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Potential fallout of canyon-linking tunnels must come to light

Gale Dick

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A bombshell burst last October when news was leaked of a meeting of the "25 most influential people in government, tourism and the ski industry" to discuss the possibility of building tunnels for cars that would connect Alta to Brighton and Brighton to Park City.

The initial list of the 25 most influential didn't include any representative of the Salt Lake City's water department, the U.S. Forest Service or any environmental group. A few of these excluded ones have since gained limited access.

The thunder from that blast is still reverberating and a nervous watchfulness has set in among citizens along the Wasatch Front in the Salt Lake Valley.

Other meetings have followed that initial meeting and the main focus of the discussions seems to be aimed at increasing the number of skiers and summer visitors using tunnels.

Watershed, mass transit, carrying capacity and wildlife barely get a mention.

Unquestionably, it is urgent and essential to plan for the problems that are already beginning to overwhelm the Wasatch as the population of Utah rapidly grows. The 25-most-influential committee is responding to this need.

But is this committee, as it is presently constituted and aimed, the right group to do this job? The answer: a resounding *no!* The committee is heavily stacked with people that stand to make money from the outcome.

The Wasatch Mountains are not a commodity to be bought and sold. Most of the range near Salt Lake City is public land managed by the Forest Service, Salt Lake City and Salt Lake County. Because of the Wasatch Mountains' role as a watershed for the Salt Lake Valley, as a wildlife habitat and as a treasured outdoor resource next to the valley, there are many stakeholders beyond the restricted group of the 25 most influential.

The agencies responsible for managing these lands must play a central role in planning for the future and so must the public. Existing master plans and ordinances can show the way. The Salt Lake County Canyons Master Plan adopted in 1989 must be brought up to date.

Citizens must remain alert to top-down maneuvers that co-opt public lands. Remember the infamous land exchange that allowed Snowbasin to grab Forest Service lands in the name of the Winter Olympics, bypassing public process and land management procedures.

The 25-most-influential committee seeks ways of getting more and more people into the mountains, leading to degradation of the land and a diminished experience for all. Planning for the future must protect watershed, wildlife habitat and reduce traffic. The carrying capacity of these fragile mountain lands must be studied. The committee of 25 has started with a desired outcome in mind and concocted a justification for it.

The Wasatch Mountains - so beautiful, so available and so tempting to developers - have long been and will long remain a battleground of conflicting interests with developers often in possession of weapons of mass destruction, so to speak.

The Wasatch must not be urbanized. Traffic problems must be faced and not made

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worse by making it possible for an ever-higher density of private vehicles in these canyons. Canyon-linking tunnels have been considered often in the past and rejected for good reasons. What contribution could such tunnels make to protecting and preserving the Wasatch? Would they dump toxic water into our water supply? Would they divert water away from the Salt Lake watershed?

These and a host of other questions need to be discussed openly by an inclusive group of stakeholders. Start by studying the problems, not by deciding what the solution should look like. Open the doors, 25-most-influential folks!

* GALE DICK is president of Save Our Canyons.

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