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Triumph of cooperation

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To people who have watched land-use struggles unfold in booming Washington County, it is almost beyond belief that a bill could emerge without serious protest from any interested party.

But the 2008 version of the Washington County Growth & Conservation Act, which may get a Senate hearing as early as this month, appears to be a triumph of collaboration and negotiation. That reflects well on both Sen. Bob Bennett and Rep. Jim Matheson, who jointly spearheaded the effort. But then, the combination of the two politicians (Bennett is a Republican and Matheson a Democrat), may have set the tone for cooperation.

The bill isn't perfect, and it does not enjoy unqualified support. But even environmental groups, such as the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, call it a huge improvement and say their focus has gone from trying to kill the bill to trying to tweak it during the amendment process. Some environmental groups, such as the Nature Conservancy, say they outright support it as is.

A successful land-use bill is vital for the St. George area, where an exploding population is running head-on into sensitive lands and recreation areas, and where resources are scarce. Washington County now has 140,908 residents, according to the latest estimates, and its 4.5 percent growth rate last year was among the highest in the nation.

Unless some public land is made available for development, a limited supply will cause real estate prices to rise beyond a level any service-sector employee, school teacher, police officer or other low- to middle-income worker could afford. The previous version of the bill would have allowed the sale of about 25,000 acres of public land, much of it in areas many considered too environmentally sensitive for homes and businesses. The new version would allow 9,052 acres to be sold — still a generous amount.

Some environmentalists still worry that too much federal land would go toward construction of water reservoirs when it would be better to stress conservation in order to limit water needs. Others are concerned with a provision that would give Washington County 10 percent of the proceeds from the sales of public land for development. This might turn into a precedent other counties would want to use in order to raise one-time funds.

But even these concerns do not rise to such a level that anyone is talking about opposing the bill. Some spirited debates may loom over details. The bill is almost certain not to pass exactly as it now is written.

However, the prospects of an acceptable Washington County lands bill becoming law are good, and that is remarkable.