

March 25, 2024

GROWTH AND TRANSPORTATION PLANNING

I wish to address our citizens about the issues of growth and transportation across our state and most particularly, Lehi. It has been the subject of much concern. I hope to provide an explanation of the demands that the city has responded to over the years, but more importantly, the projections and needs for the future. I will also address the issues of property rights as they relate to growth and planning. Understanding these points is critical as we work towards building a capable transportation system.

A Victim of Our Own Success

In the late 1990's after it was announced that Micron was going to be constructing a large computer chip manufacturing plant in Lehi, I expected that there would be significant changes coming to Lehi City. I did not know at the time the extent future changes would affect not only our community, but the entire state of Utah. I did recognize that our position along the I-15 corridor would likely fuel demand for people and businesses to locate here. It did. Soon, Adobe announced construction of a major facility here. Xactware, Ancestry, Microsoft, Oracle, Entrada, and many more soon followed. In the span of a decade, Lehi City has transitioned from a small farming community to a city identified as the economic engine of the state of Utah.

I am not going to deny that the pains of growth have been difficult. I grew up in north Utah County. I bagged potatoes, thinned beets, and stacked bales of hay. I have never once missed that work, but I certainly miss the atmosphere. Lehi has changed. For better or for worse is not an argument I am going to make here. I will say that I knew based on our location, our highly skilled and educated labor force, and the dramatic increase in wages, growth was going to happen.

Growth is Not a New Complaint

I understand each of the last six mayors has been accused of "ruining" Lehi. I might argue that it goes back much farther than that. In the 1970's, Lehi City was experiencing a significant sewer contamination crisis. They had a small treatment facility but needed to expand capacity by investing in the new Timpanogos Special Service District (TSSD). Many existing properties had drain-fields that were failing to contain waste. As a result, contamination was beginning to appear in private drinking wells around the city. Today, we would not question the need to invest in correcting this problem, but the city council suffered significant public push back and consequently, all council members struggled in the next election. That problem was related to growth and today, accusations of "ruining" Lehi continue to be growth related.

Growth is an Allowance of the US Constitution

When a person is elected, he or she is required to take the "Oath of Office" wherein they swear to uphold the Constitution of the United States and of the State of Utah. That includes the Fifth Amendment which guarantees particular property rights. After the Civil War, the federal government doubled down, if you will, by making certain that those same rights were

made applicable to the states in the Fourteenth Amendment. The Founding Fathers understood the sacred importance of the right to own property, the ability to do with it as you want and the right to due process if the government attempts to infringe on these rights.

The U.S. Supreme Court later upheld the states' use of zoning and nuisance laws that protect adjacent property owners from clearly offensive and/or abusive uses. In other words, property owners have rights specific to their property guaranteed by the constitution. Neighbors have certain protections once statutes are specifically adopted in state or city codes.

So, what does this mean as it relates to growth? There are two things to understand here. First, property owners have the right to develop their property within the constraints given by the legislative body. Second, the legislative body needs to weigh the rights of the property owner with the protections of adjacent property owners while keeping in mind that constitutional amendments are a primary right.

Constitutional rights also prohibit Takings and Exactions without just compensation and cities must follow specific state restrictions about pausing growth. All of this must be given careful consideration by local elected officials. Housing becomes unaffordable when government places too many restrictions on growth, but we need our state legislature to respectfully understand a municipality's limited capacity to provide infrastructure supporting growth.

Where Growth is happening and Local Projections

Rapid growth has not been unique to Lehi. It is occurring along the Wasatch Front. In the last few years, the cities of Saratoga Springs, Eagle Mountain and Vineyard have seen greater growth than Lehi. It is important we understand what demands have driven all this growth. Generally, growth comes in three different ways; internal growth (increase in population due to births), external growth (increase from those moving in from outside of Utah) and, finally, returning growth (those who moved outside the state for job opportunities but have now returned for various reasons).

Many believe that external growth has been the greatest contributing factor to our population, but that is not necessarily true. To be clear, every one of us is responsible for growth. It does not matter if we were born here, if we started a family here, if we moved here, or if we returned to live here. We have contributed to the population of Utah County.

Growth is an issue we need to monitor and frequently re-evaluate. In Lehi, we must also consider the anticipated growth of our neighboring cities to the west. Projections (including recent changes in state housing legislation) estimate a future population of 395,000 people living west of Lehi. To put that in perspective, that is a population increase of over four times the current number of residents in Saratoga Springs and Eagle Mountain. This will generate enough traffic to cripple our current transportation system. As uncomfortable as it is, we must plan for the impact their traffic will have on our city's transportation systems.

Why Have we Not Planned Better?

We have tried. In January 2018, my first month as mayor, I attended a meeting on Capitol Hill with the Point of the Mountain Commission, a board on which I had just been appointed to serve. I listened intently to a presentation given by Mr. Robert Grow and Mr. Ari Brunning of

Envision Utah. The subject was the future transportation systems at the Point of the Mountain. The consultant participating in the study was Fehr & Peers, an engineering firm that I was familiar with as being very capable. The report stated that there was a definite need for additional transportation corridors on the Lehi side of the Point of the Mountain, one being an east/west connector between the Mountain View Corridor and I-15 and another corridor running south to north through the Jordan River narrows from Lehi to Bluffdale. It was pointed out in the presentation that without these corridors the freeway at 2100 North in Lehi would fail. That got my attention. I directed staff, with the permission of council, to engage an independent traffic engineering consultant. I wanted all available data evaluated to better understand what transportation concerns we would be dealing with and the best manner to prepare for them.

For the last six years, Hales Engineering has been gathering data points on growth from adjacent communities, Mountainlands Association of Governments (MAG), and UDOT. They have also collaborated with other engineers involved in similar analytics such as WCG, Metro Analytics, and Horrocks. The thorough analysis has included the addition of density increases our state legislature has required of cities in the last three years, including accessory dwelling units (ADU's), and additional bills anticipated to increase housing density throughout the state. Population projections for Lehi, Saratoga Springs and Eagle Mountain have been added into the modeling efforts to better understand needed transportation corridors.

Planning for our Future

MAG is currently bound by a future planning horizon of 2050. Based on our experience, a 20 to 30 year planning horizon does not address the rapid growth-related transportation problems experienced by our combined communities in northern Utah County. For example, a study completed in the early 2000's indicated a need for three arterial routes through Lehi City by 2030 (2100 North, Pioneer Crossing and 1900 South). This was soon proven to be inadequate. The 2100 North freeway will begin construction in 2026 and needs to happen because peak travel demands on the current frontage roads went into failure within a short time after opening. Pioneer Crossing quickly exceeded its original capacity and has required several changes including intersection improvements, two signal timing adjustments to favor east/west traffic flows, requests for additional lanes, and most recently a push for grade separated interchanges. Now, 1900 South also will need to be upgraded to make the entire transportation system flow.

Based on the most recent travel demand forecasts, it appears that a freeway at either 1900 South or traversing the north end of Utah Lake would provide the best connectivity for the desired future travel paths to the Provo/Orem area. This freeway will have the ability to access I-15 at 500 East in American Fork, Pleasant Grove Boulevard, 1600 North in Lindon, and 800 North in Orem.

If a freeway were constructed at either location, we would still need multiple high-capacity corridors. Pioneer Crossing could remain at grade and could include transit lanes connecting the Saratoga Springs/Eagle Mountain area to Frontrunner at the American Fork interchange. We would still need a future lake crossing connection between Saratoga Springs and Provo. The Clubhouse Drive extension and the Point of the Mountain Freeway Connector (as currently planned on the Utah Unified Transportation Plan) will be a necessity. In the absence of any of these roads, travel demand will simply be moved to another corridor, causing definite failures.

We look forward to collaborative planning beyond 2050 with MAG and UDOT to identify future transportation corridors and provide corridor preservation now so that widening projects do not displace current and future residents of our communities.

Closing Thoughts

This I know, we must all encourage our state leadership to look to a further horizon. It is crucial that we plan adequately for future transportation, transit, water, energy, and environmental demands. We simply cannot ignore probable projections, or our infrastructure systems will fail. I see this as a necessary responsibility to our children, to their children and to all those who will call Lehi their home. I fully believe if we use appropriate data in our planning, we can prepare for what lies ahead. We must not ignore the projections, deny the probabilities, and then fail to plan appropriately.

I care for this City deeply and there is no place I would rather live. I believe Lehi City will continue to be a wonderful place to call home if we recognize those things we can't control and work to manage those things we can.

Please help me in encouraging a thoughtful consideration of our future.

Thank you,

Mayor Mark Johnson