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LDS AND SCOUTING

As dust settles on LDS Church decision, questions arise on what's next for Scouting in Utah and its beneficiaries

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Dominic Valente, Daily Herald

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Wade Stout poses for a portrait Saturday, May 13, 2017 in Orem. After The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints made their announcement about the Boy Scouts of America on Thursday, many young members are wondering what their future will look like in the Scouts. DOMINIC VALENTE, Daily Herald

The dust is starting to settle from Thursday's announcement that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will be discontinuing its participation in the Venturing and Varsity programs of the Boy Scouts of America.

While considered a major announcement, most of the response through social media and on-the-street can be narrowed down to three words: it's about time.

Scouts, LDS Church leaders, and parents are still trying to figure out what this change means for the future of a lot of things — for Eagle Scout awards and revenues just to name a few concerns.

"It's just too soon to tell," said Stan Lockhart, past-president of the Utah National Parks Council. "For many years, the Boy Scouts and the church have tried to figure out how to make older boys programs effective."

A brief look at the Utah National Parks Council Annual Report for 2016 indicates the dollars involved in running programs is massive. The question now is what could happen to those funds?

Friends of Scouting, the fundraising program raised \$2.9 million for the council last year; camping revenues were approximately \$2.6 million; activities garnered \$960,000; and special events, grants, sales and investments came in at about \$866,000.

The council also used a yearly 5 percent draw on a \$3.2 million endowment fund that supplements Scouting programs and projects.

The LDS Church has indicated that money is not its top priority.

"Though important, financial and property obligations are not the primary concern," the church statement said. "Instead, we are driven by our desire to serve the spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual needs of young men."

The church noted that most of the legal associations are in connection with the Cub Scout and Boy Scout programs.

Scout camps, which many are for those 14 years and older, garnered \$2.6 million from camp fees. Those are used to help maintain the 4,330 acres of council camping property.

Now that LDS 14- to 17-year-olds will not be attached to the BSA, some are asking what will happen to that funding source and the camps.

One of the questions the LDS Church anticipated most was about Eagle Scout status.

"Young men who desire to continue toward the rank of Eagle will be registered, supported, and encouraged," the church statement said. "It is important to remember that only those young men who are properly registered are eligible to be awarded merit badges and rank advancements."

A potential drop in Eagle Scout projects could affect many nonprofit organizations, schools, hospitals and cities.

Data provided by the Utah National Parks Council to the Daily Herald during the last 12 months shows Alpine School District was one the largest recipients of Eagle Scout service, with well over 40 projects completed at schools across the district.

"If this new announcement were to cause a decline in Eagle Scout projects targeted for schools in Alpine School District, we would certainly see a need to invest in more paint, or, not have as many playgrounds updated as frequently with vibrant colors for kids to play on," said Kimberly Bird, district spokeswoman.

Among some of the more unique Eagle projects done on behalf of Alpine's schools were a hydroponics system created for a greenhouse; security bar codes put inside all of one school's library books for its new school library security system; and a bridge that was built over a ditch making it easier to utilize the Murdock Canal Trail for students coming onto school grounds.

"We are appreciative to all of the young men who dedicate time and service for our schools as they pursue their Eagle Scout Award," Bird said.

Eagle Scout projects are very important to nonprofit organizations. Bill Hulterstrom, president and CEO of United Way of Utah County, said it could change a lot of things.

"It has a real impact on how we get things done," Hulterstrom said. "Our community will need to figure out a new way to get volunteer projects."

In the Utah National Parks Council data, Utah Valley Hospital benefited from more than 20 Eagle Scout projects at its campus in the last year.

"For many years, local Boy Scouts have completed Eagle Scout projects that benefit Utah Valley Hospital," said Janet Frank, spokeswoman. "The majority of these projects have centered around donating a variety of comfort or entertainment items for our patients. Many Scouts have made blankets that are distributed across the hospital. Others have put together hygiene, bedrest or newborn kits that contain some basic necessities patients may need. Courage capes have been another favorite project that helps our pediatric population."

Frank added, "All of the donations we've received from Eagle Scout projects help in the healing process for our patients and their families. We're grateful for the generosity local Scouts have shown us in the past, and we look forward to continuing our relationship with others who are working on Eagle projects in the future."

There is hope. Many Boy Scouts and their parents are firm believers in the program. Scott Hogensen is one of them.

"I got my Eagle Scout when I was 14 or 15," Hogensen said. "I know Scouting made me a better prepared, more well-rounded young man. My sons will participate as long as the program is offered."

While many organizations don't solicit Eagle Scout projects, some would be hurting without them.

Kids On the Move in Orem has received great help from Scouts.

"KOTM was the beneficiary of 45 Eagle projects in 2016 for a total of 4,164 hours," said Scott Bean, CEO. "These include sensory boards, activity walls, Bumbo-seat wheelchair trainers, weighted blankets and toys, and many others."

Bean added, "Of course, we hope that these projects will continue within the younger age Scouting program at the LDS-sponsored units, as many Eagle projects are completed before a young man turns 14. While we do expect a drop-off in the total number of Eagle projects benefiting KOTM, it remains to be seen how LDS-sponsored units withdrawing from Varsity and Venture Scouting will impact us."

Nearly every city in the county has had Eagle project service hours donated. Saratoga Springs saw more than 16 in the last year.

"We love to have Eagles to do projects," said Taffi Pugh, library volunteer coordinator said. "It has been a great benefit to us. We will happily take volunteers."

A quick look at the new website for LDS young men — ymactivities.lds.org — shows the LDS Church still wants them to give service, help in their neighborhoods and broaden their understanding of the importance of volunteering and doing good to others as they prepare to serve missions.

It may take some time yet to see if Eagle Scout projects continue to be a strong part of the volunteering community. In the meantime, professional Scouters will most likely be spending their time looking at revenues, budgets, fundraising and what's next for the Utah National Parks Council as the church gets closer to the Jan. 1 changes.

Daily Herald reporter Genelle Pugmire can be contacted at gpugmire@heraldextra.com, (801) 344-2910, Twitter @gpugmire

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LDS Church cutting ties with BSA Venture and Varsity Scout programs