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Today

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in Dixie

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HURRICANE CITY OFFICES



Both St. George and Hurricane are projected to grow substantially over the next 30 years, but Hurricane just might end up the larger of the two.

Winds of Change: Blowing at Hurricane force

by Wendi Epps

With Washington County's explosive growth over the past several decades, it's certainly not your father's Dixie anymore. But the reality is, within 30 years it might not be the Dixie you remember, either.

For starters, the general area is expected to become an urban complex, home to around half a million people. And St. George - historically the dominant city in the region - may find its influence challenged by Mesquite to the southwest and by Hurricane on the north. Amid this civic squeeze play, St. George could easily find its domain eclipsed by today's still-nascent Hurricane.

According to Ryan Cashin, Hurricane Planning Commission Chairman, Hurricane already has several housing projects in the planning phases, and some are near groundbreaking. "We have planned for a capacity of 210,000 residents (in 30 years)," he says. Providing a frame of reference for the vast transformation to come, he adds simply, "We have somewhere around 16,000-17,000 currently."

This means that in two or three decades, it may be Hurricane that assumes the role of Dixie's darling. It's a notion that other county and civic leaders aren't inclined to dash.

"Not a bit," says Hurricane Mayor Tom Hirschi. "I go back to the Brigham Young statement of many years ago that this area would one day become a continuous city from St. George all the way to Zion canyon."

"The law of commercial is that commercial follows rooftops," adds Scott Hirschi, economic director for Washington County. "When you have residents, commercial will follow." Hirschi points out the high number of industrial parks that are being built within Hurricane city limits, and he doesn't "see why that trend wouldn't continue in the future."

Scott Hirschi also notes that St. George's build-out population is only 175,000, which would place it 35,000 short of Hurricane's projected size. But he notes those figures can change over time as ordinances, conditions, supply and demand, and the attitudes of city government change. However, because Hurricane currently has the largest land mass and still has areas it can annex, he agrees that the population of Hurricane may eventually

surpass St. George.

St. George, however, isn't likely to give up without a fight. The city's growth is attributed to many factors, including its beautiful scenic setting, proximity to several national parks and monuments, and its dedication to maintaining open spaces, neighborhood parks and trail systems.

"Currently there's a far greater economic base in St. George, and obviously for working families, St. George is a more viable place to live," says Marc Mortensen, assistant to the City Manager of St. George. While Mortensen continues to remain optimistic about St. George's continued growth, he notes that outlying areas have also become popular places for residents to settle because the commute is so short. "At some point, Hurricane will be the largest city in Washington County in the distant future," he also concedes.

Mesquite's numbers are less predictable, according to Bill Chernock, Business Development manager for Mesquite. "While several decades away, the number 50,000 has been used... The 50,000 figure

is largely based on the projections of water availability we receive from the Virgin Valley Water District, and that capacity is closely monitored."

While that population figure seems rather surprising when one considers today's 15,000 residents (already more than a 50 percent jump from 2000) climate and location give it advantages similar to those of St. George while offering something St. George probably never will: casino gambling and ties to glitzy Las Vegas. Those intangibles could propel Mesquite into growth even faster than anyone can currently quantify.

Mesquite, in fact, offers potential residents many things not found in St. George or Hurricane: Lower prices on real estate, casinos, entertainment, lower elevation, tax breaks and proximity to McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas. And while Mesquite is still developing its ability to bring in big box stores and working to increase its commercial appeal, it is almost equidistant between St. George and Las Vegas, giving



Hurricane Mayor Tom Hirschi, left, and St. George Mayor Daniel D. McArthur envision a future of cooperation rather than competition.

residents the ability to live in a small town and still take advantage of the amenities of a larger metropolitan area.

All of this is not lost on Chernock, who says Mesquite has emphasized its role as not only a place for residents to settle, but also as a hub for tourism. "We recognize the importance of the 1.6 million visitors we host annually," he says. "The visitor provides a significant part of Mesquite's economy and in many cases is the resident of tomorrow."

The city of Hurricane, meanwhile, is growing steadily, but still slowly - which camouflages the explosive growth that experts anticipate for the future. With the addition of higher-end communities like Sand Hollow and Colina Tinta, Hurricane is already seeing a shift in the development trend. Sand Hollow plans to become a full-service resort property, complete with a championship golf course, equestrian center, sports venues, spa and fitness facilities, and much more. The community of Colina Tinta will bring 1,800 more homes and an 18-hole Jack Nicholas golf course.

Another development that will bring a great change is Elim Valley. The company boasts it will pave the way for 12 connecting neighborhoods, each with a town center. Hurricane City Manager Clark Fawcett says the area will attract a lot of

commercial businesses. This demand for industrial and commercial lots is above and beyond projected expectations. "A few years ago, they said we had too much industrial on our plan, but we've already surpassed what we planned for and we're looking for space for more," he says.

With the addition of a number of new developments - and considering that Hurricane has two state parks within its city limits, a couple of new golf courses, the opening of several new industrial areas in the next year, a new hospital, and possibly, a water park - Fawcett is sure that Hurricane city will soon be more than capable of reaching its goals by the time it reaches 50 percent of its estimated build-out. "We're at less than 10 percent of build-out, so now is the time to do that planning and get things put in place for the future," says Fawcett.

According to Washington County's Hirschi, the largest factor of economic growth is population growth. Keeping in mind Scott Hirschi's rule that "commercial follows rooftops," it seems simple enough that once St. George and Mesquite reach their population capacity, Hurricane will meet and exceed both in size. But there is one important factor that St. George and Mesquite have that Hurricane is lacking: direct access to I-15.

That direct access brings with it economic stimulus. Passers by stop and purchase food, gas, hotel rooms and groceries. But Fawcett doesn't feel that having direct access to I-15 will hamper Hurricane's economic development. "I don't know if we necessarily need the interstate to go through our town. We do need to have more routes from town to I-15 to reduce traffic problems."

But Hurricane Mayor Tom Hirschi views the coming growth more in terms of human benefits than raw economic progress. "It's not about simply getting bigger," he notes. "It's about getting enough jobs so that our youth won't have to go all over to find what they need in terms of career opportunities, schools, churches, and the like. All of our kids will be able to stay here."

St. George Mayor Daniel D. McArthur also focuses his attention on quality of life. "Growth has its downsides and its upsides. It's a delicate balance to work to maintain the quality of life we have come to expect in this beautiful desert place we call Dixie." He is an advocate of managed growth, coupled with a strategic vision for the future. "Water is what's going to control growth," he says. "It's the limiting factor of what can happen in our communities. Long-term planning is what has gotten us to this point in history, and it's what's going to take us into the future."

One dynamic all three cities seem to share is their goal of preserving the surrounding natural beauty. By working toward this goal, they often have to work closely with developers to build around existing natural rock, plateaus and lava fields instead of on top of them. "Residential densities may be lower in some cases than some developers would like...however, for the developer, large or small, who is willing to share our community's vision of quality of place, we do everything we can to help them succeed," explains Mesquite's Chernock.

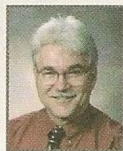
St. George and Hurricane have also worked to protect their natural red and black rock backdrops. According to its city leaders, St. George has worked hard to provide residents with the resources to enjoy an active lifestyle through the implementation of trails, preservation of open spaces, creation of neighborhood parks, and protection of the red and black hills. Hurricane even offers density bonuses to developers in an effort to aid them in sharing their city's vision. So no matter where residents choose to settle or where travelers spend their cash when visiting these areas, they will continue to find themselves surrounded by the natural beauty that engulfs this region. ■

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Greg Ashcroft, Agent
498 W Telegraph Street, Suite A
Washington, UT 84780-1529
435-673-1133
greg@gashcroft.com



Michael B Ford, Agent
175 W 900 S, Suite 7
St George, UT 84770-5269
435-628-9067
mikeford@mikefordinsurance.com



Mike Barker, Agent
720 S River Road, Suite E 104
St George, UT 84790-5515
435-628-3031
mike@mikebarkerinsurance.com



Sherry McGhee, Agent
67 North 300 East
St George, UT 84770-2916
435-628-2673
sherry@sherrymcgee.net



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