

Southern Nevada Regional Open Space & Trails Context An Overview for Speakers



Southern Nevada Regional Open Space & Trails Summit

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Prepared by Outside Las Vegas Foundation
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The Setting

Southern Nevada¹ has been one of the fastest growing areas of the United States over the last two decades. It is comprised of Clark County and numerous municipalities, townships and communities ranging in size from 1.8 million to 30 residents.² The population in Clark County is nearing two million residents. Over 70,000 people continue to settle here annually. Southern Nevada has been at the top or near the top for population growth nationally the past 15 years. This area is also a world-class tourist destination hosting over 36 million visitors from all points of the globe each year.

One of the emerging tourism sectors in Southern Nevada is ecotourism. Seven million acres of spectacular natural landscapes - ranging from lush forested Alpine environment to dry desert landscapes - surround the Las Vegas Valley, forming one of the most unique settings of any large urban area in North America. This immense area includes:

- Lake Mead National Recreation Area, National Park Service
- Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, Toiyabe National Forest, U. S. Forest Service
- Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex, (Desert, Moapa, Ash Meadows, Pahrnagat), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Bureau of Land Management (NLCS)³
- Sloan Canyon National Conservation Area, Bureau of Land Management (NLCS)

An additional three million acres rounds out the total public lands available to explore, appreciate and conserve. There are a total of eight congressionally-designated special management areas in Southern Nevada. This means that they are not only of local significance, but important to the nation as a whole. In addition, there are 19 designated wilderness areas in Clark County alone, and 14 in Lincoln County. These public lands encompass approximately 80 percent of the total land base, leaving only about 15 percent of Southern Nevada in private ownership. The public lands in Southern Nevada receive some 16 million visitors a year and contribute over \$1.5 billion to the local economy.

¹ When we talk about Southern Nevada, we are generally referring to Clark County. But this can also include the southern portions of Nye County and Lincoln County.

² Includes cities and townships of Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson, Boulder City, Mesquite, Laughlin, Searchlight, Jean, Primm, Moapa, Overton, Logandale, Indian Springs, Blue Diamond, Goodsprings, Nelson, Sandy Valley, Kyle Canyon/Mt. Charleston, Glendale, and Bunkerville.

³ National Landscape Conservation System

To obtain more information on key issues and quality of life indicators for Southern Nevada, we suggest you visit the Clark County, Nevada website at: www.accessclarkcounty.com. This site includes, among other things, the County's strategic plan and initiatives and the core services, outcomes and performance indicators. We also suggest you look at the Clark County Monitoring Program website at: www.monitoringprogram.com. The Clark County Monitoring Program was established in 2005 to provide a foundation for on-going policy discussions and a baseline from which changes could be monitored over time. The Program is comprised of indicators in core areas, including environmental, economic, community well-being, fiscal, developmental, public health and safety.

The Challenges

A number of actions and events are profoundly impacting the quality of life, the economy and infrastructure of Southern Nevadan communities, and the preservation of our public lands. These include population growth, urban in-fill and suburban development, the Bureau of Land Management land disposal program, and burgeoning land costs. These challenges demand a new approach to funding, management, and community involvement on public lands issues.

There has been pressure over the years to privatize some of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) public lands (those not included in the National Landscape Conservation System/NLCS). The BLM Resource Management Plan for the Las Vegas Field Office established disposal boundaries around many of the communities in southern Nevada. This allows the land to eventually be privatized or held in trust by local jurisdictions.

Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act⁴

The process for privatizing these lands was defined in the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act (SNPLMA) and also in the Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation, and Development Act of 2004. The SNPLMA became law in October 1998. It allows the BLM to sell public land at public auction within a specific disposal boundary around Las Vegas and throughout Clark County. The revenue derived from land sales is split between the State of Nevada General Education Fund (5%), the Southern Nevada Water Authority (10%), and a Special Account (85%) available to the Secretary of the Interior.

The SNPLMA Fund is the most significant funding program in southern Nevada for open space and trail related efforts. The monies in the Special Account are 85% of the total revenue collected from the sale of the BLM public lands and can be used for:

- Acquisition of environmentally sensitive lands in Nevada, with priority given to lands in Clark County.
- Capital improvements at the Lake Mead NRA, Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex, Red Rock Canyon NRA and other areas administered by the BLM in Clark County, and the Spring Mountains NRA.
- Development of parks, trails, and natural areas in Clark County pursuant to a cooperative agreement with a unit of local or regional government.
- Conservation initiatives on public land in Clark County, Nevada, administered by the Department of the Interior or the Department of Agriculture.

⁴ <http://www.nv.blm.gov/snplma/> for more details.

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- Development of a multi-species habitat conservation plan in Clark County.
- Lake Tahoe Restoration Act projects.

The SNPLMA has also been a tremendous revenue source for the funding of conservation programs in southern Nevada. To date, over \$2.6 billion dollars has been deposited into the Special Account from land sold within the Las Vegas Valley Disposal boundary. Over \$2.2 billion dollars of the Special Reserve has already been approved for various projects within the allowable funding categories, including:

- \$347 million has gone to acquire sensitive environmental lands;
- \$441 million for capital improvements on the public lands;
- \$171 million for conservation initiatives on the public lands;
- \$1 billion to local governments for parks, trails and natural areas;
- \$53 million for Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Planning and implementation; and
- \$130 million for Lake Tahoe Restoration.

The Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation, and Development Act of 2004 created 14 wilderness areas (768,000 acres), and directs the BLM to auction up to 87,000 acres of federal land in the county. The proceeds from these annual auctions are distributed as follows:

- 5% - State of Nevada Education Fund
- 45% - Lincoln County Economic Development, including parks, trails, natural areas
- 50% - Special Account for use by the Secretary of the Interior for:
 - Inventory, evaluation, protection, management of archaeological resources
 - Development of a multi-species conservation plan for Lincoln County
 - Management of the Silver State Off-Highway Trail
 - Management of the 14 wilderness areas created by the bill

The SNPLMA funds can only be used for planning, design, environmental analysis, and capital construction costs. No SNPLMA monies can be used to support staff positions or operation and maintenance costs. The four public lands management agencies, Clark County, the local jurisdictions and the Southern Nevada Water Authority are the only entities that can apply for and receive the SNPLMA funding. No private organizations or individuals are able to participate in the funding program.

Question 10 Transportation Bond Issue

In 2002, the voters in Clark County passed a comprehensive transportation bond issue for transportation improvements called "Question 10." The "Question 10" bond issue included \$68 million to help cover the maintenance of shared use trails that were included on the approved "Off-Street Shared Use Path Network. Presently, only 71 miles of the off-street network have been built but funding is available through "Question 10" to help support maintenance of the 760 miles that, ultimately, are expected to be built as part of the approved off-road network. There are sufficient funds in the program to cover the maintenance costs until the year 2028.

The "Question 10" monies cover the annual pro-rated annual life cycle costs of repaving plus annual surface maintenance costs for items such as stripping, sweeping, safety lighting, cleaning of drainage and storm channels and debris cleanup. The local jurisdictions receive

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reimbursement at the rate of \$8,000 per trail mile per year. "Question 10" does not cover the costs associated with landscape maintenance or trail amenities.

"Question 10" also allocated \$50 million for the maintenance of the on-street bike trail network. Again, the covered costs relate mainly to the life-cycle resurfacing costs and annual surface maintenance such as stripping and debris clean-up.

Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition⁵

The unprecedented growth in southern Nevada creates challenges in maintaining basic quality of life elements such as education, health care, the natural environment, public safety, recreation and culture, and transportation. Recognizing that these challenges transcend governmental jurisdictional boundaries, Clark County, the cities of Boulder City, Henderson, Las Vegas and North Las Vegas, and the Clark County School District entered into an interlocal agreement to establish the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition (SNRPC). The SNRPC facilitates regional collaboration and planning efforts.

The SNRPC's mission is to bring together all public jurisdictions to coordinate regional planning in a seamless fashion while respecting each member's autonomy. This requires promoting intergovernmental cooperation and trust built on careful planning and accountability, thus enhancing the quality of life in southern Nevada. The following seven mandated priorities of the Coalition are:

- Conservation, open space, and natural resource protection
- Population forecasts
- Land use
- Transportation
- Public facilities
- Air quality

Southern Nevada Agency Partnership⁶

The population boom in southern Nevada creates many challenging situations for the public land managers. They must fight litter, dumping, graffiti, urban boundary encroachments, illegal off-highway vehicle use, disturbance of fragile desert soils, cultural resource thefts, and exotic species threats, among other problems. In the late 1990's, the four public land management agencies began exploring the possibilities of combining agency resources and joining forces to most effectively and efficiently manage the totality of public lands in southern Nevada. The result of this vision is the Southern Nevada Agency Partnership/SNAP. This truly unique collaborative partnership has been designated as a national pilot for cooperative conservation and reinventing how government does business on a landscape level under the Service First Legislation.

As part of the SNAP effort, fourteen interagency teams have been formed to address initiatives including litter, cleanup, volunteerism, law enforcement, resource protection, recreation, research and education.

⁵ See <http://www.snrpc.org/> for more details.

⁶ See <http://publiclands.unlv.edu/snap.htm>

Recently, the Nevada System of Higher Education established the Public Lands Institute⁷ at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Their mission is to help the public lands management agencies develop comprehensive land management programs, ranging from messaging campaigns to field and laboratory research to place-based education. They provide staff/project support for some of the interagency teams and their initiatives.

Open Space and Trails - An Historical Perspective

The interest in preserving open space and developing interconnecting trails in southern Nevada has evolved mostly in the last five years. This is primarily a result of the population explosion and the densification of the urban form in Southern Nevada, brought about by the scarcity and cost of land and available funding from the SNPLMA. There is speculation that the Las Vegas Valley disposal boundary may be expanded in the near future, which makes it even more imperative to identify key open space resources prior to potential disposal and find ways to protect those areas.

Residents are increasingly concerned about the pace of development and the loss of open space. A number of recent resident surveys have showed that open space and trails are very important elements enhancing residents' quality of life. Additionally, they want to see more done in protecting key open space resources and in developing a variety of interconnected trails.

Current Local Government Planning Efforts

Until three years ago, there had been no open space studies done by any of the local jurisdictions. The City of Las Vegas completed the first Open Space and Trails Plan⁸ for the fast growing northwest in January 2005, which is now being implemented. The City of Henderson completed and approved their Open Space and Trails Plan in December 2006.

The SNRPC completed a Regional Open Space Plan⁹ in July 2006. This plan defines the vision, tools, strategies and conceptual framework for a regional approach to conserving open space in Southern Nevada. The focus of the plan is the Las Vegas Valley, and which emphasizes success through the cooperative efforts of communities, jurisdictions and citizens of the Valley, while respecting local autonomy.

Clark County has initiated an open space planning effort for the greater Las Vegas Valley to begin the implementation of the Regional Open Space Plan. The County has also initiated a similar plan for the Moapa Valley (located in the northeast area of the County), and intends to develop additional plans in rural townships as local interests dictate.

The Regional Transportation Commission¹⁰ has completed an inter-modal transportation plan that incorporates both on-street and off-street trails. All of the local jurisdiction plans support and encourage the development of an integrated and interconnected system of trails and open spaces.

⁷ See <http://publiclands.unlv>

⁸ See <http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/TextOnly/Publications/6048.htm>

⁹ See http://www.snrpc.org/RegionalPolicyPlan/OPENSACEPLAN_2006.pdf

¹⁰ See <http://www.rtsouthernnevada.com/>

Current Federal Agency Planning Efforts

There are a series of open space, trails and recreation related planning efforts that will be initiated this year by the federal agencies, particularly the BLM. The BLM will be initiating a trail planning and design study for the corridor adjacent to Route 159 through Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area/NCA. They will also be conducting a North Red Rock Canyon NCA Trail System Plan Feasibility Study and a Trails Plan for the Sloan Canyon NCA. Over the next two years, BLM will also be developing nine Recreation Area Management Plans, where potential trails and points of connectivity will be evaluated.

The SNAP Interagency Recreation Team has an inventory underway for all of the recreation-related infrastructure, including trails, pathways, roads, in Southern Nevada. And, the USFS has incorporated the identification of potential trail corridors and connectivity in their recently completed Middle Kyle Canyon Plan and the Spring Mountains NRA West Side Plan.

Interagency Coordination

For the past three years, there has been an informal local jurisdiction coordinating group for trails and connectivity called the "Vias de Vegas Trail Connectivity Group. Although there were good efforts being initiated individually by the various local and federal jurisdictions, there was little coordination between the agencies. As a result, there were missed opportunities for connectivity, and even some potential conflicts with adjacent jurisdictions. The Outside Las Vegas Foundation solicited the assistance of the National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program to establish and facilitate the Vias de Vegas Trail Connectivity Group. The Group consists of the four federal agencies, five municipalities, the Regional Transportation Commission and Clark County Regional Flood Control District.

The Vias de Vegas Group's role has primarily been to coordinate trail efforts and encourage the development of a regional system of trails and open spaces for Southern Nevada. This evolving system is locally referred to as the "Vias de Vegas" and is a movement to improve the quality of life and community character by providing an integrated and interconnected system of trails and open space linking residential, civic, commercial and business landscapes to parks and recreational facilities operated by federal, state and local governments. The link between trails and open spaces is that trails are generally in attractive open space corridors. The regional trail and open space system serves both shorter local trips as well as long distance treks to outlying destinations on the public lands.

Presently, there is interest in restructuring the Trails Connectivity Group to play a more formal role in coordinating both trail and open space efforts regionally.

Why Have a Summit

The idea of a Summit originated from the Vias de Vegas Trails Connectivity Group. The Group felt that there was a need to elevate the community's understanding and support for development of a regional system of trails and open space. Although there are many sound and innovative trails and open space efforts unfolding in Southern Nevada, the citizens and leadership of Southern Nevada may not be engaged as fully as they could be; they may not have the necessary appreciation for and understanding of what it will take to transform the

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current system of planning, construction and maintenance of trails and open spaces into a world class integrated regional open space and trails system.

Thus, the Summit offers an opportunity to:

- Raise the political profile and support
- Increase public understanding and support
- Showcase present successes
- Learn about successful programs around the country
- Dialogue on the challenges and existing disconnects
- Initiate a multi-jurisdictional partnership agreement that will explore the feasibility of implementing a regional open space and trails system

The Summit will be an invitation-only event. We will be inviting elected officials, governmental decision-makers and practitioners; environmental and trail user organizations; and local and regional agencies.

Funding Opportunity

There is opportunity in Southern Nevada to create a world-class regional system of trails and open spaces. For example, almost \$300 million from the SNPLMA Fund has been approved in the last five years for trails and trail-related infrastructure for the local jurisdictions. Monies have also supported several trail projects on the public lands. This has amounted to approximately 300 miles of trails within Clark County. In addition, funding from the Federal Highways Administration Program and from the Nevada State Trails Program Fund has been utilized locally to develop trails.

The SNPLMA provides a very fortuitous opportunity to fund additional trail development and open space acquisitions in the future. It is very important that the community utilize this money wisely. Developing connectivity for the open space and trail efforts between the urban landscape and the adjacent federal lands is exponentially more valuable than just funding trail segments and open spaces preservation that do not provide connectivity as part of a regional system.

Infrastructure Challenges

Since trails and open space programs are reasonably new to southern Nevada, there are not the institutional structures in place. For example, open space is not a clear mandate within any of the local jurisdictions, with the exception of the City of Henderson and perhaps the City of Las Vegas. Therefore, there is an expectation that the Summit allow for the exploration of how other communities have structured/restructured to develop, operate, maintain and fund trail and open space systems.

The SNRPC Open Space Plan outlined several possible approaches for dealing with the infrastructure-related needs such as:

- Creating and facilitating a “forum” of metropolitan jurisdictions and stakeholder entities to pursue implementation;
- Creating an obligated funding source earmarked for specifically assigned staff and Board leadership to pursue implementation of the plan; and

- Creating a special “open space district” or “authority” with adequate funding to pursue the initiatives of the plan.

We see the Summit as helping to address the first step in creating a community forum where southern Nevada decision-makers can be exposed to concepts from other communities.

Operations & Maintenance

Although, we have access to funding in southern Nevada for trail development and open space acquisition, there is not sufficient budgetary support for operations and maintenance. This is particularly acute on the public lands where staffing and budgets for operations and maintenance are diminishing. The Clark County Question 10 Transportation Bond Issue monies available to help maintain the on-street and off-street shared use path network cannot be used for trails on the federal lands. This requires looking at partnerships and other mechanisms to maintain the system. We are hopeful that the Summit can bring some “outside” partnership concepts to the community’s attention.

Benefits of a System

We are also interested in increasing our community’s understanding of the benefits of an interconnected system of trails and open space. There is a reasonably good understanding of the intrinsic values of trails and open spaces, but not a good understanding of many of the other benefits, particularly the economic and health-related benefits. We would like to broaden the constituency for trails and open space to the health industry, development community, and others. We need to learn how to conserve through our developments, as demonstrated by several of our more recent master planned communities, which are built around “green infrastructure” of trails, natural washes and open spaces.

We would like for the local politicians to see how trails and open spaces can help address other critical community concerns. We want the decision-makers to understand why open space and trails are good investments and essential to the evolution of a successful and sustainable community. We are hopeful that speakers can address these broader benefits and how they have played out in other communities.

Additional Information

You can Google: Clark County Nevada Community Growth Task; Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation, and Development Act of 2004; Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act; City of Henderson, Nevada Open Space Plan; City of Las Vegas Nevada Northwest Open Space Plan; Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition Open Space Plan; Southern Nevada Agency Partnership; UNLV Public Lands Institute; and Outside Las Vegas Foundation...for more information.