

Infrastructure

Focus Group Snapshot

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute and the Hinckley Institute of Politics, in partnership with Deseret News and KSL, convened focus groups in April and May 2016 to identify important issues and policy options on the minds of the public and policy experts. While not representative of all voters, this qualitative research provides guidance to candidates and a deeper understanding of specific issues on people's minds. This snapshot provides the results of this research and serves as a guide to candidates on sentiments regarding infrastructure.

Summary

Utah's infrastructure system affects the economy, public and higher education, tourism, and the wellbeing of the state as a whole. Infrastructure accounts for well over \$1 billion of state and federal resources each year. Within the past year, major debates and policy changes have been made regarding the gasoline tax and transit funding, and the public has become more aware of water use. Focus group participants recognized the overall importance of transportation and infrastructure. One business leader

noted that Utah's economy has benefited because "we have kept up with infrastructure." Another individual said that the state needs more investment in infrastructure and public transit in order to keep the economy thriving and improve the state's air quality. Participants' major concerns revolved around the gasoline tax, public transit, water use, and the overall strategic planning for the state's transportation system and other infrastructure.

INFORMED DECISIONS | 2016

The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute and Hinckley Institute of Politics, in partnership with the Deseret News and KSL, are pleased to present INFORMED DECISIONS 2016, a series of election products and events that will help voters make informed choices in 2016.

This year promises to be a banner election year in Utah. The state will elect a governor, four U.S. congressmen/women, a U.S. senator, and nearly 90 percent of the Utah Legislature, as well as many other state and local officials. INFORMED DECISIONS 2016 will help voters navigate this important election year with analysis of critical issues impacting our state. It will also provide candidates with an opportunity to explain their views on these and other issues.

Major components of INFORMED DECISIONS 2016

Focus Groups

The Gardner Policy Institute convened focus groups drawn from the general public and issue experts in urban and rural Utah to identify important issues and potential policy options. These snapshots provide a summary of the focus group discussions.

Election Briefs

Analysts from the Gardner Policy Institute, Hinckley Institute, and the Utah Education Policy Center will prepare policy briefs on the major issues identified in the focus groups. These briefs will include information on why the issue is important, an analysis of key topics, and potential policy options for consideration. Election Briefs will be released in August and September 2016.

Candidate Conversations

The Hinckley Institute, in collaboration with our media partners at the Deseret News and KSL, will lead a series of Candidate Conversations on targeted races. These forums will be hosted "town-hall style," similar to the CNN Town Hall format hosted by Anderson Cooper in the presidential elections. The majority of these Candidate Conversations will be hosted at the historic Wall Mansion on South Temple Street. The first of these conversations will be in June 2016 prior to the primary election. Later conversations will follow in October 2016.

Infrastructure

THEMES AND SENTIMENTS

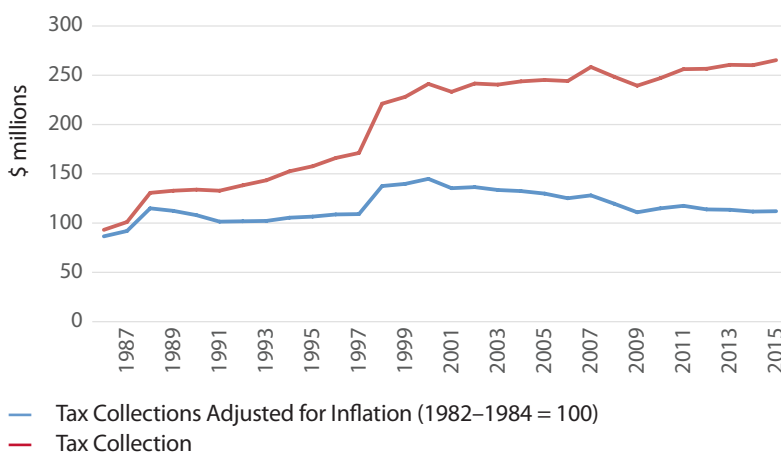
The comments made by participants can be grouped into several themes. The following notes, taken during the focus group proceedings, provide additional detail and color for each theme and provide interesting guidance for candidates.

Theme #1: Adjustments to the motor fuel taxes and other user fees are needed to pay for a growing economy.

After nearly twenty years with no change, the gas tax was increased from 24.5 cents to 29.5 cents while also modifying the tax to make it easier to adjust with the price of gasoline. The focus groups revealed a strong consensus that the Legislature should do even more to increase or reform the gasoline tax. While concerns over how the increase would impact low-income families were voiced, most acknowledged that gasoline tax is a user fee and necessary to fund the state's infrastructural needs. Other sentiments from the focus groups showed the following:

- The state should consider other ways to fund infrastructure, including a vehicle miles traveled (VMT) tax, toll roads, and/or tying the gasoline tax to inflation.
- The buying power of the gasoline tax had declined significantly since the last increase in 1997. The increase to 29.5 cents did not allow the state to catch up. Utah is already behind again.
- The state cannot solely rely on user fees. Everyone benefits and everyone should pay.

Motor Fuel Tax Collections



Source: <http://tax.utah.gov/esu/history/history.pdf>

Theme #2: People remain frustrated about the conduct of and services provided by Utah Transit Authority. Service enhancements for western Salt Lake County are particularly needed.

In the fall of 2015, voters in 17 of Utah’s 29 counties voted on Proposition 1, a ballot measure that would raise sales tax by a quarter cent to help support transportation funding. Prop 1 passed in 10 of the 17 counties, but lost in Utah’s two most populous counties: Salt Lake and Utah. These losses showed the divisiveness of the issue. Perception about the proposition was not about transportation funding, rather, it was about how the funds are not used appropriately and do not provide adequate service for riders.

- Opponents to Prop 1 voiced concern over UTA’s history of debt and misuse of funds, including the salaries, bonuses, and international travel of UTA officials.
- Frustration over service has always been a challenge for UTA, especially on the west side of Salt Lake City, and difficulty transferring between trains and buses.
- There is a perception that tax increases have already paid for services (like Frontrunner) and taxes shouldn’t be increased again. Additionally, you can “capture the imagination” of the public with big projects, but this was more difficult with Prop 1 because it was about “fixing potholes.”

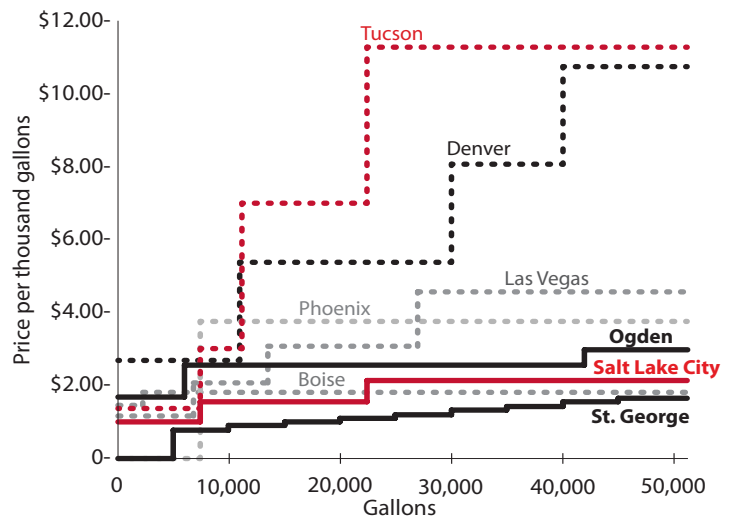
Theme #3: Enhanced conservation and appropriate water pricing will be increasingly important as Utah grows.

The focus groups revealed a growing concern over water use in the state. Historically, attention to water use was tied to the seasons, whether the state had a sufficient snowpack, how the dry weather would impact wildfires, or whether the lakes and reservoirs would be full.

- One concern voiced by many in the focus groups was the cost of water. One business leader stated, “we should be charging for water use, not subsidizing it. It makes no sense to me why we wouldn’t have users pay for the water use.”

- Highlighting how use is tied to price, another respondent said, “Until water becomes expensive, folks won’t stop watering.” In addition to the issue of water pricing, is a general mindset about water use.
- Policies throughout much of the state do not incentivize conservation; this includes large water users like the water districts and industrial and commercial users.

City Water Rate Structures



Source: Office of the Utah Legislative Auditor General and City Water Departments

Theme #4: There is a great need for long-term strategic planning in Utah.

The critical issues are construction of state and local roads, transportation planning, air quality, and land and water use.

- Regarding the gasoline tax, a respondent noted that the five-cent increase only provided “short-term stability” while the state looks for long-term solutions.
- On the failure of Prop 1, a community leader explained “there was no vision for the future, it was a failure of imagination.”
- Another said the public feels that the state is just updating or fixing old projects. A wide-scale vision for the future no longer exists.
- On air quality, a community leader noted, “We all need to work on the air, but it just isn’t well run or usable.”
- Water use should be part of planning communities and creating building codes.

SUMMARY OF PROCESS

The Informed Decisions 2016 focus groups included a random draw of the general public, as well as leaders in business, government, and non-profit organizations. Six focus groups were held in April and May 2016. Each group discussed three separate topics: taxes, infrastructure, and education. These topics and their specific questions were chosen and honed as a team effort between the Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute, the Hinckley Institute of Politics, and the Utah Education Policy Center. The Gardner Policy Institute agreed to keep individual comments made by participants confidential. All participants were responsive, engaged and enjoyed the opportunity to discuss the issues presented.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

The following people participated in Informed Decisions 2016 Focus Groups. In addition, a group of randomly selected members of the public shared their views.

Pamela Atkinson	Luis Garza	Keith McMullin
Jonathan Ball	Pam Graf	Cristina Ortega
Stefanie Bevans	Mike Green	Scott Parson
Mark Bouchard	Andrew Gruber	Tami Pyfer
Becki Bronson	Terry Haven	Christine Redgrave
Anne Burkholder	Kimberly Henrie	Allison Riddle
Carlton Christensen	Robert Hunter	Jonathan Smith
Mike Christensen	Ally Isom	John Valentine
Bill Crim	Stu Jones	Evan Vickers
Wes Curtis	Mike Leavitt, Jr.	Jarett Waite
Phil Dean	Jill Remington Love	Linda Wardell
Sophia DiCaro	Marina Lowe	Thom Williams
Sydnee Dickson	Jennifer Mayer-Glenn	Mayor Maile Wilson