2005, WFRC planners surveyed over 1,000 residents through several public workshops. To generate a vision representative of needs from across the region's communities, the process relied on input and buy-in from community members. Community input and engagement from around the region has been part of WFRC's work, including updates to the Wasatch Choice Vision, ever since.

The regional transportation plan (RTP) is the transportation element of the Wasatch Choice Vision. Both the RTP and Vision tie planning efforts to previously identified urban, city, and neighborhood centers. The centers serve as the official growth forecast points for the regions included in the plan. The plan's projects and strategies position the centers as hubs for reducing travel costs and time, supporting access to job opportunities, creating walkable communities, enabling multimodal transportation, and helping businesses connect with more customers.

¹ Wasatch Front Regional Council. "Wasatch Choice Vision". <https://wfr.org/wasatch-choice-regional-vision-wcrv/>

Access to Opportunities

Another focal point for the WFRC planning efforts is Access to Opportunities (ATO). The ATO framework is designed to meaningfully consider how the location of housing relates to basic needs, services, and amenities. Opportunities include affordable housing options, educational resources, multimodal transportation access, and employment opportunities. Regional and local ATO is a priority in decision-making and functions as a metric for evaluating the success of planning efforts, such as in the Transportation Improvement Program for the WFRC metropolitan planning organization (MPO) and the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program for the Utah Department of Transportation.

WFRC has developed mapping tools central to ATO planning: the [Wasatch Front Housing ATO Calculator](#) and the [ATO Map](#). The Calculator allows planners and developers to model housing development and evaluate its proximity and access to key destinations, such as employment, transportation, and other community necessities. Users can create a heat map to explore development scenarios and prioritize scenarios based on opportunity densities. The ATO map allows users to visualize the region's distribution of housing and employment relative to auto and transit transportation options. These tools elevate WFRC's ability to effectively plan by actively integrating transportation, housing, and land use.

Transportation Land Use Connection Program

WFRC created the [Transportation and Land Use Connection \(TLC\)](#) program in 2014 in partnership with Salt Lake County, UDOT, and the Utah Transit Authority. The TLC Program offers resources, funds, and technical assistance for local communities. It aims to facilitate locally focused, coordinated investment in planning for regional growth, and it supports community efforts to align local plans, policies, and implementation strategies with the Vision and the RTP. The program supports communities' planning efforts, such as ordinance drafting, town center plans, land use code updates, and corridor studies, in two ways: WFRC either helps provide funding and connect communities with consulting firms to develop projects, or takes on projects in-house. Awarded projects from years 2014-2022 can be viewed in the [TLC Projects Maps](#). For example, in 2021, Weber County received a TLC program award to evaluate the county's current state of housing affordability and access. Through TLC program WFRC staff support, Weber County explored the idea of access in its community and identified where housing options and opportunities overlap throughout the county. The TLC program ultimately acts as a platform for communities to implement the shared Wasatch Choice Vision. Following the demonstrated success of the WFRC's TLC Program, UDOT opted to establish a similar program to provide technical assistance to communities in the entire state.

Public Engagement and Stakeholder Collaboration

WFRC uses multiple methods to encourage and incorporate community input throughout the planning process. WFRC employed online and in-person open houses, webinars, interactive maps, and visualization tools to create multifaceted conversations around the achievement of the Wasatch Choice Vision. Additionally, WFRC hosted an annual regional consortium to share updates and create dialogue around the Wasatch Choice Vision update process. Regional planners incorporate community needs proactively into the design and conceptual phases of planning activities. Through its technical assistance efforts, the TLC program creates additional opportunities for WFRC to connect with regional and local planning entities and build lasting community relationships. To facilitate a robust planning network in the region, WFRC regularly collaborates with partners like the Mountainland Association of

Governments, UDOT, Utah Transit Authority, and the various counties and cities, to foster sustainable and successful growth in the region.

Next Steps

WFRC aims to further incorporate and accommodate housing that is affordable in its planning process. The Utah legislature recently adopted legislation that, requires local governments to align their local plans to the regional transportation plans. The Governor's Office of Planning & Budget is establishing a statewide coalition, [Guiding Our Growth](#), with housing affordability at the forefront. WFRC will provide technical assistance in these efforts and support affordable housing options in State, regional, and municipal policy and planning processes. WFRC is also working with regional partners and community stakeholders to develop and adopt the 2023-2050 Regional Transportation Plan. Focus areas for the updated RTP include external forces and policies, resiliency, safety, and freight.

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Resources

[Guiding Our Growth](#)

[Envision Utah](#)

[WFRC 2019-2050 Regional Transportation Plan](#)

[WFRC 2023-2050 Regional Transportation Plan](#)

[Wasatch Choice Vision](#)

[Wasatch Choice Map](#)

[Transportation Land Use Connection \(TLC\) Program](#)

[TLC Projects Maps](#)

[Wasatch Front Housing Access to Opportunities Calculator](#)

[Access to Opportunities Map](#)

[Utah Senate Bill 34](#)