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< FRONT PAGE WORLD UTAH SPORTS OPINION >

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Utah Always Pregnant With New Growth

Future: Help shape it by answering questions

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Don't be surprised if you hear Gov. Mike Leavitt on the radio pointing out that most of Utah's phenomenal population growth is internal. It doesn't mean the state's leaders have lifted the taboo on discussing the strains caused by a nation-leading birth rate.

It just means Utahns should pay attention to the Envision Utah planning effort, because the future that planners envision belongs to their own kin.

"We can all help to create a vision for our children's future, today," Leavitt says in a radio spot that began airing on Salt Lake Valley stations this week. The ad urges listeners to watch for a questionnaire in Jan. 10 newspapers, which will solicit opinions about desired development patterns and infrastructure investments over the next 20 years.

"The Wasatch Front is growing at a rate that is twice the national average, and two-thirds of that growth is from our own children and grandchildren," Leavitt says. "That's why it's so important that Envision Utah hears from all of us."

The message is not meant to suggest that Utah's large families -- a cultural tradition within the dominant Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints -- are due for reassessment, said Envision Utah Chairman Robert Grow.

"What we're focusing on is where do we put the next million people," not whether there will be another 1 million people in about 20 years, Grow said. "The governor is trying to focus everyone's attention on having their say."

Television ads running concurrently with the radio ads also feature children concerned about their future, though the governor's brief message does not mention the internal growth rate.

Envision Utah is a public-private partnership examining development alternatives for the fast-growing 10-county region along and near the Wasatch Front. Led by hired planning consultants and the Governor's Office of Budget and Planning, the partnership has conducted meetings throughout the region to find out how people want their cities to grow.

Using the public input and population projections adding 1 million people to the 1.6-million-person region by 2020, the planners developed four growth alternatives that range from the dispersed, sprawling suburban development of the past 20 years to a densely packed urban core that relies on public transit and easier access for pedestrians.

The questionnaire will ask Utahns which growth scenario they prefer, and Envision Utah leaders hope the response will build momentum for legislation that better manages growth or provides incentives for preferred growth patterns.

Utahns should take care to plan their family size according to what they can support, said Democratic state Sen. Scott Howell, the Senate minority

leader. But family planning and population control are not among government functions, said Howell, who was among the state leaders who made the birth rate off-limits for discussion during a state growth summit in 1995.

The Republican governor's message on the radio is helpful because it dispels the myth that most of Utah's growing pains come from Californians or other transplants to the state, Howell said. And the realization that most growth is internal helps people understand that they must act now to ensure a better quality of life for their children, he said.

"We cannot afford to continue to crisis-manage our state," Howell said. But, "When it comes to children and how families decide how many children they want to have, that is an individual decision."

Envision Utah Chairman Grow said he does not believe slowing the birth rate would change the state's outlook much. He said the difference between the national average of 2.05 children per woman and Utah's average of 2.55 children contributes only about 6,000 to the Wasatch Front's yearly internal growth of some 27,000 people and total growth of about 40,000. The region still would add 1 million people soon even if the birth rate declined to the national average, he said.

"You get to the same point, but the only difference is whether you get there in 2020, 2024 or 2025," Grow said.

Still, U.S. Census Bureau projections for fast-growing Western states show births accounting for a larger share of growth in Utah than in neighboring states. A 1997 report projecting growth through 2025 estimates more than three-quarters of Utah's growth will come from local births exceeding deaths. But in neighboring Nevada, Idaho, New Mexico and Arizona -- the Western states predicted to grow even faster per capita than Utah -- half or less of the growth should be homegrown.

Envision Utah's publicity campaign continues Tuesday, when Leavitt conducts a news conference at This Is The Place State Park, again asking residents to look for the survey in Sunday newspaper supplements. Anyone wishing to answer the questionnaire online can find it at www.envisionutah.org.



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