

# The Salt Lake Tribune

## SLC's Northwest Quadrant: Build or not?

By Derek P. Jensen

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Three experts tapped by Envision Utah will evaluate the controversial Northwest Quadrant master plan, then recommend whether Salt Lake City should allow a mini-city for 70,000 residents in the brownfields and marshlands west of the international airport.

That's according to a draft document from the Mayor's Office that has environmentalists howling. The planned review does not specify a "no-build option," they cry, and greases the skids for a subdivision in a flood plain full of migratory birds.

"Clearly there is a presumption there that development will be the way," laments Lynn DeFreitas, executive director of Friends of Great Salt Lake. "It just doesn't make sense."

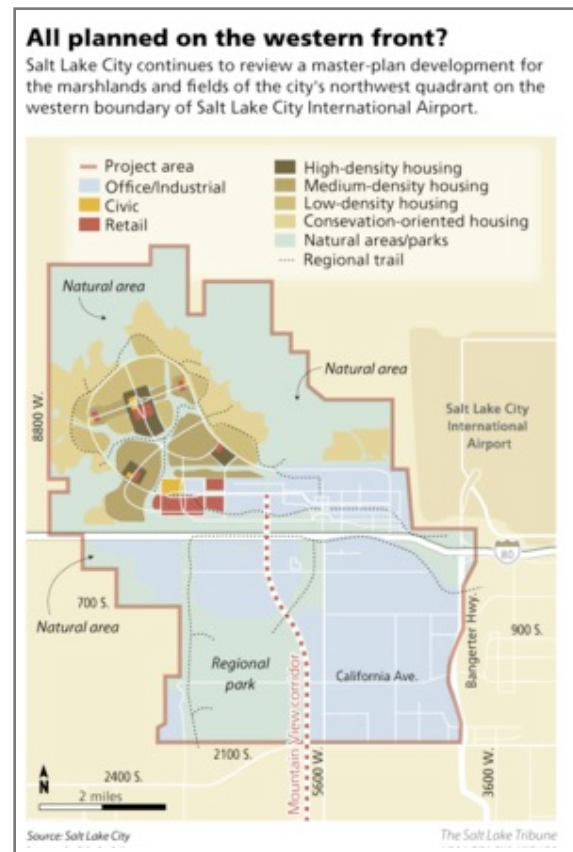
Obtained by The Salt Lake Tribune, the three-page memo repeatedly stresses the need to solicit and review community input. But it also refers to "subdivision implementation strategy," soliciting "continued involvement of interested local, state and federal agencies" and possible bus tours.

"There's no wording or any consideration at all of a no-build option," complains Michael Mielke, coordinator of Post Carbon Salt Lake. "The experts determine what the result will be. There needs to be a process that's open on determining who the experts will be."

Everett Joyce, lead planner of the Northwest Quadrant, says the city and Envision Utah will contract outside experts in wetlands, planning and sustainability. Mayor Ralph Becker, he notes, can modify their recommendation in any way he wants.

"It could have a no-development option in it," Joyce says.

That's true, says Becker, who acknowledges talking to the planning partnership Envision Utah, but adds he



has not seen the document.

"I haven't formulated what I would recommend to the council," Becker says. "That's what this is intended to do."

The mayor says the goal is to air the concept publicly, refine details as necessary, then try to build consensus. He questions why the loudest critics are coming to the fore now — after four years of review. And he says city officials will have to "fully explore" the consequences of a no-build option.

For at least a decade, private-property owners have targeted the area north of Interstate 80 — between the airport and the Great Salt Lake — for development. Some insiders fear the city's refusal to make the necessary zoning changes could result in an expensive legal fight.

The Northwest Quadrant master plan imagines 25 schools, a transit spine, regional parks and a walkable village center surrounded by neighborhoods sculpted with the latest sustainability standards. Most of the 19,000 acres, which once served as a Depression-era welfare farm, is owned by the LDS Church.

Environmentalists and urban planners consider the blueprint a disaster. They argue the mosquito-infested bird flyway is "unlivable and unbreathable," riddled with toxic landfills, deer flies and alkaline pools. Worse, they say, such sprawl would devastate bird refuge and air quality, and divert precious resources as the city digs its way out of the recession.

"Why would you throw a dart out in that far western reach and say, 'This is going to be green and sustainable,' when it's the furthest thing from green and sustainable," DeFreitas says. "I voted for Ralph because he was a visionary and a planner. But people are beginning to question, 'What kind of a planner is he?'"

In May, the City Council approved Becker's \$100,000 request for additional study, but not before Councilmen Soren Simonsen and Luke Garrott criticized the move.

"You all have stacked the deck," Garrott told the mayor's chief of staff and the council. "Why wouldn't you be investigating a no-build alternative?"

Simonsen calls it "curious" that the administration never consulted the council, which he says was supposed to happen as a condition of approving the \$100,000.

"I have a hunch they're doing this to sell the plan," he says.

In its September newsletter, the League of Women Voters of Salt Lake also questions the prudence of the plan.

"The estimated vehicular traffic is said to be a problem as well, not to mention the strain on water supply, garbage disposal and other utilities," writes Sherman Bloom, the league's director of natural resources. "Parts of the quadrant have soil that is unstable, and the entire area has a subsurface water table that is saline and highly alkaline, so that there are serious limits as to what can be grown in the area. There is more, but this gives you an idea of why some people feel this project is ill-advised."

Still, Becker insists there is no timeline and that he feels no pressure to act soon. He says it is important that Envision Utah is an independent agent of the city. What's more, he emphasizes, public feedback will be key.

"It's worth going back and looking at whether it's worth doing," the mayor says. "It's healthy to get it out there and get comments on it."

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What's next?

P Mayor Ralph Becker has “no timeline in mind” on making a decision about whether to allow major development in the 19,000-acre Northwest Quadrant between the international airport and the Great Salt Lake. City Hall, with Envision Utah's help, will contract with a trio of experts to review a master plan that foresees space for 70,000 residents living on the vast swath. The experts' recommendation will help guide the mayor and City Council on a final decision, perhaps next year.

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