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A bad plan: Bennett's bill would encourage St. George sprawl

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What Washington County needs is a plan to control its fast-paced growth and protect its fragile natural resources. Unfortunately, Sen. Bob Bennett's Washington County Growth and Conservation Act doesn't offer one. It's a plan, instead, for even more urban sprawl and consumption.

The county's growth is outpacing the rest of the nation. Only four U.S. counties are growing faster. A disturbing lack of foresight has turned what was once a well-ordered desert community of quiet residential streets and small businesses into a giant strip mall punctuated by water-guzzling golf courses.

Now Bennett and Rep. Jim Matheson are asking Congress to approve an ill-conceived sell-off of 25,000 acres of public land in the county to private developers, a move that will only encourage further unmanaged sprawl in the desert, where scarcity of water should naturally dictate the pace of growth. Instead of setting limits, it includes a route for a proposed Lake Powell pipeline to quench the thirst of added development the county can't otherwise sustain.

Piping water from Lake Powell, a shrinking reservoir that a warming climate is likely to prevent ever refilling, so that tens of thousands more can move to the St. George area, is irresponsible. Coaxing grass to grow on nine existing public golf courses in the desert is already a senseless waste of the West's dwindling water supply.

Bennett's Growth and Conservation Act has been developed largely by him and Washington County commissioners, who have so far shown little ability to manage their county's growth or to mandate conservation, with virtually no input from Utahns who would be affected and only a grudging nod to the environmental ramifications. It designates about 220,000 acres as wilderness, but more than half are already protected inside Zion National Park.

The latest version of Bennett's bill eliminates a contentious dam in the environmentally sensitive Beaver Dam Wash and postpones a transportation artery through a preserve for protected desert tortoises. But it includes miles of off-road vehicle trails and ignores other areas worthy of wilderness consideration.

Bennett promises a local planning process if his legislation is approved. But the right time for that was long before the bill went to Washington.