

San Juan County planning for up to 6,000 people in Spanish Valley

Rudy Herndon Moab Sun News | Posted: Thursday, November 16, 2017 8:40 am

When state officials projected future growth in San Juan County over the next four decades, they estimated that it would grow by a paltry 0.3 percent each year.

But a new plan is shifting those projections upward significantly, after San Juan County officials secured millions of dollars in grants and loans to develop new water and sewer infrastructure that is expected to fuel development in southern Spanish Valley.

“There will be a great deal more growth once the water and sewer lines hit,” Grand County Building Official Jeff Whitney said.

To prepare for that likelihood, San Juan County hired Salt Lake City-based Landmark Design to come up with a master plan that guides future growth within a 15-square-mile area, which could eventually be home to as many as 6,000 new residents.

The Landmark Design team and San Juan County officials met last week with about 60 people over the course of two meetings in Spanish Valley. Many of the attendees were from Grand County – and some of them, like Moab City Council member-elect Karen Guzman-Newton, were hearing about the project for the first time.

“It was eye-opening for me,” Guzman-Newton said. “I had no idea (this was in the works).”

San Juan County Chief Administrative Officer Kelly Pehrson said the county partnered with Utah’s School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) to kick-start the planning process.

“It’s extremely preliminary,” Pehrson told the Moab Sun News. “We’re just in the process of talking to the public about what residents out there would like to see.”

In one sign that new development is already underway, the old Moab airport in Spanish Valley is being upgraded.



Old Moab airport

Contractors worked to improve the runway at the old Moab airport in Spanish Valley on Wednesday, Nov. 15. Upgrades to the airport come as a design firm continues its work to develop a master plan that will guide future growth in far northern San Juan County. [Photo by Rudy Herndon / Moab Sun News]

According to Pehrson, the runway was pointed in the wrong direction, so Moab developer Mike Bynum hired a crew to straighten it out.

Pehrson said that the county commission hasn't taken any action on nightly rentals near the old airport, nor has it received any plans for such proposals. But San Juan County Building Department employee Greg Adams said he's heard that there are plans to put in overnight rentals nearby, and that the developer is planning to upgrade the existing subdivision.

Area resident Rick Lemus moved to the neighborhood in January 2016 because he believed that it was peaceful and quiet. But as the construction work around him continues, Lemus is concerned that he'll soon have an active airport in his "backyard."

"We just want to have organized growth"

While the Utah Governor's Office of Management and Budget projects minimal development in San Juan County, a separate plan from Jones & DeMille Engineering anticipates a much-faster growth rate in the coming years.

That's partly because development trends in Moab are pushing more and more people south toward Spanish Valley. As those trends continue, the Jones & DeMille plan found that development is expected to increase substantially once the new culinary water and sanitary sewer systems are fully operational. Population growth, too, is likely to increase "dramatically," the plan found, as developers subdivide platted lots into smaller quarter-acre and half-acre lots.

"We know that growth is going to happen," Pehrson said. "We just want to have organized growth."

After meeting with residents, Landmark Design Project Planner and Principal Planner Mark Vlastic said one common refrain his team heard is that they envision Spanish Valley as a bedroom community that retains its rural character.

"They want it to be its own place, but they also acknowledge that Moab is just down the road," he said.

Some residents may have been taken aback when they heard Vlastic say last week that the area would be "like a new Moab." To clarify those remarks, Vlastic said he intended to say that southern Spanish Valley could resemble its neighbor to the north in terms of its potential population.

"In some sense, it's on the same scale as Moab," he said. "But we envision it to be a very different place."

Under the current vision for the plan, Vlastic said, 40 to 60 percent of the land would be preserved as open space, and future planning efforts would carefully consider the natural environment – especially floodplains and waterways. That vision, he said, is based on feedback they received from area residents

who were drawn to the area because they value the easy access to trails and surrounding public lands – and the sight of the area’s dark night skies.

“It’s heavily weighted toward the long-term vision of the land telling us where (the development) should be,” Vlasic said.

That vision, he said, is one that SITLA officials support.

“They don’t see the point in expanding in every direction,” he said.

The Poverty Flats area just south of the Grand County line has a different set of needs than state-owned lands farther south, he said: About 60 percent of that private land has already been developed – sometimes haphazardly – while the remaining 40 percent is undeveloped.

“The pattern out there is that it’s not very well planned,” Vlasic said.

In contrast, the state-owned land is a clean slate, and Vlasic said the design team and SITLA officials see the planning process as a unique opportunity to conduct a more comprehensive look at that whole area.

Overall, the design team envisions a wide range of densities in Spanish Valley to encourage the development of more affordable housing, while taking transportation and access into account, as well.

The team doesn’t foresee much development on the west side of U.S. Highway 191, where the Moab Rim rises sharply from the valley floor. Some regional commercial development is likely along the highway corridor, Vlasic said, although a contracted economic adviser sees a decreasing demand for retail businesses the farther that residents live from Moab.

Ultimately, Vlasic said the rate of growth in the area depends on the availability of water.

“(It’s) the determining factor,” he said.

Guzman-Newton said she’s concerned about the effects that increased development to the south could have on the valley’s water resources.

“There are definitely environmental impacts to look at,” she said.

For Guzman-Newton, efforts to improve relations between officials in Grand and San Juan counties will be vital to future development.

“That’s something that’s going to have to change, because it’s going to have a big impact on our valley, and how much say are we going to have in it?” she asked.

From her perspective, it’s easier for developers to move forward with projects at the southern end of the valley.

“Just from the outside, it feels like in San Juan County, it’s really easy to build whatever the heck you want, because they don’t have the same planning requirements that Moab and Grand County have,” Guzman-Newton said.

Whitney, whose office is conducting inspections of new construction projects for San Juan County from the Bridger Jack area north to the Grand County line, anticipates that future development could increase the availability of housing for local workers.

“The density will be allowed to get bigger, so that may be an area for workforce housing,” Whitney said. “But we’ve always held that the workforce housing should be closer to where the work is.”

“When it grows, it puts people to work”

Spanish Valley resident Kevin Irvine and his wife Tina moved to San Juan County from Grand County in 2000, and he said they were the first residents in their neighborhood.

To this day, though, he said they never hear from San Juan County officials – although their proxies occasionally visit them during campaign season.

“They’ll come and say, ‘Can we put this political sign in your yard for this guy or that guy,’ and we don’t even know who they are,” he said.

With little in the way of communication from San Juan County, Landmark Design’s planning process was news to him, although Irvine said he is not opposed to future development in the area.

“I’ll just go with the flow because it’s going to grow, and when it grows, it puts people to work,” he said.

If he had a say in the plan’s vision for the area, Irvine sees a need for shops that cater to local residents, such as clothing stores, and even a big-box retailer like Walmart. He’d also like to see the development of parks where he can take his grandkids, and it wouldn’t hurt to have a nearby road maintenance shed that San Juan County officials could use.

Moving forward, Vlasic expects to hold another round of public meetings in the process sometime in mid-January 2018, although no dates have been set.

“The next step is to figure out, of these models, how much of this land is needed, and how would (the development) be phased?” he asked.