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Planning Morgan's Growth (editorial)

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It's a common refrain on this page -- and in this very space -- but it's true: The people who get involved are the ones who decide. It's that way in politics and life in general. Either you participate, or you're little more than an observer.

The 8,300-plus residents of Morgan County are discovering that right now. Envision Utah began holding public meetings there last week -- the last of three public workshops is tonight at 7 at Morgan Middle School -- to get a sense of what Morgan residents want to see in terms of growth in their county over the next 20 or 30 years. And, as always, the people who carve a couple of hours out of their evening will help steer the process.

So far, six in 10 of the residents participating have said they think there's been too much growth. This isn't all that surprising, since Morgan County's population growth, on a percentage basis, is second only to Washington County in the Beehive State.

Seven of 10 people participating in the public meetings have said they believe growth should be restricted to the valley floors, and not allowed to creep up the benches that ring the county's valleys. The views of those mountains and slopes, they say, should be open space and free of structures.

Morgan is unique not only for its beauty, but because 61 percent of its residents commute an average of 58 minutes round-trip to and from work -- the highest percentage in the state. Related to that is the county's median household income: \$58,451 in 2005, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (that's \$1,000 more than Davis County's median, and \$10,000 more than Weber County's). Real estate prices, however, are high, and that means some people who work in Morgan -- like school teachers, for example -- can't afford to live there.

This is of critical importance, since Morgan residents will be asked to decide whether they want to see economic diversity in the county's housing stock -- and the location of such housing.

In later workshops, scheduled for late summer or the fall, residents will further study various growth scenarios and strategies for implementing those plans. People who love the way Morgan is now, and hope to preserve that beauty and atmosphere, better get involved. The county's population, as we mentioned previously, is not yet 8,500. But it is projected to be 25,000 by 2030, and 39,000 by the time it reaches "buildout" -- a loosely defined term that will mean less and less if strict planning processes are not implemented.

A recent Standard-Examiner news story about the Morgan County/Envision Utah process contained a quote by John Barber, an auto dealer who's chairman of the "Envision Morgan" steering committee: "Either we manage growth or it overruns us."

That, Morgan residents, is the unvarnished truth.