

Tidepool Originals: VOICES

Bet on Las Vegas for Western solutions

With other Western locales mirroring Las Vegas' growth, the time is right to draw lessons

by [HAL ROTHMAN](#) | posted 12.15.05

Las Vegas is a funny place to find solutions to the woes of Western cities, but in southern Nevada, the phenomenal growth of the last 20 years has spawned innovative ways to solve the problems of Western cities.

Las Vegas has all the problems of a healthy economy -- growth, sprawl, air pollution, traffic congestion, changing demographics, inadequate public financing and everything else you can imagine.

It's true that the remarkable changes of the past few years have transformed life in the Las Vegas Valley. The cost of living is 14 percent higher than the national average. Housing prices have risen in five years from the national norm to 38 percent above it. Homeownership has fallen below 60 percent, underneath the national average, and household income actually fell by \$1,300 in the last 12 months, leaving Las Vegas below the national average for the first time in recent history. It is easy to think that the quality of life has gone to hell in a hand-basket in a hurry.

The culprit, not surprisingly, is our incredible growth. Since 1980, greater Las Vegas has quadrupled in population. The boundaries extend further every day, and people drive farther and longer in each succeeding year. The Las Vegas Valley is addicted to growth. Paradoxically, while growth doesn't pay for itself, growth foots the bill for what does get paid for in southern Nevada. Las Vegas has this wolf by the ears: It can't hang on and it can't let go.

Solutions come slowly. One good one is the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act of 1998, the best arrangement any American community has ever secured to mitigate the impact of federal action. It auctioned Bureau of Management land rather than allowing its piecemeal disposal, and targeted the proceeds for regional projects. Now, there's money for capital improvements, conservation initiatives, development of parks, trails and natural areas in the county, and acquiring environmentally sensitive lands.

Another is a 79-species habitat conservation plan for Clark County that compels developers to pay a \$550 per-acre development fee to maintain habitat for endangered species such as the desert tortoise. This creative usage of the Endangered Species Act was born of necessity, but it has become a linchpin in the development of wilderness and recreational space in southern Nevada. It also creates a convergence between the environmental community and developers, and nowhere else in the country has such a consensus been forged.

The world of water has changed and the Southern Nevada Water Authority should get much of the credit. This authority reinvented water in the Southwest, changing a nasty competitive situation, the famed "whiskey's for drinkin', water's for fightin' " of legend, to a cooperative model in which everyone sits at the table and people negotiate like grownups. This ended such travesties as communities spilling water into the streets to maintain their claim to their "share."

Las Vegas also developed a stunningly effective water-conservation program. Since 2003, the community has added more than 150,000 people, yet in 2005, the Valley used 15 billion gallons of water less than it did in 2003. Las Vegas has saved one-sixth of Nevada's annual share of the Colorado River while adding a mid-sized city to its population. Can any other Southwestern city match that accomplishment?

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Clark County has also built its own road, the 215 Beltway, around the city. When faced with federal funding that guaranteed that the much-needed artery would not be completed until 2020, county leaders acted. The result is a nearly complete beltway, built mostly with local moneys. Traffic congestion remains bad, but it would be a lot worse without 215.

But this is only a start. Las Vegas's growth-inspired problems continue to be legion. Air quality looms large. Even with the 215 Beltway, traffic congestion threatens to clog movement, and some form of mass transit is essential. Even more, emphasis on creating "live, work, play" communities needs to begin in earnest. Decentralization is as clear in Las Vegas as anywhere else, but converting to work situations that keep people close to home has yet to occur.

It's been 40 years since the title of a book, *Learning from Las Vegas*, became a buzzword, and that book was about architecture. Now, Western cities can learn from southern Nevada's successes and failures. It's time the region recognizes how much the future begins in Las Vegas.

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