

Article Last Updated: 12/01/2005 02:03 AM

SLC rides TRAX to national spotlight

Smart growth: The city is honored for its ongoing commitment to transit, rather than sprawl

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The Salt Lake Tribune
Salt Lake Tribune

Visionary planning, financial commitment, dedicated leadership and TRAX trains have meshed to turn Salt Lake City into a national smart-growth showcase, the Sierra Club announced Wednesday in its annual "Building Better" report.

Utah's capital city is one of 12 American cities the national conservation organization is spotlighting this year for their commitment to vibrant development geared toward mass transit instead of urban sprawl. The Sierra Club points to Envision Utah and its founder, Robert Grow, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Mayor Rocky Anderson, the Salt Lake City Redevelopment Agency, and the Utah Transit Authority as key players in the city's renaissance.

TRAX has been the backbone of the turnaround, said Utah Sierra Club spokesman Marc Heileson. "Ten years ago, Salt Lake's downtown was in trouble. Eight years ago, the reports were not too favorable about Utah and Salt Lake."

That makes this year's recognition even sweeter, he said.

Envision Utah's work in 1998 set the course by promoting light rail and commuter rail over building more roads. That in turn allowed the city to concentrate development around transit.

"Salt Lake City has established priorities and invested initiatives to create a strong, transit-oriented urban core and a healthy mix of offices, retail and housing," the Sierra Club report says.

Urban planning for the past half-century has centered on the automobile. In Salt Lake County, that has led to a near-destruction of farming. The U.S. Department of Agriculture census shows that from 1997 to 2002, harvested croplands in the county shrank from 16,167 acres to 7,894 acres. Salt Lake City's focused attention on downtown development and transit is an antidote to gobbling up what's left, Heileson said.

Salt Lake's high population growth rate makes it a prime candidate for transit-oriented development. Empty-nesters are trading their suburban tract homes for the amenities of downtown living.

"It's a good feel downtown. We're seeing that manifested in the housing stock being purchased so quickly," said Dave Oka of the city Redevelopment Agency.

For example, the 117 Metro Condominiums just north of the City-County Building all have been presold, with more potential buyers in the wings, he said.

Other would-be downtown residents are clamoring for housing in what are now office buildings, Oka said. A New York couple is remodeling a defunct Main Street coffeehouse into a home they say will allow them to live in a kinder version of Manhattan.

In August, the Downtown Alliance reported the city's central business district - the 40-block area bounded by North Temple, 500 West, 400 South and 200 East - expects more than \$1.5 billion in construction projects and a population surge that will almost double the number of people living downtown by 2010.

The LDS Church owns ZCMI Center and Crossroads Plaza, and has announced plans for a \$1 billion redevelopment of the properties that includes up to 900 housing units, office buildings and retail.

"This new report from the Sierra Club recognizes laudable efforts by many in Salt Lake City to plan and build for a healthy, livable future," said church spokesman Dale Bills. "The church is pleased to play a part in making our city a place everyone can enjoy."

Other developers are planning more than a dozen major office, retail and higher education construction projects to be built over the next five years, the Downtown Alliance says. New housing projects will increase current residential population by two-thirds.

The Gateway, a housing and retail development built on a former Amtrak train storage facility, receives special

mention from the Sierra Club. The Redevelopment Agency, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and developer The Boyer Co. worked together to clean up the formerly contaminated "brownfield" site that now anchors development on downtown's west side.

All of The Gateway's 150 condominiums have sold, and its 350 apartments are consistently leased, said company partner Jake Boyer.

"We're already seeing a lot of redevelopment in surrounding areas, a lot of loft condominiums up and down the Second South, Third South corridors," he said. "It's neat to see our city get this recognition."

While not planned as so-called transit-oriented development, Gateway is the current terminus of the north-south TRAX line.

An intermodal hub, where bus, TRAX and commuter rail transit will come together, is under construction next to Gateway.

Jeff Harris, deputy chief of asset management for UTA, joked that he'd like his agency to take all the credit for Salt Lake City's turnaround, but acknowledged that Gateway would have been developed even without TRAX.

What the trains have done is allow for housing to move west while tying downtown together and show the rest of Utah what planning around transit instead of cars can do for cities.

"Our goal along the entire light-rail line, the commuter rail line, is to create those environments, those uses along the line," Harris said. "As long as people can shop, work, play, eat, be entertained, you are creating an environment along the line where people can live without the automobile. And we're trying to create that in Sandy as much as we are in Salt Lake."