



LAS VEGAS' RISKIEST BET?: ZERO CARBON EMISSIONS BY 2050

An NPG Commentary
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

Due to cheaper costs of living, lower taxes, and newly built homes, Clark County, where Las Vegas is located, is home to roughly 2.3 million people. The University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV) Center for Business and Economic Research projects county population will grow to 3.4 million by 2060, with some forecasts expecting 4 million as early as 2055.¹

To accommodate the million-plus additional people the city is doing what it always did: allowing vast swaths of its undeveloped desert to be converted into strip malls, residential subdivisions, and roadways.

Over half a million people are expected to move to southern Nevada in the next 15 years, spurring a new wave of construction. **Instead of curbing growth, the city known for excess is betting it can conserve its way out of climate catastrophe.**

Oh wait: There is something new to report: In 2021 Clark County adopted a **“sustainability and climate action plan.” The plan will reduce emissions by 100% by 2050 - an achievable goal...or so Las Vegas leaders claim:**

“We are one of the best kept secrets in the world when it comes to sustainability,” Jace Radke, a senior public information officer with the city of Las Vegas, said, before spouting the well-known (and worn-out) litany of municipal achievements like 450 miles of

bike lanes, 52,000 streetlights upgraded to LED, and public buildings, parks, and traffic lights converted to renewable energy.²

Good moves, all of them. But too little, too late. Sort of like putting your finger in the dyke just before a tsunami hits.

Reality check #1: In June 2021 temperatures hit 116° – a record for such dangerous weather so early in the year. In 2023 the Las Vegas metro area experienced the hottest July ever recorded with an average high of 112° - the last two weeks being the hottest 14-day stretch on record.³ Concrete buckled during the day and emanated heat long after sunset. Thousands of homeless people, as well as outdoor workers, and communities that couldn't afford air conditioning, bore the brunt.

Reality check #2: In 2019 Clark County generated more greenhouse emissions than the city of Los Angeles, which is home to roughly 1.7 million more people.⁴ A report issued by the county in 2022 attributed about half of the emissions to power used for buildings and industry, while the next biggest share – 37% – was used in transportation. Both of these sectors will only increase as more development takes place, and more commuters hit the roads.

The construction equipment alone is expected to add to emissions so long as the county continues to prioritize growth.⁵

NEVADA'S HOUSING AFFORDABILITY CRISIS

Nevada ranks fourth among all 50 states in the average percentage of income devoted to housing costs, according to a new study by Lending Tree. Here are the top five housing-cost-burdened states, along with the share of income residents have to pay toward a new mortgage:⁶

Hawaii: 39.69%
Montana: 33.80%
California: 33.72%
Nevada: 33.43%
Utah: 33.02%

These numbers do not factor in housing-related costs such as electricity and other utilities. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development considers a household **“housing-cost-burdened”** if it spends more than 30% of its income on housing and utilities.

Like fellow mountain state Montana, Nevada's housing burden is high mainly because of its relatively low income. By contrast, Hawaii and California rank high due to their higher monthly mortgage costs.

Hawaii's monthly mortgage payment of \$3,696 was 1st in the nation, while California came in 2nd at \$3,399. By comparison, Nevada's average monthly payment of \$2,506 was 12th highest, while its monthly income of \$7,497 lands in the middle of the pack, at 24th.

“In a nutshell, it seems like Nevada is attractive enough to entice homebuyers who are willing to spend a good chunk of change on a home, but that industries in the state might not be paying as much as would be ideal for people to keep up with rising housing costs,” said Lending Tree Senior Economist Jacob Channel.⁷

Our take: many of the new homebuyers are retirees from states where incomes are considerably above those paid to native-born Nevadans. The new arrivals have pushed real estate prices beyond the reach of many long-term natives.

GROWTH ETHOS STILL PREVAILS

“We can't say, ‘We are full, you can't come here anymore. We were challenged to find the balance between making more land accessible and providing a relief valve for that urban growth without undermining the quality of life and the resources here.’”⁸

This statement, by Marci Henson, the director of Clark County's Department of Environment and Sustainability, epitomizes the **“business as usual”** attitude of local politicians to the crisis triggered by population growth and climate change.

For Ms. Henson, the key to **“balancing growth and sustainability”** lies in a federal lands bill that would open up more than 36,000 acres of pristine desert now operated by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, to private developers. A new suburb, stretching for miles along the I-15 corridor south of Las Vegas, would replace an arid, pristine landscape, currently dotted with yuccas.

Note: The Southern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act (AKA the “federal lands bill”), was introduced as a discussion draft by U.S. Senator Catherine Cortez Masto (D., Nevada) in 2020.⁹

The area is home to threatened desert tortoises, but the bill will carve out new protected habitat for at-risk species, part of roughly 2 million acres elsewhere in the region that will be set aside as new conservation and recreation areas.

It will also be a boon for local budgets. Funds from those land sales could funnel back to Clark County, to be used to achieve its ambitious climate goals.

Residents of Clark County will need the money. The proposed suburb is miles from Las Vegas, and could add hundreds of new commuters. Paving over natural landscapes with concrete will drive up temperatures and require more air conditioners to keep buildings cool.

The biggest challenge, Henson acknowledges, may be water. The Colorado River basin, which supplies

90% of the region's water, is mired in the worst drought in recorded history. Lake Mead now features an infamous (and ominous) bathtub ring revealing a 150-foot drop in water levels over the past two decades.¹⁰

The Southern Nevada Water Authority's (SNWA) track record is strong: per capita water use in the region declined roughly 47% between 2002 and 2020.¹¹ But water efficiency gains have stalled in recent years, while population growth – AKA the number of “capitas” – is increasing faster than per capita usage is decreasing.

Water agency officials say they have already picked the “**low hanging fruit**” when it comes to conservation, and now they must stretch to realize the harder-to-reach breakthroughs. One such effort: SNWA now pays a \$100 bonus for every new tree planted. Unfortunately, Southern Nevada is losing many of the few trees it has due to extreme heat.¹²

Meanwhile, climate change alone is adding 10 gallons per capita per day to water demand - a 10% increase – according to SNWA officials.¹³

Still, a strong whiff of complacency prevails within the agency:

“Implementing conservation programs successfully are the things that allow me to sleep at night,” says Colby Pelligrino, the deputy general manager of water resources for the SNWA, adding that she wasn't concerned about continued sprawl. A Las Vegas native, she has watched the city grow and change and she sees these shifts as a hallmark of southern Nevada.

“When people think about Las Vegas they think about living in excess, but we have been a world leader in water conservation for at least the last decade and a half,” she said.

“We have got work to do to balance our water use and our demands.”¹⁴

Patrick Donnelly is trying desperately to wake up Ms. Pellegrino. A tortoise biologist and the Great Basin Director for the Center for Biological Diversity,

an environmental advocacy organization, Donnelly has been fighting the lands bill since its inception and has grave concerns about unbridled population growth in southern Nevada.

He doesn't think the region can conserve enough to sustain a new sprawling suburb, more cars, and more concrete in one of the hottest areas in the country. **“It [the lands bill] will perpetuate the same pattern of unsustainable development that brought us to the brink of climate collapse to begin with.”**¹⁵

Donnelly has been pushing lawmakers to channel growth upward rather than outward. **“There's no doubt – Clark County does not have control over demographic shifts,”** he says, **“but they are talking about Las Vegas metastasizing like a tumorous growth outside the valley. The idea that all those people need single-family residences to move into? That is wrong.”**

Reality check #3: You build a new suburb – sustainable or not – they will come.

“There's a gallows humor when you live here, like ‘Ha ha, one day this place is going to be uninhabitable,’” Donnelly says. **“It is a dark joke but actually it is true. One day this place will be uninhabitable. And the question I pose when people say that is, ‘Who gets to leave?’”**

SUMMARY

Nevada is a state in denial.

Decades of breakneck population growth have converted untold acres of desert into urban sprawl.

The driest state in the country is siphoning water from the Colorado River (as are six other states) and being managed by a water system that talks up conservation but is oblivious to the demands of population growth and unexpectedly extreme heat.

While the current situation is wildly out of sync with continued population growth and future-focused sustainability, it is not too late.

But the clock is ticking.

NOTES:

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3. Jeniffer Solis, *Southern Nevada at risk of losing tree shade to extreme heat*, nevadacurrent.com, August 31, 2023.
4. Canon, op. cit.
5. Ibid.
6. Jason Hidalgo, *Study: Nevadans paying a larger share of income on housing than the rest of the U.S.*, Reno Gazette Journal, April 27, 2023.
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8. Canon, op. cit.
9. <https://www.cortezmasto.senate.gov/news/press-releases/cortez-masto-releases-discussion-draft-of-clark-county-lands-bill/>
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
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13. Canon, op. cit.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.



Edwin S. Rubenstein, president of ESR Research, is an experienced business researcher, financial analyst, and economics journalist. He has written extensively on federal tax policy, government waste, the Reagan legacy, and – most recently – on immigration. He is the author of two books: *The Right Data* (1994) and *From the Empire State to the Vampire State: New York in a Downward Transition* (with Herbert London, 1994). His essays on public policy have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Investor's Business Daily*, *Newsday*, and *National Review*. His TV appearances include *Firing Line*, *Bill Moyers*, *McNeil-Lehr*, *CNBC*, and *Debates-Debates*. Mr. Rubenstein has a B.A. from Johns Hopkins and a graduate degree in economics from Columbia University.



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