

Idealized Recreation System Supporting Narrative

Problem Statement

The accessibility, quality, and variety of recreation opportunities in the Wasatch Mountains are key elements of the active, healthy lifestyles and high quality of life enjoyed by residents of adjacent communities. However, recreation in the Wasatch is changing. Population growth, changes in recreational use, land development, climate change, and changes in transportation performance are affecting existing recreation opportunities. The current system is stressed and struggles to respond to and provide recreation experiences desired by residents and visitors. Without active planning and investment in the future, the Wasatch that we leave to our children will not have the accessibility, quality, and variety of recreational opportunities that we enjoy today. The region may experience:

- Additional roadway and parking congestion resulting in decreased accessibility to recreation destinations;
- Unplanned and unmanaged growth in recreational use at all locations;
- Reactive management and limitations on recreation;
- Crowding and degraded recreational experiences;
- Decreased quality of life;
- Decreased ability to attract visitors and employers; and
- Missed opportunities to mitigate conflicts between recreational user groups, environmental, economic, and regulatory interests.

Through the Mountain Accord process, communities along the Wasatch Front and Back have an opportunity to address shared challenges and leave a lasting legacy of accessible, high quality recreation opportunities for future generations.

Idealized System Development

Overview of process

The ideal future for recreation in the Central Wasatch was developed by the Recreation System Group, comprised of members from various stakeholder groups with input from topical experts, research, case studies of other recreation planning efforts, the best available data, and professional judgment. The development of the idealized system was guided by the vision and goals developed by the Recreation System Group earlier in the Mountain Accord process.

Focus of the Idealized Recreation System

In order to address the challenges outlined above, the Recreation System Group developed a vision and goals centered on promoting access to recreation opportunities while preserving the recreational quality and variety so valued by Central Wasatch communities and visitors. Despite the pressures associated with increasing recreation use, the group determined that the community benefits of a healthy, engaged, and active population provided by accessible recreation outweigh the recreation quality benefits of across the board access limitations. As a result, the proposed vision, goals, and actions were not designed to limit or restrict use in the mountains as a whole.

However, the Recreation System Group acknowledged that the quality of recreation experiences is also a key consideration when planning for the future of the Wasatch Mountains, and that crowding could decrease the quality of these experiences. To avoid this decrease in quality, the idealized recreation system promotes recreation use in areas that can accommodate recreational infrastructure expansion, or improvement, that will be necessary to accommodate more users and maintain quality experiences. The actions proposed would also protect difficult to access, pristine areas and locations with a unique setting or recreation character; connect and improve the trail system; and provide transit service that integrates recreational needs. As a whole, the actions proposed in the idealized recreation system would provide access to a diversity of recreation uses and accommodate a range of use levels while promoting the high quality recreation experiences which make this area such an attractive place to live and to visit.

Key Considerations

- Quantitative data on existing recreational uses in the Central Wasatch is limited and therefore, in some cases, decisions were based on the best available understanding of recreational use and dynamics. Ongoing efforts to collect data on recreational use in the Central Wasatch or data collected during subsequent phases of Mountain Accord will help inform specific design and may provide rationale for refining elements of the idealized system.
- Many site specific details will need to be worked out in subsequent planning efforts and will require public involvement and feedback. However, it is important to note the system group supports additional recreational developments focused on maintaining or establishing the desired recreational quality in the areas identified. These could include trail developments, transit stops, management strategies to reduce social encounters between users, infrastructure improvements to facilitate increased use while preserving character, etc.
- The system group achieved broad consensus on the majority of proposed actions but is divided on two actions that were discussed during the development of the idealized system: (1) One Wasatch and (2) a new public transit connection between Little and Big Cottonwood Canyons and the Wasatch Back. The discussion generated the following arguments for and against each of these potential actions:

One Wasatch	
How action would support vision and goals	How action would detract from vision and goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase connectivity between winter high use recreation areas • Expand opportunities to manage for high density recreation at resorts • Provide new and unique recreation experience • Ability to participate in discussions about where, how, and under what conditions (e.g., public access and conservation requirements) connections occur. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of beginner areas and accessible terrain for growing backcountry user group in the resort expansion areas • Displacement of current demand for backcountry recreation into smaller area • Impacts on backcountry skiing terrain from skiers leaving from resort expansion areas • Degradation of undeveloped character and setting in expansion areas
Transportation Connection	
How action would support vision and goals	How action would detract from vision and goals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote accessibility of mountain recreation from population centers • Decrease roadway congestion that detracts from recreation experience • Create opportunities for new loop hiking and biking, as well as other unique recreation experiences • Connect flagship recreation destinations • Transit can be used as a tool to focus and manage demand for recreation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concern that anticipated increased number of resident and out of state recreational visits would degrade experience • Would alter existing character of “dead end” canyons • Transportation mode would determine specific impacts – difficult to determine how would support or detract without knowing specifics about mode and alignment

Proposed Actions

The following proposed actions should be implemented in order to achieve the idealized recreation system as conceived by the system group.

Proposed Action*	Goals Served**					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Adjust Wilderness boundaries to complete the Bonneville Shoreline Trail (see Land Management map)		X	X			
<p><i>Intent:</i> The full construction of the master planned Bonneville Shoreline Trail will provide unmatched opportunities to connect recreation destinations and key access nodes along the Wasatch Front. Completed sections of the trail are popular with multiple user groups and serve as a close to home destination that reduces recreational pressure at other destinations within the canyons and Wasatch Back. Completing the remaining sections of the Bonneville Shoreline Trail will require construction of trail within existing Wilderness areas, which preclude bicycle use. Bicycle use on the trail is a key component of the group’s vision and minor modification of Wilderness boundaries and/or exchanging current wilderness along the proposed trail corridor for more appropriate areas to the east would allow completion of this key trail connection.</p>						
Place areas into special management to protect against future development and preserve natural landscapes (see Land Management map)		X			X	
<p><i>Intent:</i> The Central Wasatch has many unique environments, including USFS-administered lands important for backcountry recreation and high quality scenic vistas. While many of these areas already receive various levels of protection, development occurring in these critical recreation environments could result in permanent modification or loss of the recreational value in these areas. The recreation system group supports a protection mechanism that would protect areas from development while allowing flexibility for future recreation and management adaptability.</p>						
Preserve lands that provide unique recreation experiences, are currently used for recreation, and are adjacent to existing open space		X		X		
<p><i>Intent:</i> As a result of historical recreational use and management in the Central Wasatch, many popular recreation destinations occur on privately owned lands to which permanent public access has not been secured. Additionally, some lands that are not in public ownership contain opportunities to develop recreation amenities that would be contribute to the future vision of the recreation system group. The recreation system group has provided recommendations to and supports the Land Preservation Subcommittee of the Executive Board’s efforts with regard to land preservation.</p>						

Design and manage branded areas to attract high levels of use by supporting many activities and user groups (see Connections map)	X				X	
<i>Intent:</i> Identifying, branding, and designing carefully selected areas for high levels of use and providing attractions and infrastructure to bring users to these areas is a key strategy for managing increasing recreation use and preserving overall recreation quality. Managing branded areas promotes user safety, increases the predictability of recreation experiences for all users, and allows for the burden of increased use to be concentrated in areas appropriately designed to handle high volumes of use as opposed to spreading users equally across the entire Wasatch. The locations the recreation system group has identified for these areas leverage existing infrastructure including ski resorts for increased and different types of uses, especially outside of the winter ski season.						
Design and manage key recreation areas for increased use while maintaining existing character and recreation opportunities (see Connections map)	X				X	
<i>Intent:</i> With branded, high use areas being identified at existing ski resorts and select other areas, the recreation system group also sought to identify recreation areas where future recreation use could be focused that would serve only dispersed, non-commercial recreation. Locations were selected because they can physically accommodate infrastructure improvements to allow a moderate level of increased use. These areas should be designed and managed to ensure the character and available recreation opportunities remain similar to current conditions.						
Complete key non-motorized urban and mountain trail connections to provide a more robust trail network (see Connections map)			X		X	
<i>Intent:</i> Outside of the winter ski season, the trail network in the Central Wasatch is the main attraction for recreational users and provides the avenue by which the population experiences the outdoors. This network should connect recreation and trail hubs to one another and connect communities to those opportunities. Completing key trail connections will help accommodate increasing levels of use, provide new recreation opportunities, provide alternatives to private vehicle use to access mountain areas, provide non-motorized connections between recreation destinations, and limit natural resource degradation. In addition to these connections, the group supports ongoing trail planning efforts within areas where increased use is proposed.						
Provide year-round, public transit service to connect users with recreation destinations (see Connections map)	X				X	
<i>Intent:</i> Connecting communities adjacent to the Wasatch Mountains with recreational opportunities, improving recreation experiences, and promoting healthy lifestyles requires providing convenient year round transit service to recreation destinations. Transit service provided to support recreation should consider the planned recreation character and level of use for each recreation destination and provide service appropriate for this level of use.						

Establish transit-focused nodes to reduce vehicle use in the canyons (see Connections map)					X	
<p><i>Intent:</i> Traffic congestion was identified by the group as a factor affecting recreation experiences. The recreation system group proposed transit-focused nodes at the mouths of the Wasatch Front canyons and in two locations on the Wasatch Back. These are locations where it is convenient and accessible to drive and park a personal vehicle and take public transportation to a final recreation destination. Transit nodes should function year-round and will contribute to reductions in traffic congestion on mountain roads accessing recreation destinations.</p>						
Establish and fund an organization to provide long-term recreational planning, management, and public education					X	
<p><i>Intent:</i> The recreation system group supports the multi-jurisdictional planning being conducted through Mountain Accord and sees continued planning and management as key to achieving the group’s long term goals. The system group recommends creating an organization or modifying existing partnerships (i.e., Wasatch Legacy Partnership) to provide funding and oversee ongoing management, maintenance, enforcement, and adaptability of the recreation system. Funding mechanisms may include user fees, property taxes, bonding measures, allocations from government entities, public/private partnerships, and leveraging donations. A fundamental purpose of this organization will also be educating the public about responsible use of the Wasatch Mountains and associated recreation facilities and providing information that will lead users to appropriate facilities for recreation.</p>						
<p><i>*The intent of Mountain Accord is not to take over responsibility of existing agencies (e.g., U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency) and programs, but rather to work collaboratively with them.</i></p>						
<p>**Recreation System Goals:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify and establish high use areas to focus where future growth in recreation occurs 2. Preserve special, unique recreation areas and settings to maintain opportunities for solitude and naturalness 3. Provide a well-designed, appropriately maintained, well-signed, and interconnected trail network that meets demand and can adapt to evolving uses 4. Pursue the most appropriate and feasible means of securing legal public access to critical recreational opportunities 5. Establish appropriate levels of access and designed settings in harmony with the desired recreation experience 6. Establish an organization, with authority to act based on public support, that fosters long-term success of the Central Wasatch recreation system by promoting collaborative and united management, user education, and acquisition of ongoing funding for continued system maintenance, evolution, and management. 						