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Report: Metro areas will drive recovery

Wasatch Front's exports, innovation, low carbon and opportunity will shape Utah's next economy.

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A new Brookings Institution report has concluded that when the “next economy” emerges from the deep hole left by the Great Recession, what happens along the Wasatch Front will propel the whole state forward.

Out here in the West, that seems pretty obvious. But what drove analysts at the Washington, D.C.-based think tank to that conclusion were its findings about the level of involvement of a state’s population centers in four key elements that will shape that next economy — exports, innovation, low carbon and opportunity.

Because what’s good for large metropolitan areas is good for the state as a whole, Brookings recommended that “states should place economic development strategies in the service of metropolitan-led visions for economic growth, building from the distinctive assets and market strengths of these regions to grow quality jobs and promote sustainable, statewide prosperity.”

Utah has been doing that for a decade through the Envision Utah planning process, said Jeff Edwards, the Economic Development Corp. of Utah’s president and CEO.

“It’s a wonderful example of getting people to think in regional terms and to develop 30- and 40-year models for where things are going to go,” he said. “I agree with a lot of what was said in the Brookings report. You have to have a sense of place, what you are as a community and what your strengths are.”

Brookings based its findings on data from 2009. That year, according to a report Friday from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Salt Lake County was Utah’s only metropolitan area whose gross domestic product (GDP) rose from 2008.

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Salt Lake's uptick was tiny, just 0.3 percent, with a strong financial services sector overcoming weakness in construction. But where financial services are not plentiful and construction tanked — think St. George — the GDP plummeted more than the national average of 2.4 percent.

In St. George, GDP fell 5.8 percent. Provo-Orem slid 3 percent. Logan and Ogden-Clearfield fared better than the rest of the nation but still had declines of 1.5 percent and 1 percent, respectively.

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Overall, the Bureau of Economic Analysis reported, "the economic decline was widespread as real GDP declined in 292 of 366 (80 percent) metropolitan statistical areas."

In the Brookings Institution's perspective, when the GDP bounces back, four factors will drive the recovery in Utah's five metro areas:

- Innovation — of all Utahns employed in science and engineering occupations, 94.2 percent live in the largest cities.
- Opportunity — of the population age 25 to 64 with a post-secondary degree, 92.1 percent live in the metro areas.
- Low carbon — the portion of the metropolitan population that can commute via modes other than driving is 89.4 percent.
- Exports — 87 percent come from the Wasatch Front, Logan or St. George.

"The most innovative and educated workers in states cluster in metro areas," the Brookings report observed.

Arthur C. Nelson, presidential professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah, found Brookings' findings "quite accurate. The analysis is solid and implications reasonable. ...

"I would expect that over the next generation, the 100 largest metropolitan areas will dominate America's economy even more than they do now."

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