



Zion and Springdale Rock Together

Utah's oldest and most-visited national park and its gateway community have forged a unique partnership born after years of turmoil. BY REUBEN WADSWORTH

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, many Springdale residents could say, "I went to a town council meeting and a fight nearly broke out."

Back then, the municipal meetings of Zion National Park's gateway community attracted large crowds. Some came to protest, others came to be entertained. Strong words and near brawls were the

norm. County Sheriff's deputies regularly attended to ensure nothing got out of hand. The town's mayor, Bob Ralston, was at odds with city staffers. A headless chicken appeared on a town councilor's lawn.

"No one ever came to blows or anything like that, but there were some shenanigans and hijinks that went on in the community," says Louise Excell, a former member of the

town's planning commission. "Elections were protested. People were contacting the state attorney general and accusing elected officials and others of all kinds of misconduct. It was an ugly setting."

Why all the fuss? Well, at the time, Springdale residents could not agree on the future course of their town. Should it preserve its quaint image, made up largely of mom-and-pop shops, or should it allow growth and possible tourist-trap tackiness? The pressure for development was piled on by a whole new host of developers who had recently discovered the town. Meanwhile, the National Park Service (NPS) incensed many townspeople (who stood to gain from the rush to expand) by strongly opposing large-scale development outside its boundaries, especially the Zion Canyon Giant Screen Theatre, whose height the city council exempted from its 35-foot limit. And then there was a strong contingent of Springdalers who did not want any development or change at all. Coming anywhere near a consensus seemed as likely as the park service approving the construction of a golf course on Zion Canyon's floor.

It took two outsiders (and terrible traffic congestion) to mend the rift.

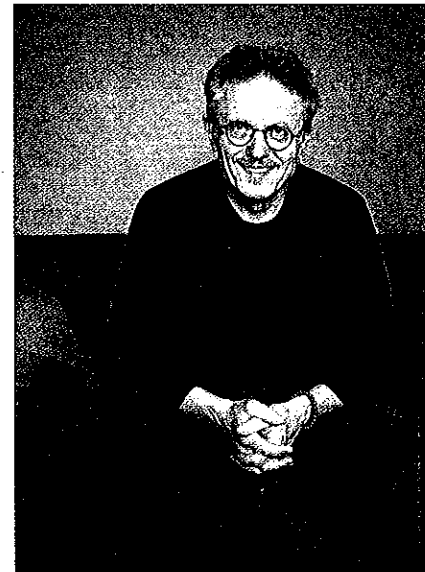
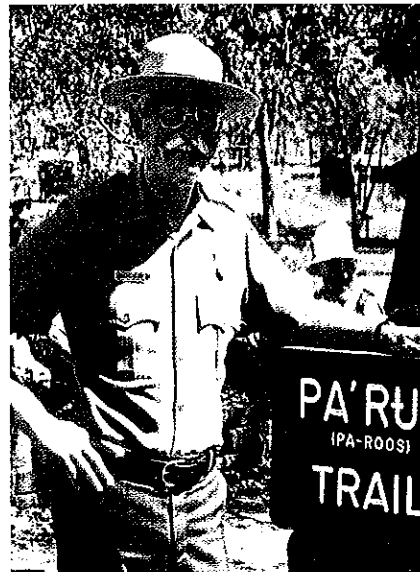
Dynamic duo

Chicago native Phillip Bimstein did cartwheels after he bought a house in Springdale on a whim following a hiking trip in 1988. Bimstein, a composer, quickly made a name for himself in a town where he knew no one until his arrival, serving as president of the town's arts council. Desperate to take the town in a new direction, a group of residents convinced him to run for mayor. Reticent at first, the idea started to excite Bimstein, choosing "civility" as his platform. He won.

Serving as Zion's Superintendent was Don Falvey's last stop in an illustrious park service career, much of which was spent as the Rocky Mountain Region's Chief of Maintenance. Born in Price but raised in Georgia, Falvey fell in love with the park during his travels as maintenance chief. According to Falvey, fixing congestion in the park was one of his "marching orders."

The idea of a shuttle system in the park to relieve its traffic gridlock and parking

Falvey, left, and Bimstein, right, worked together to create a partnership between the town of Springdale and Zion National Park.



GROUNDBREAKING LEGISLATION

One of the significant challenges in the partnership was that the park lacked the authority to spend funds outside of park boundaries. Working closely with Utah Congressman Jim Hansen's office, Falvey was instrumental in ensuring special legislation passed that allowed Zion to expend funds outside the park.

The legislation, part of the Omnibus Parks and Public Lands Management Act of 1996, allowed the park to "work with the adjacent community if there was a benefit for the town and for the government" and stated that the park could "expend donated or appropriated funds for the establishment of essential facilities for park administration and visitor use outside the boundaries, but within the vicinity, of the park."

In addition to the legislation, the park and town have many agreements together, including culinary and irrigation water, wastewater, and a combined fire and emergency services response capability.

headaches had appeared in planning documents and been talked about since the mid-1970s. "How to implement it?" became a difficult question. In the early 1990s, Excell wrote a letter to Congressman Jim Hansen, who was chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, expressing that the shuttle should include Springdale. Hansen was extremely receptive, coming to Springdale to speak with park and city officials.

"I like this idea," Excell recalls Hansen saying. "I want to help you with it, but you have to clean up your act. I'll help you, but you've got to help yourselves first."

"It was a little embarrassing to be lectured about being 'naughty children' by a congressman," Excell recounts.

Bimstein's election, Falvey's arrival, and Hansen's reprimand helped spur the town and park into action. Both entities realized they must solve their problems together.

Former city manager Fay Cope felt that Bimstein and Falvey's arrival was a case of "when the students are ready, the teacher will come."

"The students were ready, and the right people were here to do their jobs," Cope explains. "And if those players hadn't been here at that particular time, it could have all gone a very different way."



Visitors Per Year
2.75 million (2009)

Shuttle Riders Per Year

2005	2,586,665
2006	2,567,350
2007	2,657,281
2008	2,690,154
2009	2,735,402
2010	2,665,972



The Shuttle's Positive Impact

Springdale residents enjoy what few other small Utah towns have—a public transit system. Springdale residents utilize it for daily errands and going to church. The shuttle can play the role of designated driver for those frequenting the town's pubs since the last departure of the day is around 11:15 p.m. Even school children use the shuttle to get to the library and other destinations. The children feel safe on the shuttle, and their parents feel safe allowing them to travel on the shuttle, because the shuttle drivers know the children and watch out for them.

Not only do Springdale residents use the shuttle for their transportation needs, they are ambassadors of the system, which has also helped them espouse the values of national parks, spreading them outside park boundaries.

"Synergy" became Bimstein and Falvey's motto. Bimstein created a non-voting seat on Springdale's planning commission for an NPS employee and the NPS reciprocated, inviting a town representative to sit in on park meetings. Bimstein appointed a 10-member liaison committee to devise a transportation plan, ensuring that three members of the committee were NPS critics to guarantee a variety of viewpoints. Falvey attended every municipal meeting he could and led park staff in volunteering in the town. According to Cope and Excell, Falvey's leadership style made people want to help.

Former shuttle opponents became shuttle drivers as if a signal that the town's partnership with the park had come full circle.

Despite these efforts, rumors still ran rampant, including erroneous fears that a shuttle system would ruin the town.

"Some people found anything to be critical about," Bimstein says.

Calming the controversy

During a town hall meeting in 1995 that attracted about a fifth of the town's population, Bimstein and Falvey staged their finest performance. At the beginning of the meeting, Bimstein said, "We hear people are worried that the federal government is coming in here and telling us what to do." He then donned a park ranger hat and retorted, "I don't know where people are getting that idea."

Bimstein's antics broke the ice. Falvey then took out a flipchart and asked everyone what rumors they had been hearing, writing down every concern expressed. The duo then addressed every single concern, changing the gathering from an adversarial encounter to more of

a chat among friends. After that meeting, attendance at Springdale's municipal meetings declined.

"All they do now is conduct business," one resident remarked. "They're no fun anymore."

Even though most townspeople were on board after Bimstein and Falvey's brilliant presentation, there were still hurdles to jump.

One major obstacle was convincing The Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) to construct traffic-calming islands in Springdale that would narrow the roadway near town shuttle stops.


"They were having heartburn over that," says Patrick Shea, the NPS project manager for the transportation system. "There was a little bit of culture and challenge within UDOT."

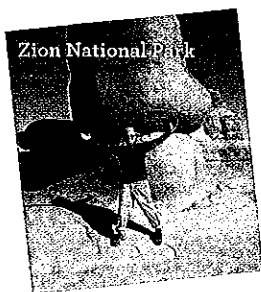
Accustomed to widening roads instead of narrowing them, UDOT nevertheless acquiesced, catching the vision even though it was not a by-the-book project. Others followed and, as Falvey put it, "wounds healed."

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As a result of the entities' unprecedented cooperation, they won prestigious awards, and personnel from parks across the country have traveled to Zion to find out how they can solve their transportation problems in a similar way.

"I shudder to think that the whole shuttle system could have been designed and built without any involvement with Springdale," Excell says. "I just can't even imagine."

Today, Springdale and Zion visitors could not imagine the park and town without the shuttle either. 



Zion National Park

Springdale's Opposite

The relationship between Zion and Springdale differs drastically from another gateway community located just 100 miles south, as the crow flies. Unlike Springdale, Tusayan, Ariz., gateway to the Grand Canyon's South Rim, has overtly resisted long-standing plans for a light rail system to soften the blow of ever-increasing tourist traffic. Tusayan locals defend their monopoly on South Rim access and scoff at blueprints for sustainable development, practically priding themselves on being a tourist trap, the label Springdale wants to avoid.



Grand Canyon South Rim