



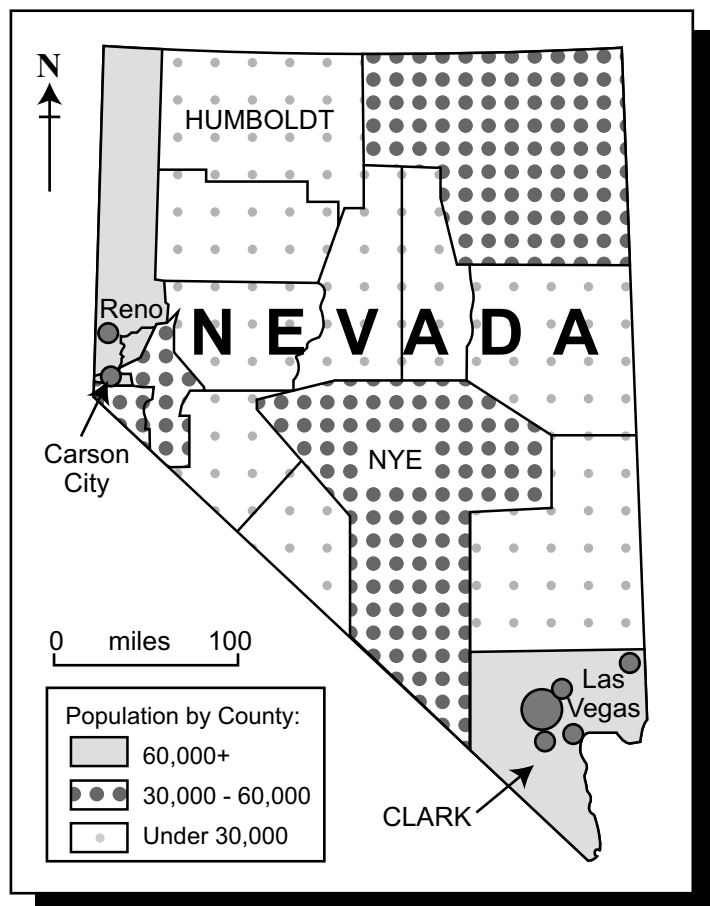
## LAS VEGAS: SIN CITY?

The Mojave desert, 200 miles from the sea, at an elevation of 2000 feet and with an average July high temperature of 40°C, may seem like a strange place to find a thriving city of 1/2 million people, but that's Las Vegas - one of the world's most unusual cities. This *Geo Factsheet* explores the growth of Las Vegas, its recent urban reimaging and asks some searching questions of the sustainability of 'Sin City'.

### Location and geography

Las Vegas sits in the south-east corner of Nevada, a State which entered the Union of the United States of America in 1864. *Fig. 1* shows that Las Vegas lies in **Clark County**, which had a population of 1.7 million in 2005, and contains the cities of Las Vegas, Boulder, Henderson, North Las Vegas and Paradise. Many of these are, in effect, **exurbs** or **edge cities** to Las Vegas. The only other populated region of Nevada is in the west around **Reno** (population 210,000) and Carson City the State Capital (population 60,000). 86% of Nevada's population lives in Clark County.

Fig. 1 The State of Nevada.



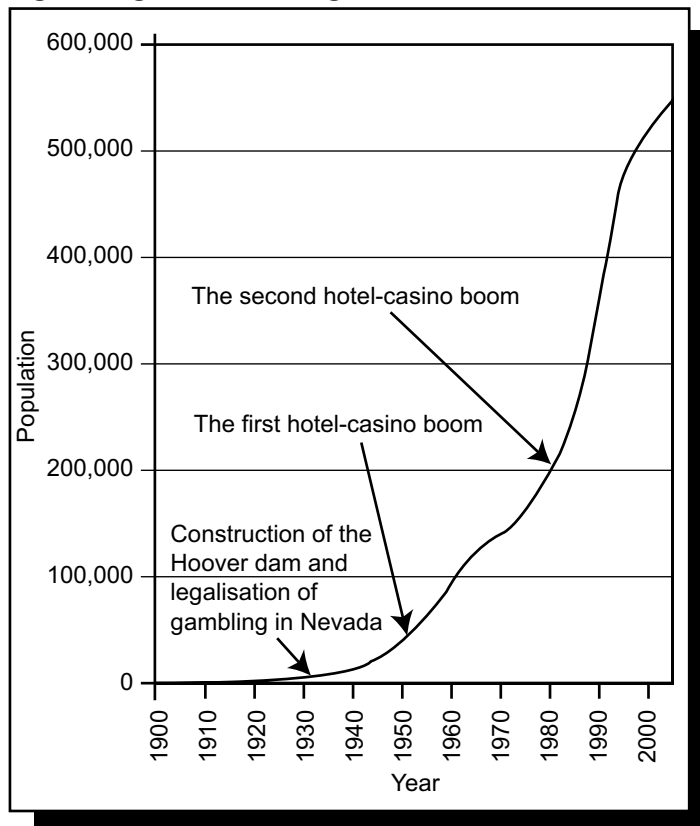
Much of the rest of the state is barely populated at all. North of Las Vegas lies the vast **Nevada Test Site**, where nuclear weapons testing was carried out between 1951 and 1992. North of this lies the 200,000 square miles of the **Great Basin**, an arid wilderness of mountain ranges and valleys. West of Vegas is Death Valley, and to the east the Colorado River, Hoover Dam and Grand Canyon.

### History and Urban Growth

Like many cities in the western USA, Las Vegas has a short history. The area was 'discovered' in 1830 by pioneers travelling west to California. The Las Vegas valley (Las Vegas translates as 'the meadows') has attractions, principally the Big Springs - where groundwater fed natural freshwater pools. It was first settled in 1855 by Mormon missionaries from Salt Lake City. Stretched to the limit by the climate, and lack of timber the site was abandoned in 1858.

The railroad arrived in 1905, and connected the Las Vegas valley to Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. The town of Las Vegas was born in 1905 as 1200 lots of land were auctioned off by the railroad company. A year later, the population of the town was 1500. *Fig. 2* shows how the population of Las Vegas has grown from those early beginnings.

Fig. 2 The growth of Las Vegas 1900-2005.



Several key events have played a role in the growth of Las Vegas. Firstly, the construction of the **Hoover Dam** on the Colorado River in 1931 coincided with the legalisation of gambling in Nevada. This brought new roads, telephones and the first casinos.

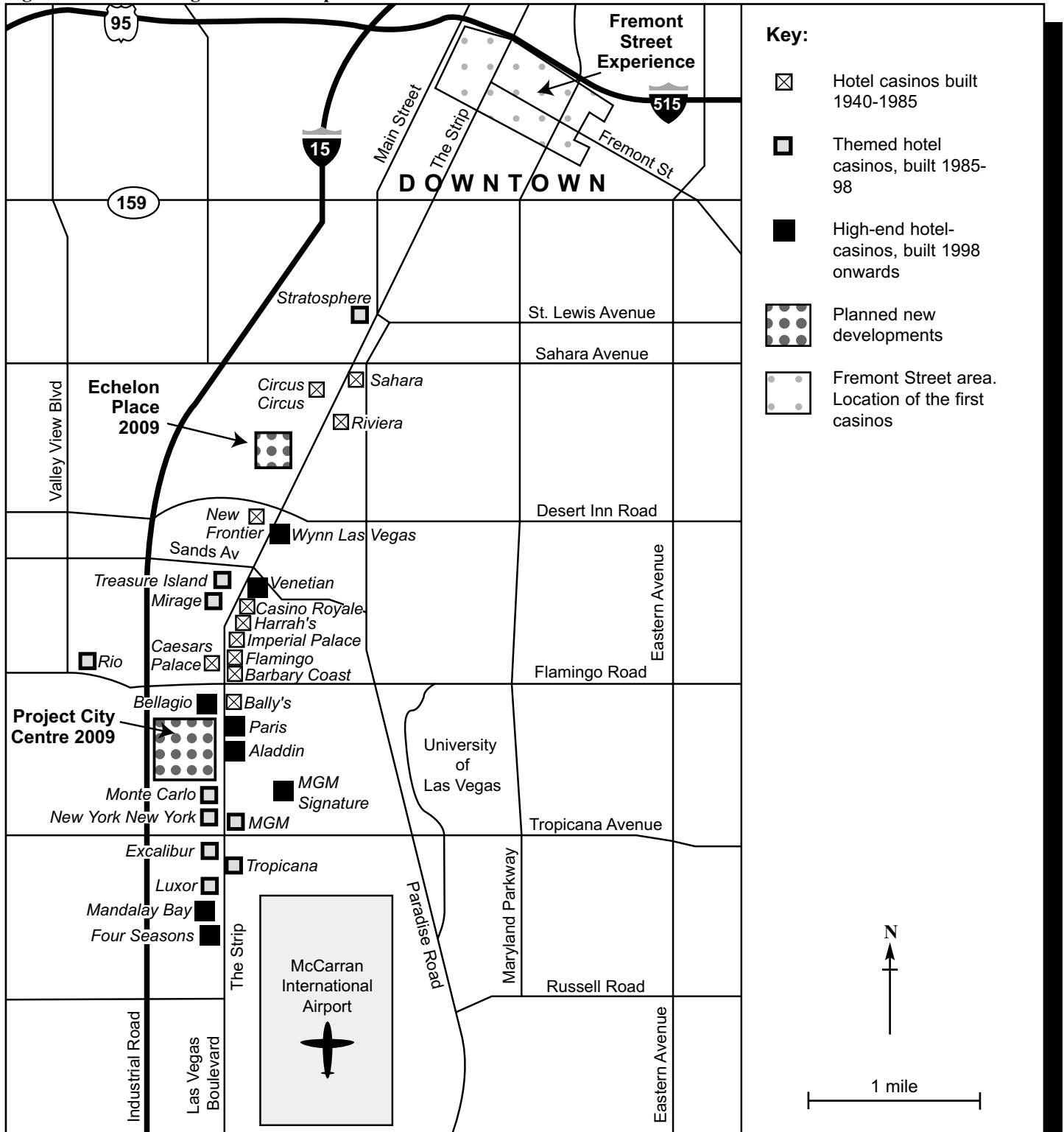
Between 1951 and 1958 11 major **hotel-casinos** opened, mostly on the **Strip** (Las Vegas Boulevard) (Fig. 3), and mostly funded by Mob (organised crime and the mafia) money. In 1959 the famous neon sign (Fig. 4) was erected at the south end of the Strip and has since become the **iconic image** of Vegas.

The 1950s and 1960s cemented Sin City's image as a playground for gambling, fast marriages and even faster divorces. The Rat Pack, led by Frank Sinatra, made the city cool, typified by the 1960 film 'Oceans 11' in which he starred. The 2001 remake of the film, starring Brad Pitt, grossed \$444 million worldwide, testifying to the enduring allure of a city where anything seems to go.

**Fig. 4** The iconic 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas Nevada' sign.



**Fig. 3: Central Las Vegas and the Strip**



**Sin City's sins?**

*Just how sinful is Las Vegas?* The answer is that you are probably too late, it has cleaned up its act considerably!

- For a start, drinking alcohol is only legal if you are over 21.
- Prostitution is illegal, however there is a thriving strip-joint industry and fears that some legitimate entertainment is a 'front' for illegal activity.
- Gambling is legal, as long as you are 21.
- You can get married in Vegas 24 hours a day, with no waiting.
- Almost as quick, a divorce takes 6 weeks.

**Image is everything: Re-imagining Las Vegas**

The original casinos of Las Vegas were built in what is now the **downtown** (CBD) area of Vegas around **Fremont Street** (see Fig. 3, page 2). This area became known as 'Glitter Gulch'. Hotels here were small, as were casinos.

The construction of the Flamingo in 1946 began a drift south along Las Vegas Boulevard (the Strip) and a move towards lavish, resort-style casinos in the area between Flamingo Road and Sahara Avenue. The Desert Inn, Sands, the Sahara and Dunes all became icons of 1960s Las Vegas - an adult playground of hard-drinking, long-nights and high stakes gambling.

**Gamblers - families or couples?**

*Increasingly, couples.*

- The 'gambler' focus of Vegas in the 50s and 60s led to a seedy image. The shift toward themed family mega-resorts was only ever partially successful. Families do not gamble, and they tend to seek out 'value dining'.
- Since the late 1990s, the focus has been on couples. Lavish, private hotel suites, high-end shops for her, private gaming tables for him, posh restaurants for both. The only loser is your wallet!

The image of Vegas tarnished in the 1970s and 1980s, as the 'sin' began to look 'seedy'. A new era began, once again further south on the Strip, in 1989 with the opening of the first modern, **themed mega-resort**, the Mirage. Many others followed in the building boom of the 1990s (The Luxor, Excalibur, New York New York) as Vegas strove to reinvent itself as a family-friendly resort. In this phase there was a renewed focus on **entertainment** and **blockbuster shows**.

Another re-invention began in 1998 with opening of the **Bellagio**, followed by the Venetian, Paris, Mandalay Bay and finally the Wynn Las Vegas and MGM Grand Signature. These new hotel-casinos are **high-end**, with expensive suites, exquisite restaurants and in many cases private **gated entrances**. Most are built on sites once occupied by the now demolished hotels of the 50s and 60s.

**Corporate Giants**

The variety of hotels and casinos on the Strip seems huge. You can stay in an 'Egyptian' pyramid, a 'medieval' castle or an 'Italian' villa. The variety hides the fact that many of the mega-resorts are owned by just 2 companies. A series of mergers and buy-outs means that **MGM Mirage** own 11 properties and **Harrah's Entertainment** owns 9.

**Retailing**

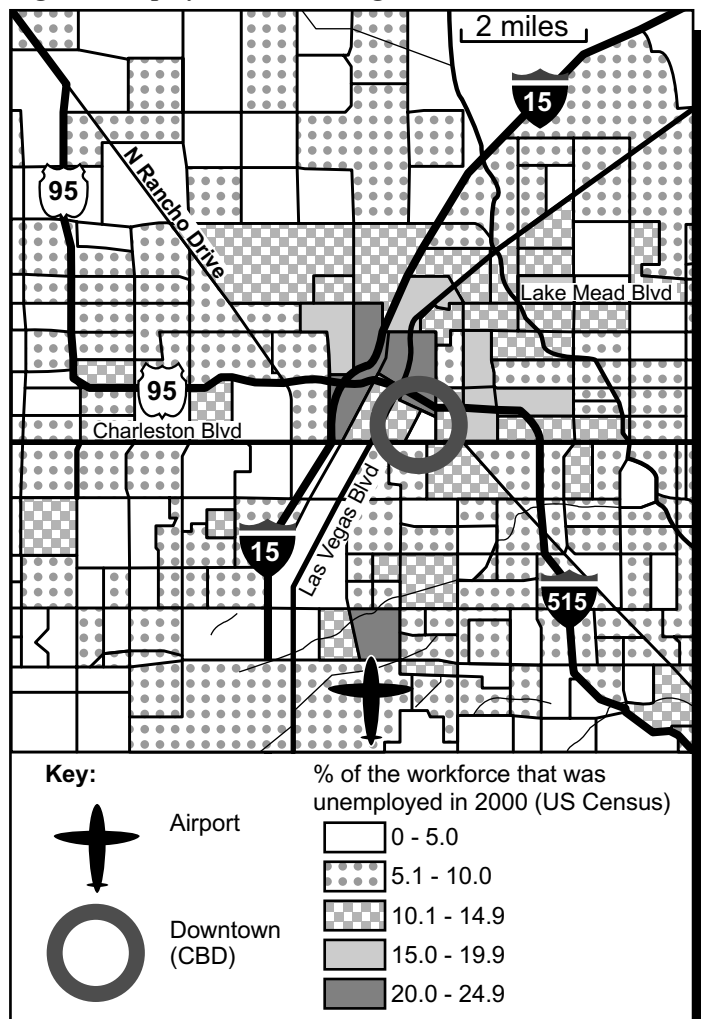
A relatively new development on the Strip is **retailing**. Most mega-resorts have long had **malls**, but recently these have expanded as resort owners realised that shopping itself was the attraction to many:

- **The Forum Shops at Caesar's Palace** - opened 1992 with 160 shops including Christian Dior, Harry Winston, Armani and Versace.
- **Grand Canal Shoppes** - in the Venetian, opened in 1999.
- **Fashion Show Mall** - opened 1981, with major expansion in 2003. Opposite Wynn Las Vegas.
- **Miracle Mile Shops** - opened in 2000 as part of the Aladdin (now Planet Hollywood) with 140 shops.

**Zones of discard**

Whilst the Strip itself boomed in terms of gambling, retailing, and the hotel trade, the downtown area of Vegas (Fig. 3) went into steady **decline** as a classic zone of discard. Las Vegas does not have a mature CBD in the way many British cities have. There is a downtown district with some offices, banks, the City Hall, Federal Court and Clark County Government Centre but no clearly defined retail and commercial central zone. The Fremont Street area, and areas to the north and west of downtown had become classic areas of inner city decay by 1990. Fig. 5 shows unemployment in Vegas in 2000; note the concentration around the downtown area.

**Fig. 5 Unemployment in Las Vegas, 2000.**



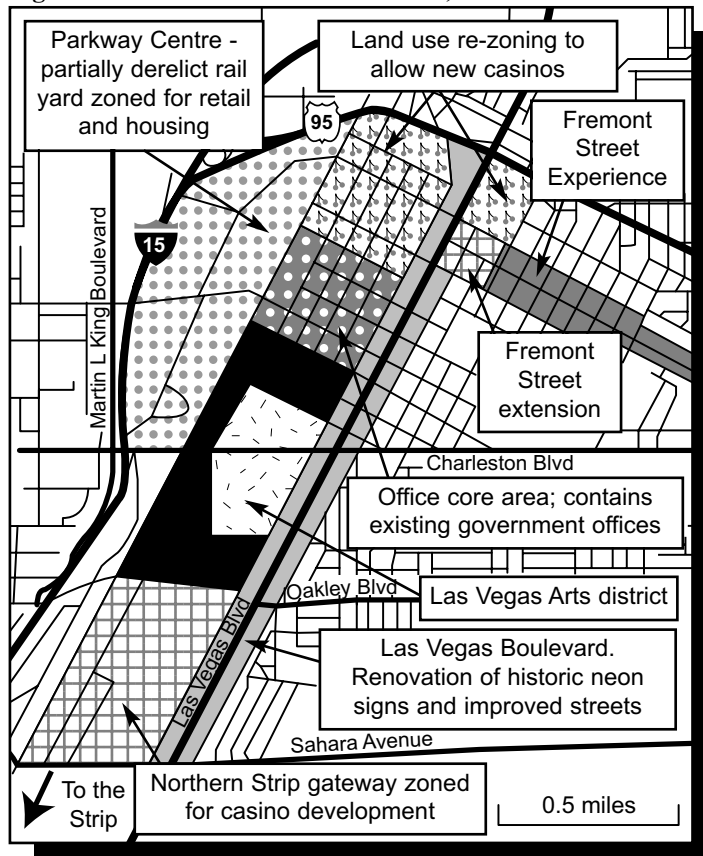
**Regeneration**

Las Vegas is almost permanently in a state of regeneration as old hotels are demolished and new ones built in their place. However, some redevelopment is more strategic:

- In 1994 Fremont Street was pedestrianised and given a covered walkway with a big screen on its curved ceiling, at a total cost of \$77 million. This light and sound show now forms the centrepiece of ‘**The Fremont Street Experience**’. It was upgraded in 2004 to form ‘**Viva Vision**’ at a cost of \$17 million. The redevelopment, of what is actually the historic core of Vegas, was designed to compete with the strip. 60 Restaurants, 10 casinos and many shops add to the area’s attractions. Around 17 million people visit the area each year
- The major downtown **Post Office** building, close to Fremont Street is currently being renovated as an arts and cultural centre at a cost of \$475,000.
- Between 1995 and 2005, \$83 million was invested in renewing infrastructure in the downtown area.

In 2005 the City adopted the **Downtown Centennial Plan**, to continue the revitalisation of the downtown area so that it can effectively compete with the Strip. The key elements of this plan are shown in Fig. 6. Some redevelopment has already begun on the large Parkway Centre site.

**Fig. 6 The Downtown Centennial Plan, 2005.**



**The Future: bigger is always better**

Due for completion in 2010, **Project CityCenter** represents the latest thinking in Vegas **hyper-resorts** (Fig. 3). The total cost of the development is \$7 billion. It will consist of:

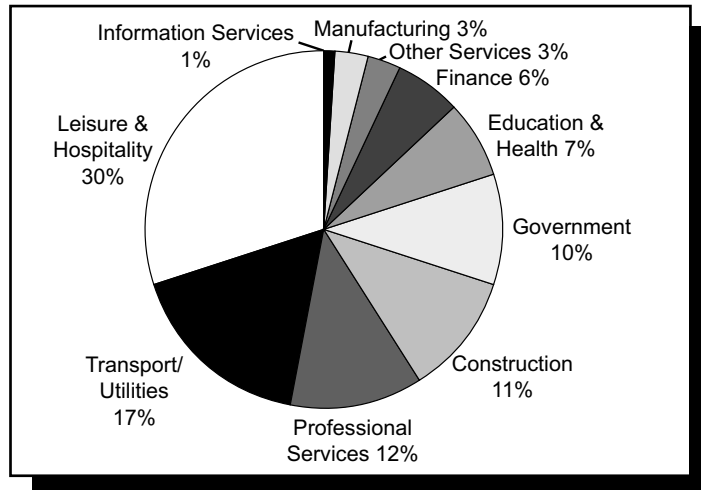
- 4800 rooms in 3 hotels (1 large and 2 small ‘boutique’ hotels).
- 2700 apartments
- 500,000 square feet of retail space
- A 2000 seat theatre
- Parking for 7500 cars

The project will employ up to 12,000 people. The focus is on luxury. The architects of the project are some of the most famous in the world - Sir Norman Foster, Daniel Liebskind and Cesar Pelli. This development simply confirms the trends that began with the opening of the Bellagio in 1998.

**Economic dependency**

Las Vegas has 139,000 hotel rooms and 15 of the 20 largest hotels in the world. 39 million people visited Vegas in 2006. There are 200,000 slot machines in the city; total revenue from gaming is \$10 billion per year. It is also the **convention centre** capital of the USA - where trade groups and societies hold annual meetings. There are 3000+ conventions per year in the city, attended by 6 million people in 2006 with a value of \$8 billion. The danger for the city is that it is overly **dependent** on filling hotel rooms (see Fig. 7). Around 20% of the city’s jobs are related to the **gaming** (gambling) industry and nearly a 1/4 million people work in the leisure and hospitality industries. Visitors spend \$35 billion in the city each year.

**Fig. 7 Employment in Las Vegas, 2004.**



The Nevada Development Authority is a business organisation that promotes the State, and the city of Las Vegas. It has worked hard to encourage hi-tech firms to locate in Vegas, with some success. The recent trend toward retailing, and high-end and boutique style tourism is helpful in terms of broadening the economic base.

**Terrorism**

Las Vegas itself has not experienced terrorism, however the September 11<sup>th</sup>. 2001 attacks did have a negative effect on the city’s economy. Some 9000 casino workers were laid-off, as visitor numbers fell by 350,000 compared to 2000. Around 250 conventions were cancelled. By 2003, visitor numbers had returned to pre-attack levels. The experience simply reinforced the need to diversify the city’s economy.

**Fabulous or flawed? Urban sustainability**

Sustainable cities need to meet the needs of their present inhabitants in terms of quality of life, as well as planning for future inhabitants of the city. Sustainable cities also minimise resource use and their **ecological footprint**. Sustainable cities take social, environmental and economic actions:

**SOCIAL**

- Encourage local decision making
- Reduce crime and fear
- Eliminate exclusion and segregation
- Provide recreation and leisure areas

**ENVIRONMENTAL**

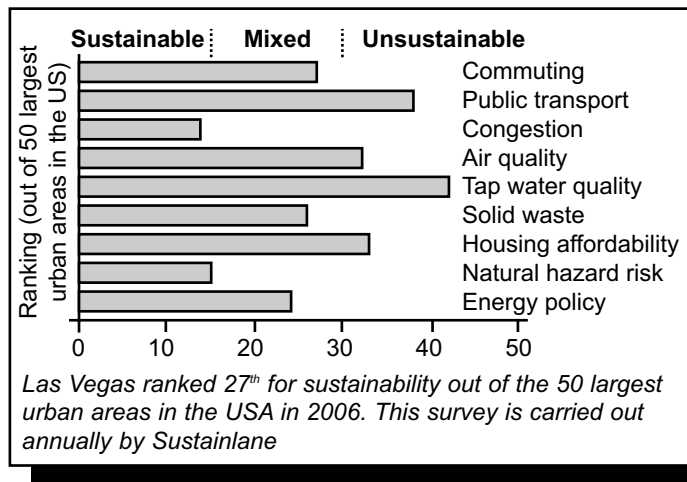
- Protect natural environments and preserve biodiversity
- Use resources efficiently
- Minimise urban sprawl and greenfield site use
- Recycle waste

**ECONOMIC**

- Provide jobs
- Reduce poverty

From an environmental and social standpoint, Las Vegas has a mixed record, as Fig. 8 shows. Commuting is mixed, largely because of continued **urban sprawl**. The *Case Study* examines this issue in detail.

**Fig. 8 Sustainability in Las Vegas, 2006.**



Public transport use is poor in Las Vegas. There is an extensive bus network, the CAT Bus (Citizens Area Transit), with low fares. It carries 175,000 passengers per day. Only 4% of commuters use public transport. In 2004 an elevated 3.9 mile monorail opened to the east of the Strip linking the MGM Grand with the Sahara. The venture was privately financed, and a single ticket is \$5. There are plans to extend the monorail to the downtown and McCarran airport, however funding is not in place, passenger number are lower than expected and some describe the **monorail** as a 'white elephant'. The continued increase in population, and car numbers, has meant that Vegas has a developing air pollution problem whereas it was once known for its clean air.

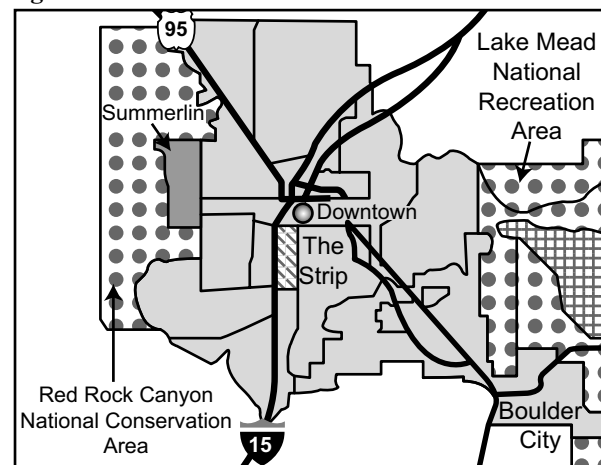
**Water** probably represents the city's biggest problem. A desert city with a population of 1.8 million, projected to be 3 million by 2020, is always going to have water supply issues. 90% of city water comes from the Colorado River, via Lake Mead behind the Hoover Dam. Quality is low, as shown in Fig. 8. Taking more water from Lake Mead is not really an option, as the lake level is at an historic low and other areas (California, Pheonix) have demands too. Plans have been put forward to build a 285 mile, \$2 billion pipeline to pump water to Vegas from groundwater aquifers in eastern Nevada. Critics of this scheme argue that groundwater supplies will be over-pumped, and prove unsustainable themselves. In Las Vegas valley itself, overpumping of groundwater has seen the water-table fall by 90m in some places, and the surface subside by up to 2m.

**Case Study: Urban Sprawl in Las Vegas**

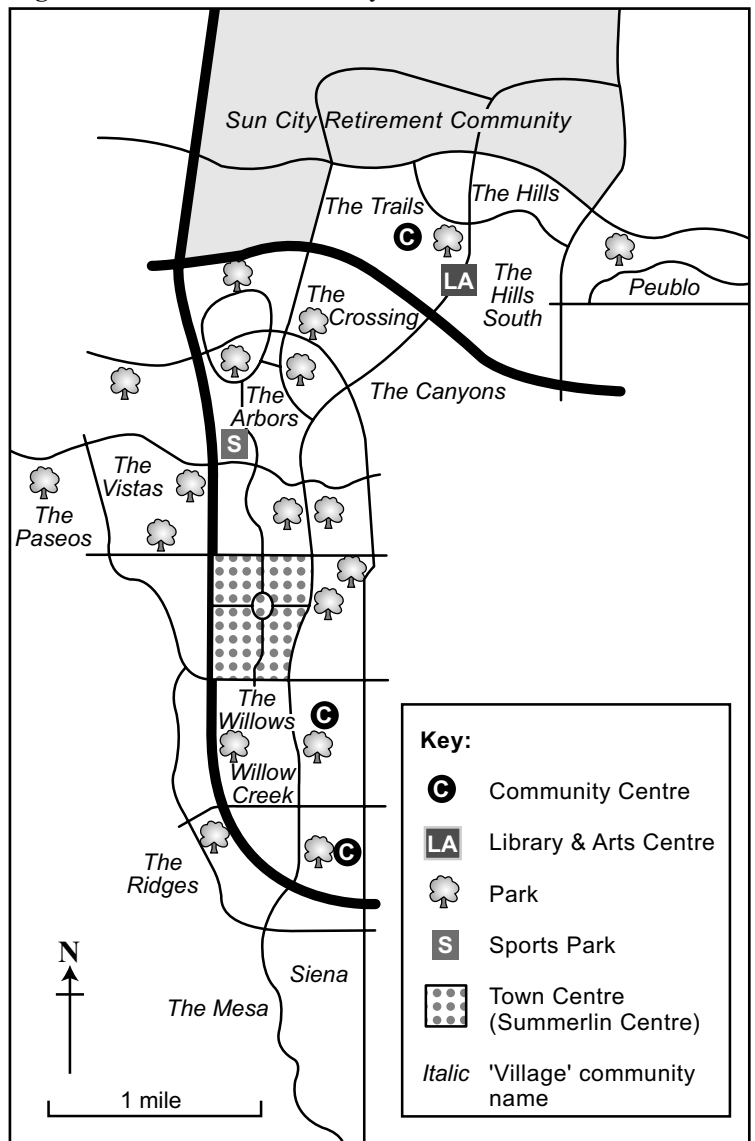
Las Vegas is one of the fastest growing cities in the USA, with a 14% rise in population between 2000 and 2005. Most of these are migrants from elsewhere in the USA, attracted to the sunbelt by the climate, and to Vegas by the low 4% unemployment rate. Many choose to live in the sprawling suburbs being built in the desert to the north and west of the city. 34,000 new homes were built in 2006, and the average house price is now \$320,000. This helps explain why housing affordability is unsustainable in Fig. 8. Many new suburban homes are in gated communities, often with their own golf courses and country clubs. Summerlin (and the age-restricted Sun City next door) is one of the largest suburban communities (Fig. 10). Increasingly, urban sprawl is running up against protected Federal Land (see Fig. 9 location map).

The Summerlin housing area covers 95km<sup>2</sup> of city-edge Las Vegas and has a population of about 90,000. The residential area is divided into around 15 'village' communities. Development began in 1990. North of Summerlin is Sun City, an age restricted community for the 55+. Here, 14,000 people live in 8000 retirement bungalows. Golf courses, community centres, shops and schools are provided on site. At over 100,000, the total population of the 2 developments is similar in size to Carlisle and Dover.

**Fig. 9 Location of Summerlin.**



**Fig. 10 Summerlin and Sun City.**

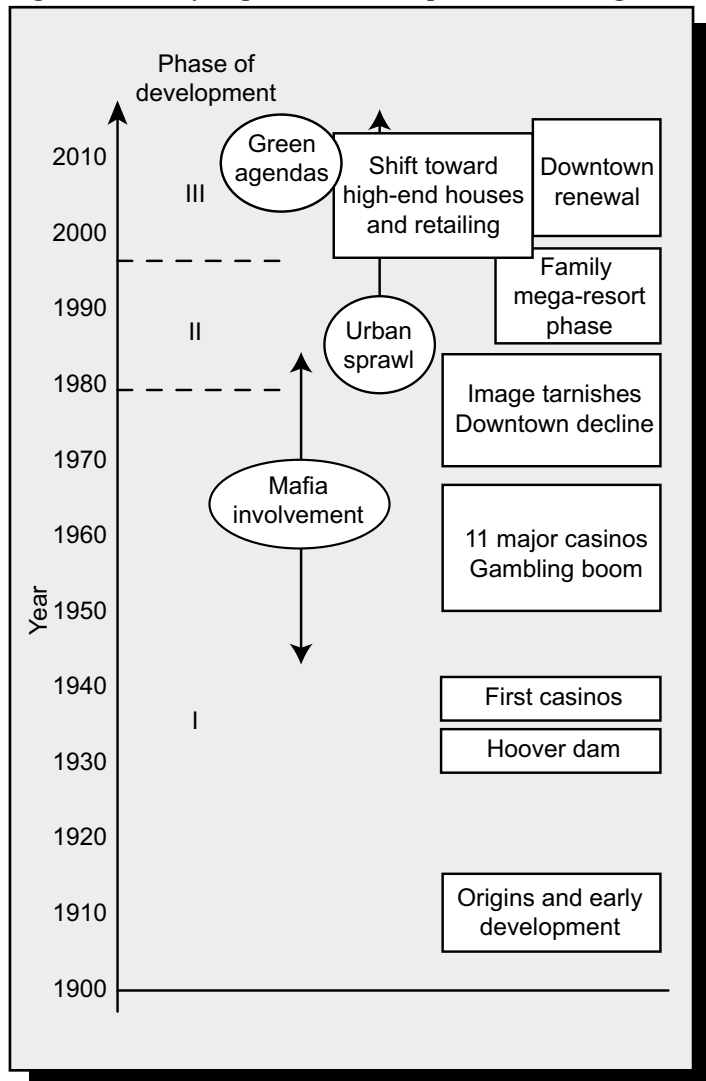


### Conclusion

In many ways Las Vegas is an immature city, still sprawling outwards as it rapidly grows. Its core business, tourism, is beginning to mature as it shifts away from its sinful image. The city's sins are now more environmental than moral, as it struggles to renew its downtown area and balance its resources, especially water, with its population. *Fig. 11* gives an overview of the changes that have, and continue to, take place in Las Vegas.

- Phase I refers to the initial growth, and eventual boom peaking in the late 1960s.
- In Phase II, Las Vegas declined, as refocuses on family entertainment.
- The current phase, III, has involved a wholesale **re-imaging** and a growing realisation that **urban regeneration** and **urban sustainability** are key challenges to address, to ensure the city's long term success.

**Fig. 11 Summary of phases of development in Las Vegas.**



### Guidelines for exam questions

- (1) Re-imaging is about perceptions, and changing negative perceptions into positive ones. In Vegas, regeneration, new types of hotels, retailing and advertising have all been used to move the city's image away from seedy gambling, towards a more up-market one.
- (2) A number of forces are at work here. A regenerated downtown is likely to attract more people, but can it ever compete with the strip? Recent retail and planned hotel development on the Strip will surely just increase its appeal. The suburbs, such as Summerlin, are perceived as more attractive places to live than the downtown too.
- (3) In terms of citizens, lifestyles may be the key. Reduced car use, car sharing and efficient water use all need to be encouraged. City planners need to consider public transport developments and perhaps restrictions on suburban expansion.

### Further research

- *TimeOut Las Vegas*, 2005, TimeOut Guides
- [www.sustainlane.com](http://www.sustainlane.com)
- *University of Nevada*, Las Vegas, Centre for Business and Economic Research
- *Las Vegas Downtown Centennial Plan*, 2007, City of Las Vegas
- [www.CityCenter.com](http://www.CityCenter.com)
- *US Census Bureau*, American Factfinder thematic maps

### Exam questions

- (1) With reference to Las Vegas, explain the term 'urban re-imaging'.
- (2) Assess the chances that the planned redevelopment of downtown Las Vegas will be successful in the long-term.
- (3) Suggest how citizens and city managers might contribute to making Las Vegas a more sustainable city.

### Acknowledgements

This Factsheet was written by Cameron Dunn who is a Principal Examiner and teaches at Westfield School, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

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