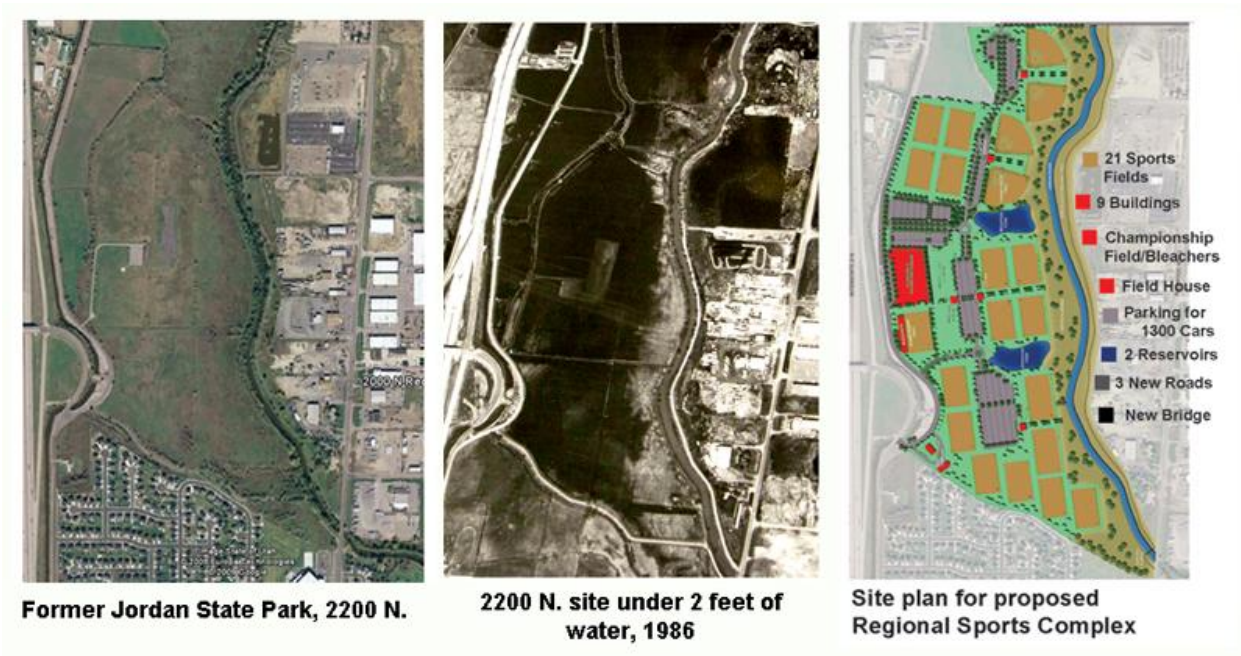


# Proposed siting of a \$39 million Sports Complex on the Jordan River Flood Plain at 2200 North

By Ray Wheeler

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**Panoramic view of proposed Jordan River Nature Park at 2200 North.** (the structure at the left is a model airplane facility that will be moved to a different site.)

It's been just four years since floodwaters unleashed by Hurricane Katrina totally annihilated one of the oldest and most iconic cities in America. One would think that in the post-Katrina era no elected official in his or her right mind would dream of

building facilities of any kind within any flood plain. Yet about a year ago Salt Lake City's mayor and City Council quietly approved the siting of a proposed \$39 million sports complex within a known floodplain, on lands that were under water for several years during the last flood event.

The proposed commercial sports complex will annihilate the largest block of undeveloped, unprotected, publicly owned land along the entire length of the Jordan River, and the only significant block of undeveloped lowlands riparian ecosystem habitat in Salt Lake City.

For three decades prior to the sports complex proposal, this site was repeatedly identified in open stakeholder planning initiatives as a flood control overflow area, a potential nature park, nature education center, native plant, wetlands and wildlife restoration area. Between 1997 and 2002 Tree Utah planted over 18,000 native trees and shrubs on the site.

The construction budget (not including several million in additional land acquisition costs) has ballooned from \$22.5 million to well over \$39 million and it is now \$16 million over budget. The Real Salt Lake soccer team is on the hook to kick in \$7.5 million.

**All other costs will be borne by the ant-like taxpayers of Salt Lake City.**

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### **Project Description and Origin**

In 2003 Salt Lake Voters approved Proposition 5, authorizing the city to bond for \$15.3 million to construct a new Sports Complex to host league soccer competition. The bond language was not, however, site specific, and voters were given no information as to location. Prior to identifying a site on the Jordan River flood plain, the city studied at least three other sites well away from the river, in some cases hiring consultants to develop conceptual plans for the alternative sites.

The bond initiative was peddled to voters as the solution to a perceived shortage of soccer fields in Salt Lake City neighborhoods. But voters had no way of knowing from the language on the ballot that the new facility would not in fact be available to local players for walk-on, pick up games of soccer. Rather, it would be dedicated to and reserved for organized competition or what is referred to as match play or league play on a "pay to play" basis much like the fees paid to play golf.

## **Economic drivers**

The primary purpose of the proposed Regional Sports Complex is to serve as a magnet for regional soccer tournaments and thus as an economic engine for local businesses primary function is to generate tax base for the City. While local soccer players spend very little to travel across town for a soccer match, teams and families from other cities and out of state spend freely on plane tickets, gas, taxis, groceries, restaurants, motel rooms and entertainment. The economic development and tax base argument is based on the assumption the regional sports complex would attract many interstate soccer tournaments throughout the year, and that those tourists from other states and distant cities (distinguish from nearby cities) would spend money on hotels, rental cars, gas, entertainment, and restaurants. Local soccer constituents would likely spend very little money.

## **The Existing Sports Complex**

To the degree that it may provide alternative play space for competitive matches currently tying up neighborhood parks and schoolyard soccer fields around Salt Lake City, the proposed commercial sports complex would theoretically free up some additional play time on city fields. But according to Salt Lake City Public Services director Rick Graham, city planners have never studied either the demand or the supply for play fields within Salt Lake City or Salt Lake Valley. A regional soccer complex 33 percent larger than the proposed new one (24 soccer fields) already exists in West Jordan. The justification for building the West Jordan facility in 1995 was that it would be the largest soccer complex in Utah and would therefore potentially serve as a regional tournament hosting facility. The proposed new facility will not be large enough to replace the original one, and will in fact compete directly with the original sports complex for tournament play and revenue.

## **Cost overruns and financial accountability**

News stories about the proposed soccer complex led voters to believe that the proposed funding of \$22.8 million (\$15.3 million from the bond and an additional contribution of \$7.5 million from the Real Lake soccer team, would be sufficient funding to build at least 25 soccer fields, 8 baseball fields, an indoor soccer stadium large enough to seat up to 7,500 people, concession stands, roads, lighting, and parking for 5,000 cars. But the project budget has ballooned to \$39 million and is

now at least \$16 million over budget DESPITE the fact that its size has been cut nearly in half—to 18 soccer fields, 4 baseball diamonds, and parking for 1,300 cars.

### **Liabilities of the existing site**

Why only half of the original project for nearly twice the cost? The city has never produced an itemized budget for the project, so taxpayers may never know why the cost per play field has more than tripled from \$682,000 to about \$1.8 million. But part of the explanation may be that building within a river flood plain is far more expensive than building somewhere else. The site is in fact both within a river floodplain and that of the Great Salt Lake, a shallow, “terminal” lake whose shorelines move rapidly in response to cyclical climate shift and have migrated by distances of up to 20 miles within the past 100 years. Flooding of the site in 1986-1987 was by water backing up into the lower Jordan River from the rising Great Salt Lake. Even in non-flood years the site has a high water table and several acres of federally designated wetlands. The solution may have to be to artificially levitate the entire 160 acres by at least several feet—possibly up to ten feet in places—by trucking in, say, 800 acre-feet of fill and by fortifying parts or all of the site with dikes. The irregular, twisting shape of the site also makes it highly inefficient. There is no way to efficiently place rectilinear soccer fields onto the oddly shaped parcel of land, and one side of the property is backed up against a river, requiring the construction of a new bridge to allow access from the east.

### **The value of open space**

The Jordan River State Park site happens to be the largest unprotected, publicly owned block of open space along the entire length of the Jordan River, and is by far the largest block of riparian/wetlands ecosystem habitat in Salt Lake City. It lies immediately upstream from the 2,000-acre [check] Legacy Nature Preserve, and effectively serves as the gateway to the water and wildlife wonderland of the Jordan River Delta.

### **History of previous stakeholder based preservation and restoration initiatives on the site**

Throughout the past 35 years the Jordan Nature Park site at 2200 North has been repeatedly identified, in a series of planning documents, as land to be reserved for the primary purpose of flood control, with compatible forms of outdoor recreation usually identified as a secondary benefit on the condition that such use should

preserve its capacity to serve as an overflow area for flood water. Back in the 1970's, long before the soccer complex plan was ever hatched, the land was purchased with federal Land and Water Conservation funds and included within a mandated no-build zone established in 1973 by the enabling legislation of the Provo-Jordan River Parkway. The vision embodied in the 1973 legislation was for a chain of parks, greenways and nature preserves and a network of bicycle, pedestrian and water trails which would ultimately connect all the way the slopes of the Uinta Mountain Range, down through the Provo River Canyon, up the shoreline of Utah Lake, the 44-mile length of the Jordan River across Salt Lake Valley, and along the eastern shoreline of the Great Salt Lake—a total distance of about 150 miles of connected parkway and trail. This breathtaking vision was conceived by enlightened urban planners during the 1960's and 1970's, as a “parkway” alternative to the massive reengineering of the river corridor by the Army Corps of Engineers. The core ideas were presented in a 1971 “Jordan Parkway Alternative” which advocated for the preservation of the entire flood plain of the river to simultaneously prohibit commercial development that would be vulnerable to flooding and to provide a generous strip of riparian green space and wildlife habitat running along the length of the river “from lake to lake.”

In no less than four open public planning processes—the Jordan River State Park Resource Area Management Plan (2002), the he Great Salt Lake Shoreline Plan (2003), the Jordan River Natural Areas Forum Strategic Plan (2003,) and the recent Blueprint Jordan River corridor vision document (2008)—stakeholder groups including city, state and federal agencies and environmental groups repeatedly identified this particular piece of ground as a potential native plant restoration area, urban wildlife reserve, nature park and/or nature education center. In 1995 the Salt Lake County Fish and Game Association spent about \$14,000 to develop a vision document for nature center on the site, and between 1997 and 2002 Tree Utah volunteers planted no less than 18,000 native trees and shrubs on the site. In 1990, the Utah State Division of Parks and Recreation and the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, jointly developed concept plans for a nature center on the site.

### **Ecological value of riparian corridors**

Ecologists universally agree that in the arid intermountain west region riparian ecosystems are by far the richest in plant and animal biodiversity—especially along the Jordan River, whose remaining parcels of wetlands and wildlife habitat form a crucial link in a transcontinental flyway for migratory birds traveling annually between Canada and Mexico.

Biological surveys show that Lowland Riparian habitat is unquestionably the habitat used by more of Utah's breeding songbird species than any other habitat type in our state. According to a Utah Department of Wildlife Resources Publication 02-27, although "Lowland Riparian" habitat makes up less than 1% of Utah's land mass, it provides habitat for at least 42% of all breeding bird species found in Utah.

Says ecologist Vaughn Lovejoy, an ecological restoration coordinator for Tree Utah: "We have reached a threshold both globally and locally where if we continue with our economical and political agendas in a business as usual manner we will push the ecological life support systems on which we and the vast majority of other beings depend on into collapse. If we wish to have the beauty of migratory song birds in our valley in the future we have to protect and restore every remaining undeveloped area of the Jordan River floodplain. This soccer complex can be built on other sites in our valley, the critical habitat along the Jordan River floodplain can only be protected and restored where nature put it."

### [Blueprint Jordan River](#)

Do the citizens of Salt Lake City value open space, wild nature and opportunities for environmental education as much as they value soccer fields or the potential enlargement of the tax base? There is in fact recent and overwhelming evidence that they do. In 2008 Envision Utah conducted a year-long series of work shops, open houses, and a survey to determine the preferences of Wasatch Front citizen for the future use of the Jordan River Corridor. In all about Envision Utah received some 2,000 responses from citizens and stakeholder groups.

To view the Blueprint Jordan River Report go to:

<http://www.blueprintjordanriver.slco.org/pdf/BlueprintJordanRiver.pdf>

For more information about the Blueprint Jordan River planning effort go to--

<http://www.earthrestoration.net/topics/view/26747/>

When the results of all the public input were tabulated, the message was clear. On issue after issue, depending upon how the questions were framed, Salt Lake Valley residents overwhelmingly preferred natural open space to shopping centers, wildlife habitat to condo blocks, nature preserves to commercial centers by margins of 13 to

1 up to 65 to 1. The most telling bar chart of them all was the public response to the question of what type of recreation they would want within the river corridor. Exactly one percent of participants identified “Sports fields” as their preferred recreational use, while 65 percent selected “opportunities for wildlife viewing.”

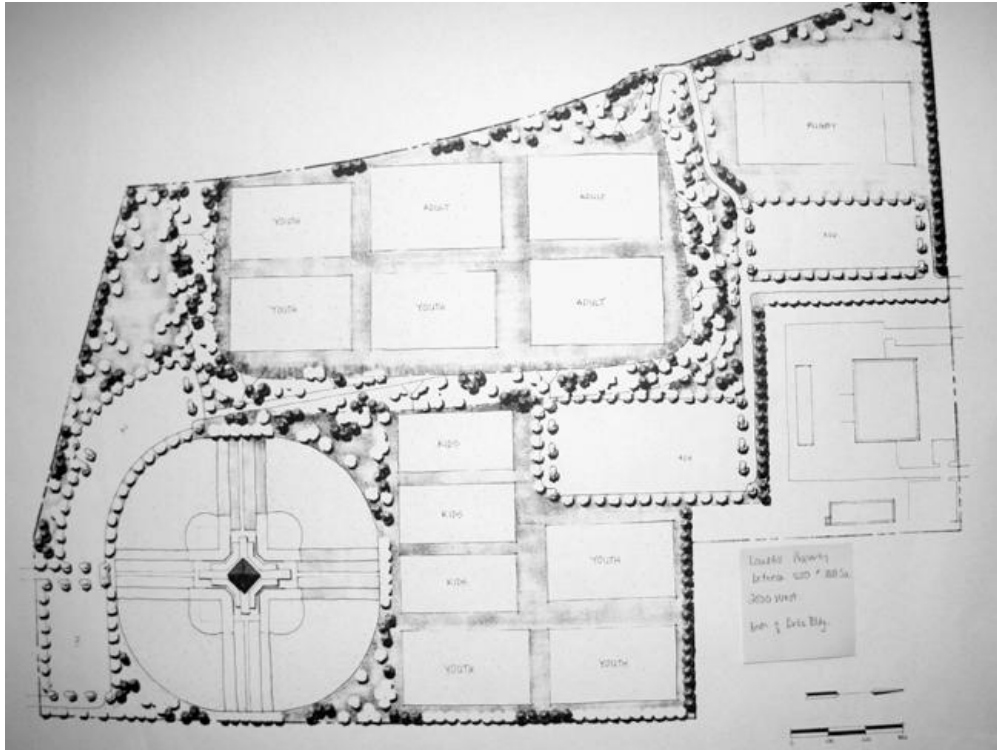
### **Alternative sites**

Environmentalists opposed to the conversion of wetlands and lowland riparian habitat into a sports complex insist that they do not oppose the construction of additional soccer fields to meet the needs of local soccer players.

Salt Lake City businessman Tagge Solaimanian is an avid soccer fan who plays soccer with friends at least once a week year round. “We do have a shortage of neighborhood play fields in Salt Lake City and in communities across the valley—particularly for indoor soccer facilities during the winter. Critics of this plan aren’t opposed to building new soccer facilities. Our problem is purely with the site.”

If providing additional soccer fields for local players is the primary objective, one might ask whether building a \$41 million sports complex is the best way to meet the need. Why not, instead, simply take the \$22.5 million of funding already in hand and build soccer fields precisely where they are needed—in communities throughout the city? Jeff Salt has studied current average cost for soccer field construction in sports complexes around the country, and says that it is in the range of about \$500,000 per field including all accessories (lighting, parking etc.) At that price Salt Lake City build no less than 45 high quality soccer fields—or perhaps smaller number of outdoor fields with a complement of indoor facilities-- with the money already in hand.

Indeed, city planners have gone to the trouble to identify no less than four potential alternative sites—replete with site diagrams showing how the same number, or more soccer and other sports fields and facilities could easily be placed onto other sites.



*Concept Plan for alternative Sports Complex site on city-owned land west of Redwood Road between 500 South and 800 South*

**Symbolic importance: poster child for a new paradigm**

This unusually large remnant of undeveloped Jordan River bottom land is a precious ecological asset in its own right, but its symbolic importance for the future of our city is much greater than its intrinsic ecological or recreational value.

Either we believe in open space and restoration of wild nature or we don't. Either we choose to protect the tiny fragments of open space we have left, or we bury them under parking lots and buildings for the benefit of fast-talking developers with get-rich-quick schemes.

Salt Lake City is the greenest city in the intermountain west. If we can't protect our largest block of riparian habitat, how can we expect the other 14 cities along the Jordan River to preserve and protect their own fragments of green space?

The long-term vision embodied in the 57-page Blueprint report is an extremely ambitious one. Its "guiding principles" call for the "preservation and rehabilitation of natural river features and functions to the greatest extent possible". A key

recommendation , spelled out on the final page of the report, is that “as much open space as possible should be conserved by ensuring that land designated as open space remains that way, and that land slated for development is protected. This step is a top priority and involves working with municipalities to share the open-space vision and identify the highest priority lands for acquisition and protection.”

In a Salt Lake City Council meeting on December 1, 2009 City Council member Soren Simonsen, the city’s representative on the Blueprint Jordan River Implementation Committee, called to the attention of his colleagues that they had earlier in the year (February 2009) unanimously adopted a resolution supporting the “Blueprint” report. Simonson said that he had confirmed with Envision Utah staff responsible for the report that its “vision” map and GIS database clearly identified the proposed site for the sports complex as land to be preserved as open space.

In a Dec. 11 interview with a Salt Lake Tribune reporter, Blueprint Jordan River project manager Gabe Epperson confirmed that the siting of a sports complex would be in direct contradiction to the recommendations of the Blueprint vision document.

Fields, unlike a nature preserve, can be built anywhere, he told the reporter, "but you can't move the river....It seems that building a sports complex is a bit of a boondoggle.”

### **“Moral obligations”**

Becker administration staff including the mayor himself have suggested that the mayor has a “moral obligation” to build the proposed soccer complex on the Jordan River site because the site was “generally understood” to be the probable location at the time of the 2003 bond approving funding for the project . Since voters did approve funding for a sports complex the city may indeed have a legal if not moral obligation to build it SOMEWHERE. But the ballot language of the 2003 bond initiative was NOT site specific. Had voters known that the huge facility would be installed on a flood plain the bond, which passed by just two percent of the vote, would surely have been defeated. There is no moral obligation to any particular SITE.

If “moral obligations” are the primary basis for city policy, there are a host of moral considerations that would obligate the mayor to aggressively pursue one of the many identified alternative sites:

- A moral obligation to respect the overwhelming support of Salt Lake City residents for the protection of open space, wetlands, wildlife habitat and wildlife viewing opportunities
- A moral obligation to endorse the “best practice” management principle of never building expensive infrastructure within a flood plain.
- A moral obligation to demonstrate accountability to taxpayers by selecting one of the less expensive alternative sites rather than one requiring massive amounts of fill to artificially levitate it relative to existing wetlands, a high water table, and probable future flood waters.

**A moral obligation** to uphold the following guiding principles and specific recommendations of the Blueprint Jordan River vision document, which were unanimously endorsed both by the Salt Lake City council and the mayor over a year ago:

**A moral obligation** to fulfill the following commitment that Ralph Becker made in his 2008 “State of the City” address:

I will ramp up action on the Jordan River: parkway completion, a trail the length of the river in Salt Lake City, and restoration of the river corridor. The valley-wide effort needs our full participation, and we need to think long-term about making the Jordan River watershed a model for ecological restoration and a pleasing amenity for our residents and visitors. Since I’ve been talking about the Jordan River during the campaign and through the transition to my new position, volunteers have flooded my office, and I’m excited to leverage our City resources with actions by other communities along the Jordan River, our residents, the State of Utah and the federal government. An action plan will be forthcoming to detail our steps to success.

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Salt Lake City businessman

- Salt Lake City businessman
- Soccer dad, lifelong soccer player and fan
- Knowledge about supply and demand of soccer play fields for Salt Lake City players