

Tribune Editorial: Spencer Cox's Roadmap would put rural Utah in the ditch

Too much of the governor's plan is stuck in the extractive economy.



[Spencer Cox calls his plan for the first 500 days](#) of his new administration the [One Utah Roadmap](#). Most of it is admirably aspirational, devoted to improved education, health care access, equality and sustainability.

But, where a roadmap is supposed to show the path

forward, part of the new Utah governor's document is fixated on the rear-view mirror. And looking backward instead of forward is a good way to wind up in the ditch.

Climate change is the greatest threat to our civilization. Markets are well along in their realization that fossil fuels are a thing of the past and thus [a poor investment](#). It isn't going to happen overnight. But it is going to happen. Utah's economic future depends on sustainable and low-impact forms of development, much of it centered on tourism and care for the public lands that are our crown jewel.

Yet the governor's plan contains a handful of booby traps that would leave Utah mired in a carbon-heavy, boom-and-bust past.

Cox, an attorney and former telecom executive, plays up his small-town roots and has long urged that the state make sure to share its economic growth with rural areas. But the "Rural Matters" section of his Roadmap shows no leadership, no bold ideas and, if anything, stands to make the future of nonmetro Utah even worse.

By listing coal and oil development as a focus, ignoring the promise of sustainable forms of energy and supporting such expensive and ecologically harmful boondoggles as the Lake Powell pipeline, the Bear River water project and the Uintah railroad, the governor condemns his beloved

rural Utah to a slow economic, cultural and environmental death.

The Roadmap does promote sustainability in several ways, such as improving public transit along the Wasatch Front and greatly increasing the number of charging stations for electric vehicles. But real leadership in this area would see that Utah stands to benefit greatly, both economically and environmentally, from a full embrace of the shift to solar, wind and other renewable sources of energy rather than tie us to the slowly dying carbon-based economy.

Cox and other Republican leaders of the state are also picking a losing and time-wasting fight by opposing the apparent plan of the incoming Biden administration to [restore the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments](#) to the size and scope they had before Donald Trump's vandalism shrank them both.

A press release issued jointly by Cox, leaders of the Utah Legislature and the state's all-Republican congressional delegation refers to the federal lands in our state as "[our backyard](#)." That is a bad analogy. Federal land in Utah is not Utah's backyard. It is the public park next door.

Yes, we may care more and know more than people who live further away about what uses should be made of those lands, uses such as profitable yet sustainable large-scale solar energy. But the land is owned by the people of the

United States of America, held in trust for the whole of humanity, now and forever.

Reasonable requests, particularly the idea that the feds should send state and local government a lot more money to help make up for the tax-exempt status of all those acres, are less likely to be heard if we begin negotiations with wholly unreasonable expectations.

Overcrowding, pollution and high prices in the metropolitan parts of the state will drive more outmigration to the smaller towns and rural areas of Utah, movement that ought to be supported with such public infrastructure as broadband internet, highways, maybe even rail service.

No one should be surprised, though, when the pipeline of rural development increases not only jobs and economic activity, but also the percentage of environmentally aware voters who will live there. Notice, in a state that supposedly values local control, that the elected leaders of [San Juan and Grand counties and the towns of Bluff and Moab](#) are officially in favor of restoring Bear Ears. So, of course, are the five tribes of the [Bears Ears Inter-tribal Coalition](#), folks who are about as local as can be.

The parts of Cox's Roadmap that are tied to the extractive economy are not leadership. They are a vehicle stuck in reverse.

