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Commentary: Protect the natural environment of the city's northwest quadrant



Al Hartmann | The Salt Lake Tribune Bald eagles stand in a row on an ice patch while fishing at Farmington Bay State Waterfowl Management Area on Monday, Feb. 7. Farmington Bay is a great place to see numerous birds for Bald Eagle Day on Feb. 12.

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The march of development is a reality we all face, and doing it in balance with our environment is a responsibility for the future.

The northwest quadrant of Salt Lake City consists of a large area of mostly undeveloped land near the Great Salt Lake shoreline. For decades, multiple planning efforts for development have been undertaken. With a rapidly increasing population along the Wasatch Front, attention has once again turned to this large tract of land for its economic potential amid rising concerns of negative impacts to the natural resources of the area.

Just as Salt Lake City is considered a national transportation hub, the Great Salt Lake is a critical migratory bird hub. It is one of North America's most important migratory stopover sites. Every fall and spring, the lake hosts one of the largest concentrations of birds on Earth, as they stop to rest and feed on its abundant resources. Birds arrive from their nesting sites as far north as the Arctic and depart for wintering sites as far south as the tip of South America.

Due to its critical importance to birds, the Great Salt Lake has been designated as a hemispheric site within the Western Hemispheric Shorebird Reserve Network and all five of the lake's major bays have individually qualified as Globally Important Bird Areas by BirdLife International and National Audubon Society.

A large complex of low-lying wetlands dominates the northern portions of the NWQ and extends to the west and north to the shoreline of the lake. In geologic terms, this area has been shaped by the prehistoric Jordan River. For thousands of years, the Jordan River meandered across the land, depositing and moving sediments, leaving behind old river channels, basins and islands. Since the late 1800s, humans have used this distinctive landform to expand, create and enhance wetlands by lightly altering the prehistoric features and diverting water from the Jordan River back into the ancient waterways.

The high water table and low permeability of soils in this area have been an ideal setting, resulting in approximately 20,000 contiguous acres of diverse habitat currently managed for wildlife. This large wetland complex surrounding the NWQ on the north and west is owned privately and publicly by such entities as the National Audubon Society, duck clubs, Utah Reclamation Mitigation and Conservation Commission, and Salt Lake City.

This juxtaposition of the Great Salt Lake and its associated wetlands to the NWQ has led to decades of discussions between major landowners and those with conservation interests for strategies that would allow development in the NWQ, while minimizing impact on environmentally sensitive lands.

In 2002, a planning process initiated by Salt Lake County included scientific rationale that identified land appropriate for retention in a natural condition and recommended a "conservation area" in the NWQ. This was to help alleviate development-related disturbance to wetlands and wildlife, and conserve ecologically important and sensitive portions of the NWQ.

In 2015, major property owners once again entered into a collaborative effort with conservation advocates. After months of negotiations, boundaries were drawn that would allow light industrial development in the majority of the NWQ, predominantly in the southern areas where ground elevations are higher, while maintaining a nondevelopment zone of natural areas primarily in the northern low-elevation areas within the floodplain. This approach provides balance between development and protection of an irreplaceable natural treasure. These natural areas hold distinct values and also function as a buffer from development impacts to approximately 20,000 acres of adjacent land dedicated to wildlife.

In August 2016, Salt Lake City incorporated the natural area as part of the NWQ Master Plan, largely following the recommendations from major landowners and conservation advocates who had personal understanding of the character of the land. The natural area was not determined through an arbitrary and capricious manner; it was based on decades of discussion, negotiation and collaboration with Salt Lake City, major landowners, conservation advocates and other government agencies, and was based firmly on scientific studies that identified land with the greatest natural values.

As decades of planning morph into realities — and, regardless of the future governance of NWQ — the expectation is that the current NWQ zoning of the natural area be respected and honored. As development moves forward, continued inclusion of the conservation community will help guide decisions to lessen impacts to the Great Salt Lake, wildlife and wetlands.

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Wayne Martinson, Salt Lake City, worked as Utah Important Bird Areas Coordinator for National Audubon Society focusing primarily on Great Salt Lake, including the Gillmor Sanctuary, before retiring in 2016.
