



Envision Morgan Commences

Saturday, May 31, 2008

Public planning project uses direct input of county residents

MORGAN -- It's the stuff game shows and popular board games are made of -- audience polling and "chips" representing homes.

But this week, those were the tools used by Morgan County residents as they began brainstorming ideas for future growth at the first public workshop for Envision Morgan.

With wireless keypads that looked like calculators in their hands, residents were able to weigh in with their opinions. Their responses were immediately displayed on a large overhead projector.

In the first of three workshops, more than 60 percent of participants said the county's growth rate in the past five years has been too high, although more than half said the impact has been somewhat or very positive.

"Morgan County is a hot spot," said Christie Oostema, a planner with Envision Utah who helped facilitate the workshop. Morgan is second only to Washington County in average annual rate of population change. Population in Morgan County is expected to reach 25,000 by the year 2030 and 39,000 at full buildout.

"There's a way to manage growth," said John Barber, owner of Barber Brothers Ford and chairman of the Envision Morgan steering committee. "Either we manage growth or it overruns us."

Growth should not be encouraged on benches or mountain areas but should take place on the valley floor, according to almost 70 percent of participants. Participants agreed that preserving open space in a county that is 95 percent privately owned is important. Open space should include mountains, recreation trails and parks, and farmland, participants said.

"Morgan County is beautiful," Oostema said. "I can see why you're here, loving where you live."

More than half of participants want to see community services and amenities that do more to provide for day-to-day needs -- such as small markets, cafes and pharmacies -- within walking distance of homes, churches and schools.

As a bedroom community, 61 percent of Morgan County residents commute an average of 29 minutes one way to work. That is the highest out-of-county commute rate in the state, Oostema said.

More than 60 percent of participants want to see a stronger Weber State University presence, preferring a large center or satellite campus with more class offerings.

But participants could not come to a consensus on which housing patterns should be incorporated in future developments.

Almost 90 percent of participants want to see a mix of ages and life stages among county residents in the long term, meaning both families with children and retirees and single people with no children. However, 67 percent of participants want to see a mix of income in their future communities, while more than 30 percent would rather see upper-middle and upper-income residents in the long term.

Morgan County's median household income, now at just over \$50,000 a year, has risen little since 1990.

"If you had to buy your house today, could you afford it?" Oostema asked participants. "Teachers in this community are opting out, creating turnover, because they can't afford to live or commute here."

Participants concluded the night by gathering around several large maps, drawing with colored markers where they would like to see growth, recreation and open space. They placed game pieces, or chips, on the map to designate where they would like to see 7,300 additional homes. Currently, the county has 2,300 homes and has approved an additional 1,500 units.

The last of the public workshops is scheduled for 7 p.m. Wednesday at Morgan Middle School. Input is also being accepted online through the middle of June at www.envisionmorgan.org.

In the second set of workshops planned for late summer or early fall, residents will be able to explore different growth scenarios. In late fall, a map, growth principles and implementation strategies will be drafted at various town hall meetings. The concluding visioning document could be produced by early 2009.



Envision Utah intern Ryan Champlin talks to Morgan county residents about growth in their county Tuesday during an interactive Envision Morgan county meeting at Morgan Middle School in Morgan. (Drew Godleski/Standard-Examiner)