Postmodern Pastiche as Urban Culture

Postmodernists employ terms such as fragmentation and pastiche to describe the dizzying, often bizarre contrasts of everyday life or the implosion of diverse cultural influences in contemporary society. Our discussion here of living in Las Vegas certainly seems to fit this characterization, even though other communities also have experienced rapid growth and change. Casino gambling and large themed commercial spaces have spread across the nation as well (Gottdiener 1997). The result is that Las Vegas also may be seen as a unique combination of the exotic and the mundane that increasingly typifies the postmodern urban environment in the nation as a whole. As progressively more downtowns emulate Las Vegas, American urban culture will be characterized more and more by hype, themed environments, glitzy archi-tainment, and perhaps even casino gambling.

8 Local Politics and Community Interests

Recent literature on urban affairs yields the overriding conclusion that big-business interests play the tune to which all others must dance. This was not always so obvious, however. During the prosperous 1950s and 1960s, under a succession of liberal, or at least moderate, governments at all levels across the country, unions and community interests were successful at negotiating both the tenor and pace of growth so that resources were channeled towards satisfying social as well as economic needs. One of the major beneficiaries of this "corporate liberal" phase of urban history was the public school system, including higher education, which enjoyed generous government support for the expansion and upgrading of both physical plants and academic programs. Another beneficiary was county and municipal planning, which received federal support for slum clearance, highway construction and housing renovation. It was thus during this period that the interests of big business, while still dominant, were at least moderated by the influence of local citizens and non-business organizations in their quest for the public good.

By the 1970s, with the onset of deindustrialization and fiscal crises percolating through every level of government, community and public needs were largely ignored, and unions faced massive job losses. Many states also enacted tax cuts in a wave of conservatism. As a result, county and municipal governments also suffered cutbacks in revenues, payrolls, and programs. A great wailing of city souls was heard throughout urban America as community resources of all kinds suffered for lack of funding. With local urban economies reeling under the impact of declines in manufacturing, the specter of job loss, and shrinkage of the tax base, politicians responded by catering to business. Henceforth, in most metropolitan regions, the dominance of private-sector interests in defining the public agenda became increasingly prevalent.

In this context, it is tempting to characterize local Las Vegas politics as simply an extreme case of domination by the major industry in town – casino gambling. In fact, area politics has long been stereotyped by the national media in this manner. To be sure, when it comes to Las Vegas, legalized gambling is the "goose that lays the golden egg" and the needs of casino owner/operators have historically shaped the priorities of local government. Yet, it would be a mistake to subscribe to this one-dimensional view today, especially because it is based on an equally erroneous assumption that the gambling industry is a monolithic enterprise. Rather, the major corporate casino interests compete fiercely among themselves for their share of Las Vegas' multi-billion-dollar gambling/tourism profits. Further, as the metropolitan region has increased in population and matured as a place of permanent residence, a number of other local constituencies, both business and community-oriented, together constitute an increasingly complex political environment in the Las Vegas Valley. In this chapter we will provide an examination of this new political scene as further evidence of the normalization process in Las Vegas.

The Framework of State and Local Politics

Nevada has a bi-cameral structure of governance with a state senate and an assembly. Carson City, in the northern area of the state, is the capitol. Because of its location, northern interests have historically dominated the state legislature. In southern Nevada, Clark County comprises nearly 8,000 square miles and contains more than two-thirds of the state's population, generating more than 70 percent of its revenues as well. While an appearance of political equality has been created as numerical representation has slowly evolved, with 13 of the current 21 state senators representing Clark County and 26 of 42 assembly representatives also from the south, the county's share of political power in the state still lags behind its percentage of population and revenues. One reason for this results from the impact the state capitol's location has on political seniority. Every two years, southern legislators must leave their homes, families, and businesses for at least five months to live in motels more than 300 miles from home. The resulting personal and financial toll means that southern politicians rarely serve the lengthy terms in office required to attain seniority. Thus northern Nevada legislators, who can live at home during the sessions, find it easier to serve longer careers in the legislature – building seniority and the power that comes with it. In addition to the north–south split, the conflict between the more populous urban counties and the economically strapped, rural "cow counties" also plays a significant role in Nevada's politics. The rural counties have historically been a powerful force in state government, as much of the

state's land is classified as "frontier" and the vast majority is federally owned.

Traditionally, southern Nevada's power has been manifested more at the federal than the state level, with much federal largesse over the years going to the south (see chapter 1). Today, both United States senators are from Clark County, although its congressional representatives are split between the north and south. While the bulk of Clark County constitutes Nevada's first congressional district, 30 percent of the county, along with the rest of the state, comprise the second congressional district, suggesting that Clark County's voters should have more impact on that district. Also, following the 2000 Census, it is expected that Nevada will obtain a third congressional seat due to its enormous population growth.

In Nevada, the spatial divide between north and south has always been more salient to political debates than party ideology. Historically, Nevada has been ruled by the Democrats. Since the Depression-era administration of Franklin Roosevelt, powerful Nevada Democrats, like Senator Pat McCarran, have played an important role in obtaining federal funds for the state. Although Republican Paul Laxalt enjoyed influence during the Reagan Administration, when he retired he was replaced by a Democrat, Harry Reid. In this sense, Nevada politics parallels that in California, where public officials at the national level have run a well-oiled machine for most of the twentieth century. The interesting difference is that, at least since World War II, California's power has been based on its population, while Nevada and other southwestern states that have received federal support have benefited more from the shrewdness and seniority of their senators and congressmen.

Nevada Democrats, because of the state's frontier heritage and the influence of the gambling industry, have strongly opposed government regulatory intervention, like their Republican counterparts, in Nevada and elsewhere. Senator McCarran set this tone with a hands-off policy, championing localism and opposition to government oversight. Somewhat hypocritically, at the same time, McCarran actively lobbied for every conceivable type of government assistance and program, including nuclear bomb testing, as a means of developing the region's economy. In short, Nevada Democrats traditionally have behaved more like Republicans in actively resisting all forms of federal government regulation. Yet, at the same time, they have aggressively pursued federal funds of all kinds. In this sense Nevada Democrats more closely resemble southern "Dixiecrats," who also displayed a penchant for anti-regulatory sentiments while promoting their own special interests.

At the city and county levels, a distinctive hybrid of structural features also characterizes local politics. Chapter 1 described the way city government was reformed by progressive principles. Yet, despite instituting a professional city-manager type of municipal governance, the city also retains an elected mayor and an elected city council in a ward system. Because of Nevadans' traditional support for limited government, the mayor and city council members are paid to serve only part-time by law, making local politics in southern Nevada appear to be something of an avocation. For example, in 1998, Ward One, the west urban-core area, was represented by a police officer, Michael McDonald; Ward Two, the southwest suburban section, by Arnie Adamsen, who worked for a real-estate title company; while Ward Three, the east-central section that also includes the Westside, had a barber, Gary Reese, as its councilman. The only exception was in Ward Four, the northwest area, where Larry Brown, an ex-baseball player and Harvard graduate, quit a lucrative position as a Water Authority executive to serve full-time when elected in 1997. And an independently wealthy, former auto-dealership and grocery-chain owner, Jan Laverty Jones, served as Mayor, also a part-time position, elected at-large by city voters in all four wards.

A similarly limited government also operates Clark County, which is run by a board of seven commissioners, chosen in separate district elections, with the chair rotated among them. They, too, are paid to serve on a part-time basis. In a community of 1.3 million residents, the bulk of commission business involves running local government and providing services and infrastructure. The tourist industry occupies a major part of the agenda concerning county affairs, as competing casino interests battle regularly for commission approval of expansions, licensing, access roads, parking, and various sorts of other permits. The power of the casino/resort industry also is illustrated by its role in the history of the development of McCarran International Airport (see chapter 2), long supported by the commission despite negative environmental and residential impact, because it brings millions of vacationers to the region.

Interests and Dominance in the Political Process

While key economic interests have dominated the Las Vegas region throughout its history, there have been a succession of business elites over time, with one group replacing another as a consequence of changing economic fortunes. Ranching in the early 1800s gave way to mining and railroad interests, by the turn of the century, that directed

the town's development as a commercial center. Between the 1930s and 1950s, a number of local businessmen dominated the region, although growth was due largely to massive federal government spending, first for dam construction and later for the war effort. By the 1950s, however, casino gambling interests rose to the top and their concerns have largely defined the agenda of city and county politics up to the present time.

As discussed previously, two distinct trends are today changing the face of local politics. First, multinational corporations are gaining increasing control of the casino/resort industry, although there remain a few prominent individual players, such as Steve Wynn and Sheldon Adelson. The large corporate enterprises appear to be less concerned with the day-to-day operations of city and county government than were the individual owners of the past, although there are exceptions, and remaining individual owners continue to be very visible in local politics. Secondly, as metropolitanization has proceeded, massive population growth has fostered the appearance of several non-gaming and non-business interest groups within the permanent resident population. Together these two trends have produced a more typical American local political scene, greatly removed from the outdated, stereotypical view of Las Vegas as a company town. To be sure, the needs of the gambling and tourism industries still come first in the Las Vegas Valley, yet even these are often racked by internal conflicts among themselves and, increasingly, diverse local residential constituencies are making their interests felt – and their needs often differ from those of big business. Consequently, local politics is much more complex and conflictual than in the past.

While a complex political environment characterizes metropolitan regions across the US, not just in Las Vegas, some urban sociologists prefer to reduce this picture to a simplistic clash between business interests, on the one hand, and residents, on the other. This has been conceptualized, for example, as a one-dimensional dichotomy pitting the needs of "use value" against "exchange value" (see Logan and Molotch 1988). Such an argument is disappointing and misleading, as we will show. Not only does it ignore the importance of image and symbols, i.e., "sign value", in the promotion of place, a major force in Las Vegas' history, but it fails to capture the complex way both use value and exchange value cut across interests in both the business and resident communities. The characteristic produced by the process of normalization is, in fact, the richness and shifting nature of local political interests as both business and residents adjust to rapid growth.

Competing Elites

Intra-Industry Competition

The aspect of local Las Vegas politics most neglected by outside commentators is the fact that the gambling/tourist industry does not speak with a singular voice. Rather, the industry is more accurately described as one composed of various competing factions operating in the region, as outlined in chapter 1. Many of their battles are waged at the level of county politics, where Steve Wynn's Mirage Resorts Inc. is perhaps the dominant player in the field, as the largest property-taxpayer in the county in 1998. Mirage Resorts runs an efficient political machine, providing major contributions to local, state, and national campaigns. The company also boasts a polling facility run by a skilled political consultant, and a get-out-the-vote phone operation. The nearly 20,000 Mirage corporation employees are strongly urged to vote and political candidates supported by Wynn have been allowed to address resort employees on company time. Wynn's Mirage Resorts' effectiveness at the city level was demonstrated when it became the first business in the Las Vegas metropolitan area to permanently occupy and close a busy urban street – Carson Street downtown.

A major Strip competitor is Sheldon Adelson, owner of the Sands Expo Center, who is building the $2.8-billion Venetian down the road from the Bellagio. Adelson has forcefully injected himself into the local political scene, largely as the result of his ongoing battle with the local Culinary Union over his not pledging to open the Venetian as a union shop. In 1996, he provided significant financial backing to help a political neophyte, Metro police officer Lance Malone, unseat longtime county commissioner Paul Christensen, in an outrageously expensive contest where a total of $1.44 million was spent by the two candidates for a part-time position that pays $54,000 a year. As political consultant Dan Hart observed: "It has more to do with how much power they'll have than how much they'll be paid. The influence local officials have over all sorts of segments of the community and the economy is significant" (Zapler 1997c). Since the county commission makes decisions that directly affect the operations of the billion-dollar resorts on the Strip, the resort giants want to have the ear of county commissioners in seeking advantages concerning various county requirements, gaining approval for expansion plans, and influencing infrastructure decisions that affect their properties. This is backroom politics of the old style, familiar in many cities run by business elites.

But Adelson only represents himself, and big money is no longer as effective as it once was. In the 1998 elections he spent $2 million in a failed attempt to place three candidates on the county commission. His Committee for Fairness funded a television blitz campaign, viciously attacking two incumbent commissioners and a state assemblyman running for a vacant seat, all of whom he felt favored the Culinary Union. Governor Bob Miller charged that the action mocked the spirit of campaign reform he'd championed in his decade as governor: "In my over 40 years in Nevada, and 25 years in public office, I have never seen a more egregious campaign tactic than I've seen by the so-called Committee for Fairness" (Freiss 1998). Both Wynn and Adelson as the "big players," therefore, have experienced their political failures in the increasingly open local political process.

Figure 8.1 Opening night at the Bellagio, 1998

One issue, in particular, brought the owners of several major resorts into conflict with each other, placing the county commission in the middle. In 1994, when the MGM and Luxor added thousands of hotel rooms at the intersection of Las Vegas Boulevard and Tropicana Avenue, the county built four pedestrian walkways, at a cost of $12 million, to elevate pedestrian traffic above the busy roadways in order to resolve problems of pedestrian safety and traffic flow. Subsequently, when the massive Bellagio project was announced at the congested intersection of Flamingo Road and the Strip, the county sought to build the same type of structure there. What followed was a three-year battle over its design and location among the Bellagio, Caesars Palace, Bally's, the Barbary Coast, and the Flamingo Hilton. Mirage Resorts started the conflict by claiming it didn't want the visual aesthetics of its billion-dollar Bellagio negated by the bridges, suggesting a much costlier tunnel system as an alternative. After the county had spent more than a million taxpayer dollars on design plans for the $28.8-million tunnel, Caesars Palace and Bally's refused to pay the higher price for what they claimed would be a dangerous and difficult-to-maintain system. Mirage Resorts responded by offering to pay the difference for the cost of one tunnel if the others would split the costs of the remaining three walkways.

Finally, in December 1997, Bellagio, Caesars Palace, and Bally's agreed to privately design and build the south and west bridges at the intersection, which were completed by October 1998 when the Bellagio opened. However, even after the Bellagio's debut, the 3,000-room Flamingo Hilton and the 200-room Barbary Coast were still locked in a battle over which of them would front the location where the $8-million north and east bridges touch down.

Another costly battle between two major resort giants was fought for ten years between Harrah's and the adjacent Sands, now the site of the Venetian, over cooperatively building a driveway between their two properties. While a driveway sounds like a small matter, the unresolved issue came within days of halting construction on the $2.8-billion Venetian. Only after years of meetings, negotiations, and litigation between the two resorts and the county was a plan for a $3-million access road between the resorts finally agreed upon.

Yet another major battle, waged in front of the county commission, between two gaming giants, this time Caesars Palace and the Mirage, gained national media coverage. This dispute involved county construction of a much-needed service road to access the back entries to the resorts west of the Strip. In the process, a casino tower expansion, the pedestrian overpass/tunnel project, and a cross-town arterial were held hostage. County commissioner Bruce Woodbury warned attorneys for the two resorts that "what's at stake here is important to the community and is more important than these two properties" (Schweers 1997a). When the county first proposed the frontage road plan, Caesars readily agreed to donate a $500-million section of its property. Caesars later discovered that Mirage Resorts wanted to make a deal with the county to obtain the air rights so that it could build a monorail linking its Mirage resort with the Bellagio, bypassing Caesars Palace in between. Caesars angrily protested against such private use by a competitor over land that it was donating to the county, and wanted to maintain its right of refusal on use of the air rights. Caesars was willing to donate the air rights for a *public* people-mover system, but not for a competitor to construct a *private* transportation system. The county commission retaliated by holding hostage its approval for a 14-story 702-room tower and parking garage at Caesars Palace that would bring $2.6 million in annual room taxes to the county and $1 million in property taxes. The county claimed that it was prepared to spend more than $4 million in taxpayer funds to condemn the Caesars land in a process that could potentially have delayed all the projects for years. The Mirage weighed in with an implied threat that it would not donate land to the county from the old Dunes property to build the Harmon Road connection.

Finally, in June 1998, Caesars agreed only to donate the land. Their tower project was approved and Caesars then agreed to pay $2 million towards the pedestrian overpass. Even after this truce, any further move by the county to transfer air rights to a competitor for private transit development would probably end up in the District Court. The *Wall Street Journal* took notice when Bally's chairman Arthur Goldberg entered the fray with a letter to the county, criticizing its "unseemly, forcible governmental extraction . . . for the apparent purpose of conveying them to a competitor to use for a private people mover system" (Schweers 1997b). ITT Corporation president Rand Araskog also wrote to the Clark County commission, criticizing the county vote to hold the tower project hostage and bringing further national media focus on the clash of the casino titans, with the county commission in the middle.

The gambling industry presents a much more united front, however, when it comes to state politics, especially concerning proposals to increase legalized gambling taxes. Mirage Resorts chairman Steve Wynn won a major personal victory in the state legislature when he secured a special tax break for the art collection he gathered for Bellagio. The 1997 legislature passed a law exempting part of the 7 percent state sales tax for residents who buy art worth more than $25,000. The measure was introduced and passed just as Wynn began purchasing a $300-million-dollar collection that includes works by Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet, Cézanne, Gauguin, Matisse, and Renoir. It was estimated that Wynn and Mirage Resorts Inc. would save an estimated $15 million in sales taxes in the first year alone, along with an annual property-tax exemption of nearly $3 million (Associated Press 1998). A condition was that the art be publicly displayed for 20 hours a week, 35 weeks a year for free to the public. Characteristically, Wynn immediately challenged the State Tax Commission's ruling refusing to allow him to charge a fee for taxpaying citizens to view the works.

Instead, a $10 per person fee was instituted for viewing the art when the Bellagio opened and Wynn did not file for tax exemption, so that he could charge the public.

Another controversy arose when concessions were awarded for the $197-million D-Gate terminal at McCarran Airport (see chapter 2). In 1998, as the new terminal opened at the airport, the State Ethics Commission investigated four of the seven county commissioners to ascertain whether ethics laws were violated in granting the lucrative concession contracts. A number of the people awarded the highly sought-after contracts for "disadvantaged" businesses were well known in the community, including a former Reagan and Bush communications director who was a partner with the daughter of a former airport director, Bob Broadbent. From a pool of 66 applicants, the 13 successful candidates included all 10 names on a list prepared by commission Chair Yvonne Atkinson Gates. She and fellow-commissioner Lance Malone subsequently were found guilty of violating state ethics laws, Gates on six counts and Malone on three. Gates's long-time friend and political consultant was given two concessions, and a close friend who had done political fundraising for the commissioner was granted two coffee kiosks, expected to earn profits of $500,000 per year (Morrison 1998a). It was the second time County Commission Chair Gates had been found guilty of ethics violations in less than a year. Malone sponsored the names of his wife's long-time friend (who received two business approvals), and his brother's boss. Although the awards process was supposed to be free of political cronyism, making the very creation of a list a violation of the process, the situation was exacerbated when Gates gave the list to the county manager, who then passed it on through the Aviation Director to the master concessionaire in charge of the screening process. The master concessionaire for retail business testified that "he accepted the list from the commissioners and ordered his staff to make sure those names made it as a final recommendation" (Morrison 1998a). No fines were levied, however, because the Ethics Commission could not determine that the actions were willful.

An FBI investigation was subsequently conducted on the airport contract award process, while the commission decided not to void the contracts because "they faced more liability in revoking the contracts than they would in defending a lawsuit filed by an unsuccessful applicant" (Morrison 1998b). The situation raised several troubling issues in the community, and a prominent local newspaper columnist, a lifelong resident of the community, reflected a widespread sentiment: "It has taken months, but thanks to the Ethics Commission I now remember the true definition of the word disadvantaged. It means, 'Any poor sucker who isn't tight with a county commissioner' " (J. L. Smith 1998b). While this situation is hardly unique to Las Vegas, it paints the entire county commission in a negative light and damages commissioners' public credibility as they engage in the vitally important work of providing services and infrastructure for the rapidly growing community. This and other incidents illustrate the weak nature of limited government, which we will discuss in the next chapter.

Suburban Interests

The overwhelming majority of the population in Clark County resides in suburban communities of single-family homes, like the American population as a whole. And, like other Americans, residents are concerned about traffic, crime, education, medical care, taxes, and the environment. Many live in communities that have defined themselves in opposition to the Las Vegas casino image, while enjoying the industry's subsidization of their tax benefits. A growing number also oppose the opening of casinos in residential neighborhoods (see chapter 7). Their dissatisfaction with highways, traffic jams, and increasing commute times that have resulted from the rapid population growth has been translated into political pressure to deal with the infrastructure needs of that growth as the number-one priority in the region. This interest is separate from the "business first" ethos traditional for local government and represents a major instance of normalization.

Suburban Las Vegas residents are also concerned about maintaining the value of their property and consequently are seeking greater autonomy from the general population, preferring to break down large county districts into smaller, and therefore more segregated, units. For example, some claim that the Clark County School District, the nation's ninth largest, and a model of regional consolidation, should be broken up into smaller zones servicing individual communities with their own school boards (see below). Thus, as disaggregation and local community home rule increasingly characterize suburban political concerns, they present a challenge to the traditional machine of county politicians. The many issues of concern to local residents will be discussed in the second half of this chapter, as it is this conflict between public versus business needs that constitutes the principal contradiction at the core of the normalization process, as we shall see shortly.

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Seniors

As discussed in chapter 4, seniors comprise a rapidly growing segment of the region's permanent population. Seniors are a potent political force nationally because they follow issues and have a high voter-turnout rate, and southern Nevada is no exception. In a November 1996 local election, for example, while the average turnout rate for all of Clark County was 56.3 percent, rates for the two precincts in the retirement community of Sun City were 87.9 and 88.5 percent. Additionally, seniors are becoming a potent political force in Las Vegas in terms of sheer demographics. In the same election, 141,565 registered Clark County voters were over age 55, constituting nearly one-third of the total.

One of the reasons for the active involvement of seniors in politics is the fact that many live on fixed incomes. This makes them highly sensitive as a group to public issues that affect tax rates and other forms of municipal indebtedness. Another factor sparking senior involvement in Las Vegas politics is the presence of both public and private programs that have established a number of community senior centers. Many centers are located in lower-income neighborhoods, such as the Las Vegas Senior Center located one block north of City Hall, and the Howard Cannon Senior Center in the east-central section of the city. These centers offer a wide variety of services to the elderly, including a convenient meeting place for the mobilization of political interests, which the general population lacks.

Class differences between the indigenous aging population and the large number of seniors who move to southern Nevada to retire also has potentially significant consequences for the local political process. A large percentage of the long-time resident senior population were employees in the local service sector. Many of them were minimum-hourly-wage employees who relied on tip income and do not have substantial pensions or retirement-program options. For these individuals, retirement is a financial struggle from the start. On the other hand, retirees who relocate to southern Nevada from other areas are usually much wealthier, with average retirement incomes of $30,000 and average estates valued at more than $300,000 (see chapter 4). Many have sold their previous homes and are able to pay cash for their retirement homes in Las Vegas, exemplified by the fact that the majority of homes sold in Sun City were bought with cash. This economic split among Las Vegas retirees has significant implications for the local political process, where long-time residents who might be predisposed to support local bond issues out of a sense of commitment to the community may be forced to vote "no" because of their personal financial situation. Meanwhile, the more affluent newcomers, more able to afford bond issues, might vote against them because they may have few personal ties to the community. This is especially likely to be the case for those who reside in planned communities where many amenities are provided, making them less dependent upon municipal services for parks and other infrastructure.

Clark County seniors' propensity to vote has been supplemented by other forms of political action. Seniors, along with other well-established homeowners, for example, protested against a proposed widening of US Highway 95, which would require the removal of 175 homes, 115 apartments, and 21 businesses. The alternative is to expand the highway over an archeological site of one of the earliest Las Vegas settlements. Many of the homes in the affected area were occupied by seniors who had lived there for decades and who had paid off their mortgages. For them, losing a home would be losing a way of life. The group's vocal protest was aired nationally on NBC's *Today* program on April 7, 1997.

During the 1997 state legislature, the Nevada Seniors Coalition also opposed passage of a proposal to raise the Clark County sales tax by ¼ percent to pay for water and sewage-system expansions. The $1.8-billion expansion of the Water Authority's aging water-delivery system, or "second straw," was designed to provide a more reliable alternative means of delivering water from Lake Mead and to accommodate new growth (see below). The Nevada Senior Coalition's president expressed the group's concerns: "Our position is that growth should pay directly for growth, which is what this expansion is about. Average workers and people on fixed incomes shouldn't have to pay for somebody else's new buildings" (S. Greene 1997d). Another growth-related public-funding issue is schools. A major school bond campaign was run by the Clark County School District (CCSD) in 1994 to pass a two-part, $905-million school-bond issue. The bond issue was perceived by many Las Vegans as a way to make existing residents pay to construct schools in developing areas of the community for newcomers, while older area schools were neglected. Seniors in Sun City were just emerging as a political force and they, too, opposed the bond issue, as did seniors living in older Las Vegas neighborhoods who also would not benefit directly. As a result, the first half of the bond issue, which involved a rollover of $605-million bonds issued in 1988 and thus no increase in taxes, was approved. However, voters rejected the $300-million bond that would have required an increase in taxes. For a later school-bond issue, in 1996, the CCSD paid special attention to seniors, campaigning heavily in Sun City and at senior centers across the valley. The $643-million school bond was passed by a slim margin.

A large population of retirees thus can have a tremendous impact on the social structure of a community. Their tendency to vote against growth-related bond issues in rapidly growing Las Vegas has not, however, applied to library bonds. Most, especially the more affluent recent in-migrants, seem to feel that libraries offer them ongoing services that schools do not. Critics also note that the rapidly growing senior population also has the potential to place a tremendous burden on the local healthcare system and could eventually crush the state budget with rising Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security expenses.

The City of Las Vegas versus Clark County

Ever since the 1940s, when the El Rancho Vegas, the Last Frontier, and the Flamingo Hotel opened on Las Vegas Boulevard outside the city limits to avoid city taxes and codes, there has been a split power structure in the Las Vegas Valley, as downtown casino interests did not always have the same goals as the county resorts on the Strip. As the latter area has become increasingly more successful, competition between these two poles of the casino economy has intensified. At the same time, the city of Las Vegas has seen businesses fleeing the inner city for locations in the newer areas, forcing it to fight to retain its economic base.

Tensions between the two geographical bases of local political power thus have been high and many of the city government's efforts to compete with Clark County have caused concern among local taxpayers. As elsewhere, business flight to the suburbs is fought by the city in the form of subsidies to businesses that choose to remain in the downtown area. This form of competition, however, is looked on by some as extortion. For example, in 1997, the city paid dearly, in the form of a $5.7-million-dollar grant to "a downtown bank that threatened to flee to the suburbs unless it got the cash" (Zapler 1997a). Critics called the action a shameful example of corporate welfare, while city officials responded that the action would bring a new $57-million, 13-story class-A office building along with associated businesses with hundreds of employees to the downtown area. They also estimated that the Sun Plaza would bring $450,000 per year in property taxes to city coffers. Nevada State Bank officials cited the $5.7-million figure as the difference in their costs of building downtown rather than in Green Valley or Summerlin. The start of work on the futuristic-looking building took place in 1998, making it the first privately owned major office structure built in the downtown area in seventeen years.

City–county competition extends beyond the gaming and business areas, as the city has aggressively made deals to annex suburban development such as the Lakes, Desert Shores, and Summerlin (see chapter 5). Yet, these arrangements point to the growing crisis of the central business core and the threats it poses to the city's tax base. While this is a dilemma faced by many declining inner cities across the nation, in Las Vegas it primarily takes place in the form of competition between the city and the county. As in many other disputes, this spatial split in the power structure is a major factor in local politics.

Casino Owners versus Real-Estate Developers

Traditionally, the most influential groups on the local political scene have been the casino owners and other local business operators. In dealing with local government, as seen above, casino interests are often less a unified voice than fierce competitors, as the major corporations and prominent individual owners battle for a larger share of gambling and tourism dollars. Intense struggles between resort giants over approvals for expansions and licensing, access roads, property air rights, and pedestrian overpasses are fought regularly in city council and county commission meetings.

As normalization has progressed, a second political force in the business community has emerged, namely the growing power of residential and commercial real-estate developers in the local economy. Their interests have coincided with those of suburban residents to create a force that is often in opposition to the gambling/tourism industry. As elsewhere, developers rely heavily for their success on local-government decision-makers who control land use. In the city of Las Vegas alone, applications for single-family homebuilding permits surpassed 500 a month in 1998, giving some indication of the pace of growth. The city issued more than 7,000 permits in the first five months of 1998 for single-family homes, apartments, commercial and public buildings, together valued at $490.6 million. More complex are the applications for re-zoning of land parcels, which may require the granting of a variation in the regional land-use scheme. Re-zonings often are based as much on political influence as on the particular merits of the case (Gottdiener 1977). In 1997 alone there were hundreds of re-zonings in the unincorporated areas of Clark County, many in what were previously isolated parcels.

Although developers and casino owners both push for growth, they are often interested in different aspects, leading to political conflict. Casino owners seek to maximize the tourist trade and want local government to support the tourist infrastructure, especially its air and surface transportation routes. Real-estate developers, on the other hand, seek government infrastructure improvements for residences, especially water delivery, sewage hookups, spending on education, and re-zonings for commercial development. Funding these public activities often places casino and real-estate developers on separate sides of heated fiscal arguments, framed generally in terms of the persistent controversy over who should bear the costs for rapid growth in the region (see below).

In sum, while it is true that local politics in Las Vegas, like other metropolitan regions, is dominated by business interests, it is by no means the case that these are unified into a single governing elite, nor is it true that business alone shapes the public agenda. As a consequence of massive population growth across Clark County, a number of other political issues and interests have emerged, including the needs of suburban residents, the special perspective of senior citizens, and the growing power of real-estate developers. Even the powerful consortium of casino owners is often split between the downtown operators and those on the Strip, and among those within the Strip. In the next section we shall discuss the major political issues facing the Las Vegas region, emphasizing how these various interests sometimes cooperate and sometimes compete with one another to make public administration in Las Vegas an exceedingly complex task.

Political Issues in the Rapidly Growing Region

In 1996, "Las Vegas approved more building permits per 1,000 population than any other city in the country" (Timmons 1996: 9) and, as we have seen, the pace of growth has not diminished since then. Over the past thirty years, Las Vegas has undergone a profound transition from a single-industry-dominated, good-old-boy frontier town to one of the largest metropolitan regions in the United States, with a diverse population approaching 1.3 million and an increasingly diversified economy. The ever-increasing permanent resident population of middle-class, suburban home dwellers has greatly complicated the issues of local politics because they are concerned, like citizens elsewhere, with traffic, crime, schools, taxes, and the value of their property. Most prominent in the eyes of many residents are transportation infrastructure problems that produce congested highways and increasing commuting times. There is also a similar concern when quiet suburban streets become major thoroughfares, and with developers transforming space adjacent to homes into shopping centers or, in some cases, neighborhood casinos. These pressing infrastructure concerns over development and quality-of-life issues are further complicated by the question of who will pay for them.

Infrastructure Crises

As we noted earlier, new developments require streets, water lines, sewer lines, and connecting roads. Communities also need parks, public transportation, cultural centers, and schools. Yet, as one local city planner noted, local government often allows developers to build before adequate public services are in place: "What they do is build, and then we catch up" (Hynes 1997). Summerlin has been an exception, having spent millions on infrastructure before any homes were built. However, even there the infrastructure impact spread beyond the community's boundaries when an additional traffic burden was placed on US Highway 95 as the community developed and others sprouted up around it. Also, as the availability of large parcels of land decreases in the valley, this scale of pre-planning is likely to be done less often. Alternatively, some infrastructure needs are paid for by homebuyers and developers. In 1998, the local Homebuilders Association estimated that homebuyers were paying $25,000 to $30,000 of the purchase price for property improvements, hookups, and impact fees, with water connection costs alone for newly constructed housing tripling from 1996 to 1998. Those who live in communities with Special Improvement Districts (SIDs) pay even more, with all these costs added to the price of a home.

The 1997 State Legislature considered a quarter-cent sales tax increase in Clark County to fund a $1.8-billion proposal by Southern Nevada Water Authority to double the water system capacity in the Las Vegas Valley, known locally as the "second straw" project. Funding the project quickly became a lightning rod for discontent even as construction began, as long-time residents balked at the idea of paying to support projected growth. The Nevada Taxpayers' Association, for example, complained that the county already had plenty of money to pay for infrastructure needs, but was wasting much of it, and the Nevada Seniors' Coalition also opposed passage of the expansion.

The 26-year-old system broke down for the first time in February 1997, while the legislature was considering the funding issue, leaving the area on an emergency back-up system for days. According to the Water Authority's general manager: "At this point, Southern

Nevada's water supply is not secure; 1.2 million people are dependent on one single pipeline with no backup should anything go wrong. Imagine this valley in the month of July, temperatures between 110 and 115 degrees, and there not being any water for three or four days. ... What would this community look like?" (S. Greene 1997b).

The state legislature authorized the ¼ percent increase in the sales tax in Clark County but, fearful of jeopardizing their re-election chances with tax-conscious voters, passed the responsibility to enact the increase on to the Clark County commission, which required a supermajority vote of 5 out of 7 to impose the tax. Three commissioners, two of them up for re-election in 1998, voted to pass along the decision to levy the tax increase to an advisory vote of the people in fall 1998, when 72 percent of the voters approved the increase, making Nevada the only western state to seriously consider funding water projects through a sales tax. Among other rapidly growing western municipalities, Los Angeles is paying for $3.9 billion in water improvements through water-rate hikes, Denver is funding $470 million in upgrades through water rates and connection fees, and the Arizona Department of Water Resources is paying its $2.2-billion share of the Central Arizona Project with ground-water pumping taxes and a property-tax hike.

This water-delivery funding crisis prompted some officials to talk of privatizing the water supply in the region and setting up competition as a mechanism of controlling costs, though others are pessimistic that such a plan would be effective. Although the debate mirrors other struggles over infrastructure needs, when it comes to the water supply, most people believe that increasing the price of water for users would be the strongest conservation tool.

The Las Vegas Valley has other infrastructure needs as well, estimated to total $10 billion over the next decade. County sanitation officials claim that they "need $1.3 billion in new tanks, pipes and treatment processes beginning in 2003 to meet demands of growth and to keep up with increasingly stringent environmental standards" (S. Greene 1997b). Sewage treatment standards in the Las Vegas Valley are especially stringent because effluent empties into Lake Mead, a federally protected body of water, which then flows via the Colorado River across national borders into Mexico (see below).

A 1997 newspaper poll found that 37 percent of residents rate the need for improving roads and transportation infrastructure to relieve traffic congestion as the most important priority for the future (S. Greene 1997b). The state alone has authorized spending $37.5 million on road-construction projects in Clark County in 1998. Also in 1998, the federal government, via the Intermodal Surface

Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), gave Nevada the largest amount ever, $1.1 billion over six years. Nevadans will get back $1.14 for new roads and improvements for every $1 paid into the highway trust fund. The most expensive road-construction project in the state is underway at the Spaghetti Bowl, the name given the bewildering maize of narrow lanes that entwine where Interstate 15 and US Highway 95 intersect. The downtown interchange was built in the 1960s for a population of little more than 200,000, but by 1998, an estimated 310,000 cars traveled through the intersection each day. A multi-phase upgrade begun in the mid-1990s will ultimately cost $200 million and will take several years to complete, while at least four more Spaghetti Bowl projects, totaling almost $100 million, are awaiting funding. Dozens of other road projects, including a beltway around the valley, also are being constructed with Regional Transportation funds.

The ongoing battle over infrastructure in the Las Vegas Valley mirrors the national anti-tax sentiment that began in California with Proposition 13 in 1978, as long-time residents of rapidly growing communities resent having to subsidize growth. While some long-term residents want higher fees on new housing to pay for growth, this ignores the fact that existing residents move within a community to larger homes as families grow or as income level allows and renters of modest means save to purchase their first homes.

The issue of "who pays for growth" also divides developer and tourism-industry interests, despite their common pro-growth orientation. Residential developers prefer sales taxes as a solution because additional housing fees would hurt the construction industry. Also, Nevada has no state income tax, in part because of the revenues paid by gamblers and other tourists through hotel, gaming, and sales taxes. However, the casino/resort owners view additional levies on their own industry, in the form of increased gaming and room taxes, with concern and continue to spend vast resources lobbying the legislature to prevent them. They have an unlikely ally in the senior population, which also opposes the idea of an increase in the sales tax. Consequently, the position that new residents should pay for growth often conflicts with the notion that infrastructure should be funded by tourists in the form of increased gaming, room, and sales taxes.

Controversy over the issues of growth, infrastructure costs, and funding sources was prominently displayed in the 1997 Ward 4 elections, in the burgeoning northwest section of the city. Some residents of the new Summerlin community were appalled to discover that plans were proposed for a casino site adjacent to their multi-million-dollar custom homes on the Tournament Players Club golf course. The incumbent councilman, Matthew Callister, an attorney and former state legislator, was charged with receiving campaign financing from the casino/gambling industry, while the challenger, Water Authority executive Larry Brown, was accused of having "established close ties with Las Vegas developers" because he had previously served on the Planning Commission (Zapler 1997b). While Brown won the election in an upset by a narrow 63-vote margin, the anti-development versus anti-neighborhood gambling-issue framed the candidates' conflict.

Few politicians in any large metropolitan community are able to conduct expensive campaigns without contributions from business, but as elsewhere, capitalists are divided by factions that often compete with each other politically as well as economically. The cost of this campaign for a part-time city council position that pays $35,416 per year was $750,000, with Brown raising $300,000 and Callister $450,000 (Zapler 1997c). The enormous sums spent on local campaigns such as this one and the county commission race discussed earlier are simply indications of the critical importance of local government in Las Vegas for both developers and the casino/gambling industry.

The Politics of Growth

Concerns about rising infrastructure needs also have led many residents to question the rapid growth that has made Las Vegas the sprawling metropolis it is today. A poll conducted locally in 1997 found that 71 percent of them were unhappy with the county's performance in handling growth; 89 percent of the survey respondents also felt that continued growth at the current pace of six times the national average was too fast, and two-thirds of them felt that growth controls were necessary "to avoid traffic congestion, preserve undeveloped areas and make utilities and other public services more efficient" (S. Greene 1997c). County commissioners somewhat petulantly responded that only one-third of southern Nevada's development takes place within the county's jurisdiction. Nonetheless, the burgeoning growth-control movement of the 1990s led state senator Dina Titus (Democrat – Las Vegas) to propose a moratorium on development that would establish a "ring around the valley." Assembly Bill 490 would have stopped development in areas "north of Grand Teton Drive, east of Hollywood Boulevard, South of Henderson Executive Airport and west of Summerlin." The plan also identified the following growth-control issues: (1) limiting leapfrog development which necessitates infrastructure expansions; (2) promoting infill development on land close to population centers with infrastructure in place; (3) the imposition of impact fees; and (4) the creation of a green belt of open space around the developing area to establish a boundary for growth.

Five of the seven county commissioners opposed the bill, because they opposed government regulation of growth following the dominant political ideology. They claimed that Titus's growth-control plan would "raise property taxes and allow an unconstitutional taking of private land" (S. Greene 1997c). Throughout the state, other opponents of controls echoed the conservative ideological position against active government regulation, and the bill was defeated.

Despite this setback, sentiment in support of growth controls still runs strong among many residents, as advancing sprawl and the infrastructure crisis persist as problems in the valley. A local environmental activist, Jeff van Ee, stated shortly after the failure of the plan: "It's about time somebody put together a road map for growth before things get even more out of control" (S. Greene 1997a). Before the end of the 1997 session, state senator Jon Porter (Republican – Boulder City) proposed the formation of a 21-member Southern Nevada Strategic Planning Authority to study growth controls and to "create a regional debate about growth and then use all the ideas to find the best approach" (McKinnon 1998a). This "study group" was given two years to complete its tasks, but not without opposition. State Assembly woman Chris Giunchigliani (Democrat – Las Vegas) whose own bill to establish a regional planning board also had failed in the 1997 session, stated that it was already too late to merely "study" growth-related problems: "We don't need to study to figure out we have a crisis. I think the public is well aware that we have maxed our infrastructure needs" (S. Greene 1997a). Senator Titus also announced that she was working with the Las Vegas mayor and other sympathetic legislators, like Giunchigliani, to reintroduce a plan for more stringent controls in the 1999 state legislature. In the meantime, the debate continues as some, like North Las Vegas Mayor Michael Montandon, argue that: "Growth poses no problems that the free market – and some well placed infrastructure – can't deal with" (McKinnon 1998a).

In early 1998, the county commission adopted an informal set of growth-management strategies in a move to create the appearance of a master plan, yet public officials maintained their market-oriented, anti-regulatory approach. Commissioner Mary Kincaid was quoted as saying that too much growth management could send the wrong message that "we don't want anyone else to move to Las Vegas." A second commissioner, Lorraine Hunt, agreed, stating: "We don't want to take away the right to build in the middle of nowhere. That's what made Nevada" (McKinnon 1998b).

When discussing growth in the Las Vegas Valley, it is tempting to conclude that all municipalities encourage rapid growth and development, but a notable exception in Clark County is the municipality of Boulder City. Long known as the only city in Nevada that has never legalized gaming, a legacy of its early days as a federally planned community for dam-construction personnel, Boulder City only legalized liquor sales in 1969. Overlooking Lake Mead at the southeast end of the valley, Boulder City is a 200-square-mile city, the largest in land area in Nevada, but with a population of little more than 14,000 residents. An example of its conservatism towards growth and its residents' unusual amount of power is reflected in a law passed in 1996 that requires the city to seek voter approval to sell an acre or more of its land, a significant point since the city owns all but six square miles of land within its boundaries (Packer 1998a). Growth control is thus a way of life in "Clean, Green Boulder City" where no more than 120 housing units can be built each year, including every apartment in a complex, causing developers to bank allocations over a period of years to build multi-family complexes. Residents avidly follow city council meetings and actively participate in decision-making, opposing several projects, including one for a landfill in the Eldorado Valley that would have brought $1 million annually to city coffers. The town actively promotes its wholesome image with Fourth of July parades, picnics, and pancake breakfasts, and the community-based Art in the Park each fall brings tens of thousands to the large park in the center of the historic town while raising money for the local hospital. The town's staunch anti-growth sentiment has a downside however, because of its limited property-tax base, as it continually loses public servants to its wealthier neighbors in Henderson and Las Vegas.

Rapid development expansion and new construction, rather than growth controls, however, continue to characterize the Las Vegas area as a whole, reflecting the region's dominant political culture, which combines anti-tax limitations on public spending with a pro-business, almost "anything goes" approach to growth.

Downtown Redevelopment and the Fremont Street Experience

The origins of Las Vegas' downtown renovation are in many ways typical of other American cities. Until the 1970s, most of the casino action was located in Glitter Gulch, which provided the signature images representing "Las Vegas" as a cultural icon. In the 1990s, however, with the advent of megaresorts, profits from gambling on the Strip and the amazing increase in tourism there have attracted

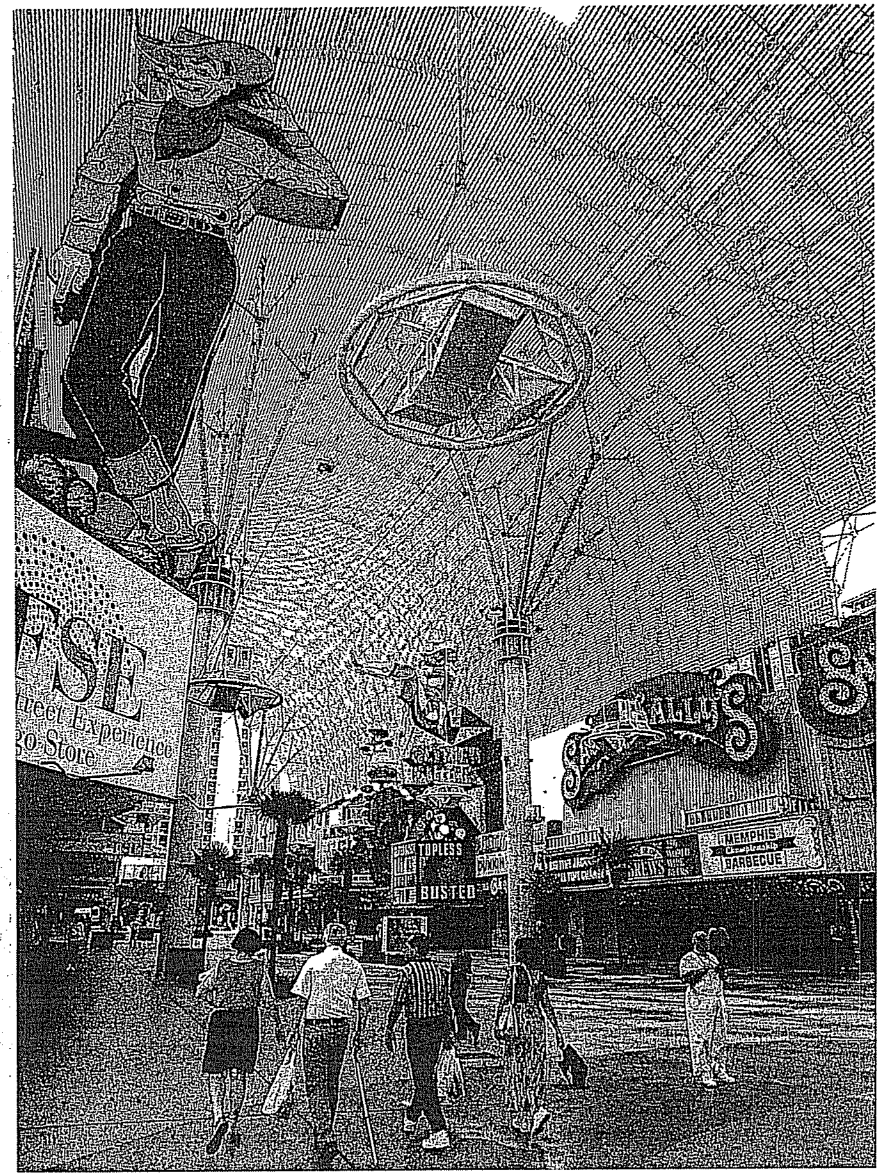

Figure 8.2 Fremont Street Experience during the day time

business away from Glitter Gulch. Thus, downtown Las Vegas, as elsewhere in the nation, is being competed out of existence by businesses located outside the central core (see chapter 2).

The short history of downtown redevelopment has had its share of political conflicts and clashes among separate interests. In 1986, the Las Vegas city council sold $50 million in bonds to launch redevelopment of the area, seeking out Bob Snow, developer of Church Street Station in Orlando, Florida, to develop a major retail project. Snow's initial plan was an eight-block shopping and gambling mall. That idea vanished, however, when the city failed to invoke eminent domain to obtain the land. Snow, with millions of dollars of his personal wealth and millions more in redevelopment funds, then proposed a single facility, Main Street Station, an emporium devoted mainly to entertainment and dining, with gaming an afterthought. Backed by the city, the project was expected to upgrade an area of deterioration and blight.

Although ten downtown casinos filed an unsuccessful lawsuit in 1990, protesting at the spending of millions of redevelopment dollars to create competition for them, Snow opened Main Street Station in 1991, a turn-of-the-century-style establishment that provided an upscale dining and entertainment experience. It featured an expensive antique collection, spectacular stained glass ceilings, doors and brass grill works from nineteenth-century banks and other historic buildings, and an 1890s snooker table from Windsor Castle. With its location in a rundown area more than a block from Fremont Street, lack of proper marketing of the place as a gambling facility, and food costs more expensive than bargain-hunting locals and tourists wanted to pay, Main Street Station drowned in red ink only ten months after opening.

Another city redevelopment fiasco, not related to tourism, ensued when the city cut a deal with Japanese developer Masao Nangaku to build Minami Tower, a skyscraper office building to be located across from the Federal Courthouse. The city was attempting to re-energize the downtown professional business core and add to its economic base. Nangaku walked away from the Tower project in 1991, leaving a huge hole in the ground that had absorbed millions of the city's redevelopment dollars. Six years later, the city had to spend $300,000 to remove contaminated dirt used to fill the gaping hole for what was going to be the state's tallest building. The city later donated the land to the federal government to construct a $97-million, seven-story courthouse.

The Minami and Main Street Station fiascoes led to a great deal of media criticism and general public skepticism regarding the downtown redevelopment process. An art project that put neon colored tubes shaped like Lego toys on the marble façade of City Hall brought even more public outcry, as did a reflecting pond portion of the project

that never worked, adding to the view of downtown redevelopment as a series of failures costing taxpayers millions in business subsidies. In this sense, the city of Las Vegas resembles many other downtowns elsewhere in the nation.

Despite Main Street Station's demise, city political and business leaders knew they had to match the spectacular tourist environment flourishing on the Strip to attract gamblers and other tourists, so they responded next by attempting to duplicate the Strip's themed architainment attractions. In 1994, a consortium of ten casinos joined with the city to construct the Fremont Street Experience, a $70-million sound-and-light show canopy that covered four city blocks of Fremont Street in the heart of Glitter Gulch; $30 million for the project came from public funds and the city pledged to build a parking garage adjacent to the project at a cost of another $23 million. The city also pledged $1 million a year for upkeep and maintenance from its parks-and-recreation budget.

Problems arose almost immediately for the city in the construction of the parking garage. The canopy itself did not require extensive renovations of property, although the famous Vegas Vic sign had to be modified, but the city had no vacant land downtown. After repeated attempts to negotiate land sales, the city exercised its power of eminent domain to condemn a 7,000-square-foot plot containing the typical downtown tableau of bail-bond, pawnshop, and tee-shirt businesses. Several private owners of the land sued, but the city went ahead with construction. By 1997, a 1,500-space, $23-million parking garage designed to provide adequate visitor parking was completed at the far end of the sound-and-light show canopy.

A Clark County judge subsequently ruled that the manner in which the city seized the property violated numerous state and federal statutes. Others complained that the public had already subsidized the privately-owned development and that the city engaged in poor planning. The city's use of eminent domain to support a private-sector project also was disputed, and may become a critical test of its future prospects, as it has used the power of eminent domain 49 times in its nine-year history, but cannot afford the lawsuits to settle the contested claims. Critics of the practice also say that it unfairly favors large casino operators over small businesses and represents a gigantic subsidy of public funds for Glitter Gulch casinos. At the same time, defenders claim that it has restored somewhat the tax base in downtown Las Vegas and has kept other businesses there. A proposed second phase of the Fremont Street Experience was approved by the city council in 1998. The $100-million "Neonopolis @ Fremont Street Experience" will be a 254,000-square-foot retail and entertainment center.

In 1995 a group of citizens filed a suit with the American Civil Liberties Union, claiming that the privately controlled downtown mall violated the constitution by restricting free speech. The casino consortium has broad authority to control activities along the pedestrian mall and under a city ordinance "picketing, rallying, proselytizing, distributing handbills and soliciting donations are all banned unless otherwise permitted by casinos" (Zapler 1998a). According to the consortium's attorneys, however, the pedestrian mall is not a public space, but a commercial and entertainment complex, though this seems to contradict comments by the city's mayor, who has called the mall a "town square" (Zapler 1998a). Thus, while some Las Vegans extol the use of eminent domain and public subsidization of business to improve downtown, others see it as yet another example of local government ignoring the rights of the public in the pursuit of economic revitalization. Nonetheless, in 1998 construction was underway on several other major downtown projects, including a $131-million Regional Justice Center, approved by voters in a September 1996 bond issue, a $78-million County Jail expansion, a $97-million Federal Court House, the 13-story $57-million futuristic Sun Plaza Building, and a $16.5-million Clark Street Associates' office complex. Regardless, the new projects will proceed within the environment of a new political culture, with increasing scrutiny by local resident groups and, therefore, giving an increasing complexity to local public affairs.

Environmental Concerns

Nuclear and Chemical Waste

Environmental issues also have played a significant role in Las Vegas' history, pre-dating the period of rapid development. In 1989, the endangered desert tortoise halted development in the valley and delayed the massive Summerlin project for more than a year. More prominent are concerns surrounding the former atomic bomb test site, located 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas in a high desert area approximately the size of Rhode Island. Above-ground testing was conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by underground testing, until a 1992 moratorium halted all testing. Prevailing winds in the area usually blow from west-to-east and lawsuits charging ill effects of radioactive contamination have been filed from areas located downwind, especially in southern Utah.

After testing activity ceased, Congress proposed converting a part of the test site at Yucca Mountain into a national repository for the growing store of nuclear waste. Many area residents were outraged at the prospect of becoming the nation's nuclear waste-dump site while others in the construction industry, who would build the project, as well as several labor unions, supported the nuclear repository. Among many southern Nevadans' fears is the specter of nuclear waste being routed through the community, as major transport highways intersect in its midst at the notorious spaghetti bowl. Tourism officials also fear the negative impact of a nuclear accident on the area's leading industry. With strong lobbying by the Nevada congressional delegation, the governor, and state legislature, Nevadans have thus far been able to stall the federal government's plans for Yucca Mountain, but the issue is not yet settled.

One outcome of the Yucca Mountain controversy was the growth of activist environmental organizations in the region. One such organization, Citizen Alert, has held entertainment fundraising events to fight Congressional plans for the high-level nuclear-waste dump. One of these combined "No-Nukes" rock music and "Honor the Earth" tours while the governor, county commissioners, and the Las Vegas mayor proclaimed "Nevada is not a Wasteland" Day. The high-profile event brought national attention to the anti-nuclear/environmental cause in the region, as have numerous other such functions featuring celebrity participants.

A second long-standing environmental problem is the legacy of magnesium- and titanium-processing chemical plants that were built during World War II in Henderson, located at the southeast end of the valley. Ground water has been contaminated and, for decades, a phenomenon known as the "Henderson Cloud" consisting of a noxious white haze that hung over the lower part of the valley, appeared on windless summer days. The Titanium Metals Corporation of America, or TIMET, which stored liquid acid in 19 open evaporation ponds in violation of the 1971 Federal Clean Air Act, was identified as the major culprit. Other companies implicated in the creation of the air-pollution hazard were the Kerr-McGee Chemical Corporation and the Montrose Chemical Company, which also operated plants in Henderson. During the 1980s, Green Valley builders brought suit against the chemical companies, who had previously been disciplined only with light fines (see chapter 5). Today, the open-air tanks are gone and pollution controls are now more strictly enforced, although several chemical plants still remain in operation.

Air Quality

Nuclear issues and chemical contamination from the past, however, are not the only concerns. Rapid development and metropolitan-scale automobile commuting have produced additional problems with air quality. People who moved to Las Vegas for the wide open spaces and minimal regulations now live in a valley with serious air quality problems and increasing restrictions. The Las Vegas Valley sits in a bowl, surrounded by mountains on three sides, and ozone levels have risen in recent years.

Ozone is a summertime pollutant produced when the sun reacts with organic gases such as hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides. Vehicle emissions from cars and other vehicles driven by more than 1.25 million residents and 30 million annual visitors are a major source of the ozone problem. According to National Air Quality Standards, the Las Vegas metropolitan region is in "non-attainment" and quickly approaching "serious non-attainment" for ozone levels. On the other hand, Las Vegas air quality has improved in terms of levels of carbon monoxide and visible particulates (blowing dust). As more of the desert is paved, particulates decrease, except around construction sites, so the Air Pollution Control District has begun fining developers and gravel-pit owners for noncompliance at building sites. The brown haze that can cover the valley in the winter months, however, continues to concern both residents and health officials. As a result, innovations such as bicycle lanes, which frustrated Las Vegas drivers often use as turn lanes, expensive timing systems for traffic signals, oxygenated gasoline, and tougher restrictions on construction sites have become a part of Las Vegas life.

Environmentalists identify the operation of diesel machinery as another major threat to air quality as diesel engines, unregulated by government, are notorious sources of pollution. In addition to the diesel machinery used for new home construction, idling trucks, and construction equipment, there are the massive fleet of Clark County school buses and McCarran International Airport's diesel ground equipment, as well as unregulated air emissions from jet fuel.

At present, the Las Vegas Valley has the fifth worst air quality in the nation, on a par with New York City, and its non-attainment profile resembles that of Los Angeles due to the high level of both particulates and ozone. The community is battling to avoid federal sanctions that would cost it millions of dollars for highway construction and other federal funds, by working to meet air-quality standards despite rapid growth.

Pollution issues have not yet reached the critical mass of public concern that would pose a challenge to the current political agenda, yet neither the tourist industry nor the housing industry can neglect them much longer, as they threaten the city's quality of life. The scary potential exists that tourists might refuse to come to Las Vegas to see dirty skies and suffer through bad traffic, despite their long historical tolerance of sitting for hours in smoke filled casinos. Even more troubling to Las Vegas' business interests than air quality, however, are declining water quality and water resources, which also have become contentious political issues.

Water Issues

Water is a major political issue in the southwest because it is an arid, desert region. The main water source for Arizona, Nevada, and southern California comes from the Colorado River via Lake Mead, the nation's largest water reservoir, with an estimated 9.2-trillion-gallon capacity, created by the building of the Hoover Dam. This mega-storage function maximizes the resources of the river for the entire region, yet growth in the area is projected to outstrip water allocations. By a long-standing agreement, made in the 1930s when there were far fewer residents there, several western states have rights to a fixed percentage of water volume from the system. Nevada is approaching its limit, so future development of the Las Vegas Valley depends very much on political negotiations among the network of upper and lower basin states serviced by the Colorado River and the ability to secure alternative water sources.

The quality of existing water is another immediate concern. For years Las Vegas' drinking water consistently tested as one of the safest in the nation. However, Colorado River water is hard and many residents don't like the taste of naturally occurring minerals or of chemicals added for purification. New residents often install water softeners, most containing salt, to lessen the impact of the mineral content in the form of soap scum and lime build-up in sinks, showers, toilets, and washing machines. They also install drinking-water filtration systems in their homes and buy gallons of bottled water, refilling them at water filtration stations located throughout the valley.

Several other factors are adversely affecting the Las Vegas Valley's water profile, including extensive pesticide and fertilizer usage; the decline of natural wetlands; and treated effluent from the local municipalities' sewage systems that flow into Lake Mead. Many Las Vegans maintain large green lawns in tribute to their former homesteads in less arid parts of the country. In the desert southwest these lawns can remain green all year round, but they are often heavily fertilized. Also, the threat of insect infestation has created a burgeoning pest-control industry. The massive infusion of pesticides and fertilizers, however, is contaminating the ground water that flows into Lake Mead at the lower end of the valley and threatening the drinking-water supply.

For example, in 1987, diazanon, "a federally approved cockroach killer," and, in 1992, the insecticide malathion, were found in some washes – washes are natural channels, dry most of the time, that divert rain and flood water to Lake Mead (Rogers 1997a). These and other pesticide problems, plus pressures created by population growth, forced Las Vegas to upgrade its sewage-treatment plant in 1992 and, according to the environmental manager for the plant, there have been no problems with insecticide contamination since. However, although three sewage-treatment facilities (Clark County, Las Vegas and North Las Vegas, and Henderson) together process more than 140 million gallons a day, the capacity of the system remains strained due to increased population growth. As a result, the system has undergone extensive upgrades, including $105 million on the county plant in 1996, $54 million to upgrade the filtration system at the city of Las Vegas plant in 1994, and a newly constructed treatment plant in Henderson, also in 1994.

All treated water and ground-water run-off in the valley go into Lake Mead, which is perceived as a serious problem by environmentalists, since Las Vegas' water is obtained directly from the lake. In the past, a vast region of wetlands adjacent to the lake, consisting of reeds and cattails, helped filter much of the pollution out of the run-off. In recent years, however, these wetlands have been depleted by development, resulting in contaminated ground water. Recent studies of streams feeding into Lake Mead have discovered other threats as well. Carp obtained from remaining wetlands, for example, were found to be contaminated by DDT and PCBs, although these have been banned for more than twenty years in the region. In 1990, the county approved a $13.3-million bond issue to restore 2,000 acres of wetlands in an attempt to re-create this vital natural barrier to biological and chemical contaminants.

Despite these significant measures, the quality of water in the region remains a matter of concern. According to a local biologist: "The valley's pollution woes won't be solved until controls are put on pesticides and toxic wastes discharged into the sewer and cleanup of contaminated ground water layers is finished" (Rogers 1997a). Contaminated ground water is perhaps the major threat to water quality as "Lake Mead faces an onslaught of contaminants washing off parking lots, golf courses, lawns, construction sites and a shallow

aquifer formed underneath the Las Vegas Valley, as it continues to grow" (Manning 1998). The problem also extends outside of the Las Vegas Valley, as Nevada overall has 56 non-point sources (areas which receive water from Lake Mead but are located some distance away), neighboring California 560, Idaho 960, and Oregon 870, raising the specter of water contamination in these other areas as well.

The industrial past of suburban Henderson is also adversely affecting the area's water quality. For the first time, in 1997, perchlorate, a rocket-fuel ingredient, was discovered in water flowing into Lake Mead. Major rocket-fuel manufacturing was done at Pepcon from 1958 to 1988, when the plant was destroyed by a series of deadly explosions. Also, the Kerr-McGee plant is phasing out the manufacture of ammonium perchlorate in its Basic Magnesium Inc. (BMI) complex on Clark County land near Henderson. However, the plant lies upstream from the Las Vegas wash, a major run-off channel that feeds into Lake Mead only six miles from the drinking-water intakes. When perchlorate was detected at high levels in wells at the plant site, a Kerr-McGee company spokesman told a newspaper reporter that: "He was not surprised that perchlorate was detected in ground water beneath the plant because the plant has been in operation for about 50 years, the first 25 years of which was a period of unregulated disposal practices" (Rogers 1997b). There are presently no federal standards regarding acceptable levels of perchlorate in water, but California has temporarily set 18 parts per billion as the level to trigger remedial action, while water samples in the Las Vegas wash registered perchlorate levels as high as 1,680 parts per billion.

The perchlorate problem is only one aspect of the more general threat posed by contaminated ground water around the chemical plants as toxic clean-up sites are numerous and remain relatively neglected, despite the availability of federal funding for clean-up. The state has tried to pressure companies to deal with this issue, but legal sanctions are weak. The quality of Lake Mead water thus remains a concern not only for Las Vegas but for other contiguous states as well, as growth in the region continues unabated.

Disappearing Open Space

Both the quantity and quality of open space in communities in the Las Vegas Valley vary from one area to another. The master-planned communities have landscaped roads and parks, with Summerlin in particular allocating at least 20 per cent of its 22,000 acres to open space. In many other areas, however, open public space is disappearing under the impact of rapid regional growth, as development encroaches upon the mountains, Lake Mead, and desert washes. Furthermore, although the Las Vegas Valley has 148 parks, many older communities are underserved. According to a local activist: "The core of Las Vegas is being developed to such an extent that little space is available for parks or open space" (Zapler 1997d). The national average of open space for every 1,000 residents is 4 to 6 acres, but in Clark County, the figure is between 1.9 and 5.7 acres, the amount varying, "depending on whether land designated as open space – but which has not been converted into parks – is included in the calculations" (Zapler 1997d). Thus, the Las Vegas region remains below the national norm for open spaces.

As parks are an important component of the quality of life, citizens have lobbied to increase park funding and resources for park acquisition, but have been forced to seek financing from public bonds. Both government budgets and the use of bonds to fund public projects, however, are limited severely by the public's reluctance to incur debt and the prevailing conservative ideology of local government. In May 1993, for example, Clark County residents voted down a bond measure that would have provided $125 million for new parks and would have cost the average homeowner $45 annually. In contrast, however, Henderson voters approved parks-bond issues in 1993 and again in 1997. The issue is also being addressed in Las Vegas, which in 1997 passed a zoning code requiring that 15 percent of the acreage in the city's new development tracts be allocated for open space. At that time the city had $6 million worth of parks projects under construction in the northwest sector alone.

The construction of the beltway, a 52-mile highway that will encircle most of the valley, provides an opportunity for additional open space and recreational areas – though almost exclusively servicing middle-class suburban residents. The county plans to spend $10 million to construct a bicycle and walking trail alongside the entire loop. The first four-mile stretch of trail was completed in 1998, but the trail system will probably not be finished until work on the beltway is completed in 2003. Eight miles of the beltway will intersect or abut upscale Summerlin and the developer has "dedicated space and paid for design work for a well-landscaped trail system along that leg" (Zapler 1998c).

Under pressure from local residents, in 1998 the Southern Nevada Strategic Planning Authority agreed to set a parks standard of 2.5 acres per 1,000 residents. Two valley communities already meet or exceed the standard, Henderson with 2.5 acres of parks per 1,000, and the growth-controlled Boulder City with 4.75 acres (McKinnon

1998d). When considering park acreage in the valley, nearby recre ational areas such as Red Rock Canyon, Lake Mead, and Moun Charleston are not included, yet each offers amenities not found i other cities that might offer more parks. However, valley growth i having an impact on these areas as well. More than 1.2 million peopl visited Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area in 1997 and th 195,000-acre scenic area is rapidly becoming an urban park, thoug the BLM has attempted to lessen the effects of human intrusion "Trails are more clearly marked, mountain bikes and horses are restricted from popular hiking areas and every so often, when the parking lots are full and traffic is heavy, rangers simply close the gates to the loop for a few hours" (McKinnon 1998e). A $5-per-vehicle or $20 season pass was instituted in late 1997 but the fee has not discouraged visitors, though it has helped cut down on vandalism.

The Need for Regional Cooperation

Given the complex and interrelated nature of the challenges that the area must meet, it is clear that the Las Vegas Valley is hampered in many ways by the excessive fragmentation of a large county bureaucracy and four municipal governments. One way to deal with this problem, employed in many metropolitan regions around the country, is to consolidate them into one governmental entity. The first efforts towards consolidation in the Las Vegas Valley since the 1946 attempt by the city to annex the Strip came in 1973 when the Las Vegas and Clark County Police Departments were merged. In 1975, the state legislature expanded the city of Las Vegas to include the Strip and most developed areas, doubling the size of the city. The county commission then moved its offices to City Hall, but the next year the Supreme Court ruled the consolidation law unconstitutional. In 1978, city voters again approved consolidation, but county voters rejected it. In 1985, after years of hostile competition, the city and county signed a "Bury the Hatchet Agreement," a wide-ranging accord covering issues as diverse as sewage treatment, fire protection, and annexation. Since then, the community also has implemented a Regional Flood Control District and a Regional Transportation Commission for public transit. Most other municipal service agencies, however, remain fragmented. One of the few victories for area-wide service occurred in education when Clark County created a unified school district, though that involved action by the state legislature. The ninth largest District in the nation, the Clark County School District is now accused by some, however, of being too large and unresponsive to community needs and a move is underway to break it up. Henderson attempted to get the 1997 legislature to authorize residents to petition the state to form new school districts. Part of the problem in rapidly growing Henderson is that the school district doesn't build schools fast enough, even if the land is available: "Over the years we have requested that developers donate properties for the sole purpose of putting in elementary and junior high schools. But even though we have a good inventory of land, there is no guarantee from the school district when and if the properties will be used to build schools," said the city manager (Robiglio 1997).

Consolidation, or the actual merging of regional government, however, is not the only alternative and grows increasingly unlikely as the region expands. Much like other metropolitan areas in the country, no entity wants to lose its individual economic or power base in a fragmented region. A more practical alternative would be to establish comprehensive regional coordination in the area, given that water and air quality, chemical pollution, and the development of parks and other open space are all regional, county-wide concerns. In fact, due to the proximity of Las Vegas' businesses and residential areas to Lake Mead, threats they pose to water quality have an impact in at least three states, as we have seen. Thus far, however, regional cooperation has been limited, with competition between the city of Las Vegas and the county in particular a major factor in the failure to establish the kind of regional environmental controls that are characteristic of the Los Angeles area. This feature is one of the contradictions that have emerged with normalization and growth. The national anti-tax sentiment reflected in the local political culture is also a barrier to the public funding of amenities, like parks, that improve the quality of life (see next chapter). Although bond measures are theoretically a way out of government's fiscal dilemmas, there is increasing resistance to their passage from the growing number of permanent residents who perceive the mounting indebtedness as a threat. In short, these pressures fuel competition, not regional cooperation, and remain a contributor to the contradictions of the normalization process fueling contentious local politics.

Structural characteristics also strain relations among the various communities within the region. According to John Schlegel, director of advanced planning for Clark County, the building of Green Valley, away from the center of Henderson, and Summerlin, miles from the center of Las Vegas, have created examples of community development that contrast markedly with older areas (Schlegel 1998). These master-planned communities, with covenants, restrictions, and assessments for maintenance, have raised expectations everywhere in

the region about the standards of neighborhood life by instituting architectural controls on housing, dedicating open land for parks or fee-based golf courses, having laws against graffiti and the neglect of lawns, and having aesthetically-pleasing landscaped common areas within their developments. The problem is that, by contrast, not all the new developments have these amenities. Outside the master-planned communities, many residential areas have no controls and no community-maintained landscaping. Residents in older neighborhoods often must contend with neighbors who pile junk on their lawns and live on streets that are less than aesthetically pleasing. As residents of more established neighborhoods watch the new master-planned developments receive new public-school buildings and libraries, along with community-controlled landscaping, they have created strong political pressures on elected officials to deal with resource inequalities. To date, however, these and other conflicts have resulted in far less regional and inter-community cooperation than is needed to foster better planning for future growth (see next chapter). The uneven development, characteristic of growth elsewhere as well as in Las Vegas, creates inequities that persist in fueling regional political conflicts.

In short, the normalization process, while producing a new political culture that plays off residents against business needs, also contains contradictory tendencies produced by the organization of separate political interests, conflicts over resources, factions of capital, fragmentation of social bases and political jurisdictions, and a fundamental clash between the increasing, multi-dimensional needs of local residents and a public ideology that limits local government to a weak role.