

LAND USE

Introduction

County plans in Utah have two land use sections: The first, located in the Resource Management Plan, covers in detail the issues surrounding public lands. Since a majority of the county is under the jurisdiction and ownership of either a Federal agency or the Navajo Nation, it is essential to have that section of policy and planning separate due to its unique situation. This section, Land Use, deals with the land the county does have jurisdiction over: around 404,000 acres, just under 8% of the total acreage in the county. Land use planning is less focused on resource management and more on development patterns and what shape development will take in the future. The purpose of a land use section of a general plan is to ensure that development does not occur in a piecemeal fashion without consideration of future impacts. This section ensures that land use has been sufficiently studied and conforms to the overall future vision of the county.

Currently, the county is under significant growth pressure due to the tourism industry. We see this pressure as positive, as it supports local tourism-related industries, but it also creates a concern with lucrative overnight accommodation being developed for a transient vacationing population at the expense of affordable housing being available for residents. Typical housing stock, which would be used for long-term rentals, is no longer available. In addition, the need for affordable workforce housing will only

continue to increase due to the expansion of extractive industries.

Areas such as Spanish Valley will most likely incorporate as they continue to experience growth. In anticipation of the growth, an area-specific special plan has been created for Spanish Valley -- the San Juan County Spanish Valley Area Plan which was adopted by the County Commission in April 2018 as an amendment to the county's General Plan. The area plan was developed to make sure that growth occurs in a deliberate manner and incorporates the approved Utah Trust Lands Administration's Community Structure Plan. The Spanish Valley Area Plan and any other future area plans are components of this General Plan.

The location of public infrastructure will most likely influence the location of development elsewhere in the county. Some unincorporated areas are already serviced by special service districts. If services are not expanded to remote areas, development will most likely be focused in areas that can reasonably provide citizens with services in the future.

Unincorporated county land outside of Blanding and Monticello is expected to show slow- to-moderate growth since people will want the amenities of a nearby town and the rural lifestyle of living in unincorporated territory. A large portion of this development will be either focused toward resource development, workforce housing, or vacation amenities for tourists. A future annexation plan has been created with Blanding and

Monticello in anticipation of this future transition opportunity.

Public Survey

An informal survey* in 2025 of San Juan County residents who primarily live in unincorporated areas suggests the following:

- Agricultural lands should be protected from encroachment.
- The integrity of agricultural lands should be protected.
- Residential neighborhoods should not be intermixed with agricultural land.

*Survey conducted by the Public Awareness Committee of Citizens. It has not been validated by the county but reflects community input.

Land Use Designations

These separate land use designations will be used on the future land use map. Each designation has its own purpose and limitations. These designations are not necessarily zoning districts but are the basis for zoning districts. Many different zoning districts can exist within a single general plan land use designation. The designations to be shown on the Future Land Use Map are as follows:

Residential - In San Juan County, residential densities range from high density, such as in Spanish Valley, to low density. The purpose of low density is to promote and preserve single family large lot patterns. This is normally accompanied by limiting keeping of animals and some agricultural practices. Lot sizes in this designation are normally at a minimum of 43,560 square feet. Anything below this lot

size should be encouraged to be located closer to other municipalities in transition areas. Since uses in this designation are rural in nature and tend to be isolated, services from public utilities are limited or are not available. Depending on the location, sometimes flexibility can be explored if neighborhood commercial and other opportunities are kept in mind.

Agriculture - This designation is for the maintenance and protection of food production and related uses. This also includes agricultural protection areas. Incidental uses to agriculture are allowed as well, such as living quarters, sheds, storage or any other use that is normally related to agriculture. Uses other than agriculture are allowed provided they do not adversely impact agricultural uses.

Transition Area - The purpose of this designation is to ensure that development near existing municipalities can transition and annex into the municipality without complication. These areas closely coincide with municipality annexation policy plans. As part of a county development review in these areas, municipalities should be involved in the process, whether through actual review or by the reviewing of existing city plans and ensuring that development conforms to those plans. Some areas within these transition areas are already serviced with municipal utilities and may be able to develop at a higher density than elsewhere in the county.

Industrial - This designation is for the manufacturing, assembly, storage, and

shipping of raw materials and other activities that support the economic base. Uses should be subject to approval and have no vested rights to develop in an industrial manner. Industrial uses should be regulated in a manner that adequately mitigates any negative externalities caused by the use. Industrial uses can be located in places that do not conflict with public lands and recreation opportunities. Industrial uses should locate near existing utilities or pay the way to extend needed services.

Commercial - The purpose of this designation is to provide for economic development, shopping needs, and entertainment for residents. Commercial uses should be separated into different like types. (For example, types that work within a neighborhood and those that work better along a highway).

Commercial uses should be clustered together to form commercial nodes and districts that can support each other. Commercial uses should not be allowed to encroach upon residential development.

Sensitive Lands - This designation is specifically for lands that cannot be developed for any use due to any natural hazard such as flood plains, erosion, tectonic, or other hazards.

Multiple Use - This designation is for land where residential and other uses will be limited. Also to protect land and open space resources; to reduce unreasonable requirements for public utility and service expenditures through uneconomic and

unwise dispersal of population; to encourage use of the land, where appropriate, for forestry, grazing, agriculture, mining, wildlife habitat, and recreation; to avoid excessive damage to watersheds, water pollution, soil erosion, danger from brush land fires, damage to grazing, livestock raising, and to wildlife values; and, to promote the health, safety, convenience, order, prosperity, and general welfare of the inhabitants of the community.

Public Lands - The prevalence and location of public lands in San Juan County necessitates a working relationship with Federal and State land management agencies in order to promote the county's land use goals.

Tribal Lands - This designation is for land that is owned and controlled by the Navajo Nation and other groups. This land is not regulated by the county but can have a direct impact on the county as a whole.

Future Land Use Map

The main tool provided in the general plan to guide policy decisions is the Future Land Use Map. It is the legal basis for zoning and reflects the vision for the county in the future. It also takes into account restraints such as road access, available water/sewer services, topography, significant habitats, groundwater resources, hazards, and accessibility to emergency services. Within these constraints, the core concept for the county's development directs future growth to areas where existing or planned infrastructure and services can support growth and to locations within or adjacent to existing communities.

The end goal is to produce a sustainable, well-balanced development pattern for the future.

Anticipated Changes

The single most important factor in growth will most likely be the availability of services. Since the county does not provide services, infill will be encouraged. Demand for workforce housing for individuals is expected to increase, and there will most likely be a desire to locate it in San Juan County. The rural character of the county can be preserved through infill development and the dedication of open space. This will be accomplished by working with municipalities to annex urbanized, unincorporated territory. It is also essential to make sure that residents of the county have more employment opportunities in professional fields and not just the tourism industry.

Public lands and multiple use designated lands will change as development continues to evolve. This currently is being experienced as expansion of tourism accommodations to include glamping and different forms of overnight rentals or primitive camping industries.

Agricultural and Industrial Protection Areas

State statute requires county general plans to “identify and consider each agriculture protection area” (17-79-403(2)(b)). As of 2025, the county does not have any registered protection areas; however, citizens have requested that processes and ordinances be established to add this element into our land use ordinance.

An agriculture protection area is a section of land that has a protected, vested use of an agricultural, mining, or industrial nature for a period of 20 years. By state statute, a county must appoint an advisory board that reviews requests from private property owners who want to establish a protection area. A final decision is then made by the legislative body, and the Utah Division of Agriculture and Food is notified. The county may establish their own review process and application fees by ordinance. During the 20-year period the land and use are protected from rezoning, eminent domain, nuisance claims, and state development. There are parcels within the county that could qualify as protection areas, and a way to establish and regulate them should be explored, enacted and encouraged.

Economic Considerations

The effect of a land use regulation on property values can be positive or negative. Historic land use regulation by the county has not been a hindrance to property values or local economic development opportunities.

Without a working relationship with Federal and State land management agencies, the prevalence and location of public lands in San Juan could negatively impact the county’s future land use goals.

Affordable Housing

According to a 2024 report by Points Consulting, titled *Dwelling on the Future: Housing Needs & Strategies for the Preservation of San Juan’s Communities*, Utah voters selected “housing affordability” as their

top concern in 2024. In San Juan County, housing concerns include not only affordability but also availability. Supply is limited, and the region has not experienced any notable housing “booms.” Utah developers do not perceive an incentive to build in the county if they can construct more profitable developments in other areas of the state. On paper, the county is less attractive than other areas in Utah due to its lack of growth, stagnant economy, high poverty rate, and lack of suitable transportation corridors. Only 40% of households can afford to buy an average-priced home in the county, and in specific areas, this percentage is even lower. Short-term rentals, while encouraged, have reduced the availability of long-term residential homes. For example, in Spanish Valley, 63% of homes are short-term rentals while in Blanding and La Sal, short-term housing stock is much lower at 3.3% and 5.6% respectively.

Without government involvement, the Points study concludes that the county’s population could decline to around 12,600 by 2040 (a 14% drop from about 14,600 residents in 2024). Overall, the study recommends that the county address issues related to zoning and housing density, eligibility to access state funds, additional resources for development, repurposing existing structures, and coordinating with the local tribes for additional housing.

Water Use and Preservation

In accordance with Utah Code 17-79-403 The county must develop a water use and preservation element that is integrated into

this general plan. This element should include the following:

- The effects of permitted development on water demand and infrastructure;
- Methods for reducing water demand and per capita consumption for future development;
- Methods for reducing water demand and per capita consumption for existing development; and
- Opportunities to modify operations to eliminate or reduce conditions that waste water.

San Juan County has limited water availability, including infrastructure limitations. The county continues to work with special service districts and, as this General Plan emphasizes, is encouraging development to take place closer to communities that have available infrastructure.

Land Use Goals & Policies

San Juan County will seek to facilitate orderly and fiscally responsible growth by:

- Supporting the creation of agricultural and industrial protection areas by defining in county ordinances a process for how a private property owner may establish one.
- Using multiple use lands wisely.
- Not permitting development in hazardous areas, such as floodplains and hill sides.
- Encouraging cluster developments to preserve open space and connect to public infrastructure systems.

- Exploring the option of transfers of development rights to protect multiple use lands.
- Working with landowners to obtain conservation easements.
- Requiring residential developments to locate within existing communities or within areas where services are provided at a level that will meet demand.
- Working with other governmental agencies to implement the resource management section of this plan.
- Ensuring that commercial developments are located near existing communities and are part of a planned use development or traditional neighborhood.
- Ensuring that commercial and industrial developments locate near existing utilities or themselves pay for the extension of services

needed. Tools to make this more achievable are impact fees and development agreements.

- Restricting industrial uses to locations where incompatible uses are unlikely to encroach upon the industrial use and make it a nuisance.
- Considering the future land use map when approving zone changes and development applications.
- Supporting the creation of area plans, such as the Spanish Valley plan, when growth pressure begins to mount -- especially if the area intends to incorporate in the future.
- Participating with entities such as the Inland Port and other State and Federal resources to encourage and implement affordable housing projects within the county.
- Creating a trails master plan.