

A Message from the President Ethel Sheffer, AICP

This is one of the last opportunities that I will have to greet you as President of the NY Metro Chapter. It has been a privilege and a lot of fun to serve the Chapter and all of you in these six years. I have tried to make all the hard work look effortless (ha!) but as you know, it takes persistent effort on the part of all of us to make the Chapter serve you well and to promote excellent planning in the New York region. After three terms, let me review some of the accomplishments of the last years and outline the challenges that lie ahead.

The Chapter has doubled its membership, bringing us up to around 1,450 enrolled professionals and students in the region. In national terms, we are still considered a middle-sized chapter, but our recent membership spurt resulted in more representation at the National Delegate Assembly. We were recognized nationally a couple of years ago with the Best Chapter Award and we continue to be singled out for our programs and for our collaborations and conferences with civic and professional groups.

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APA Conference in Las Vegas



The 100th National Planning Conference was at two huge casino/hotels on the famous Las Vegas Strip, April 27 – May 1. Inside, it was impossible to move from one session to another without darting through acres of slot machines. Outside, planners confronted reduced-scale reproductions of famous world sites, all the while questioning why this place exists in the middle of a water-starved desert. In this issue we provide first-hand reports from Chapter members and a special reprint from the Las Vegas Sun on remarks by Paul Goldberger and the immediate reaction from the chief local planner.

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A Message From The President (continued)

We have weighed in and played a constructive and critical leadership role on key issues and projects, ranging from the rebuilding of Lower Manhattan to the development of Hudson Yards, to the rather tortured development of Moynihan Station, to the implementation of PlaNYC, to lobbying with others for congestion pricing, to promoting revisions in the 125th Street rezoning and other zoning plans around the city.

Our Long Island, Lower Hudson East and West Sections have all continued to sponsor educational, advocacy and social events for their particular geographic membership while working within the Chapter to promote effective regional planning in the metropolitan area.

We have been laboring to make the new AICP Certification Maintenance Program work for all our members by sponsoring our own programs that qualify for such credit and by soliciting sponsors and partners for training and educational events for which AICPs can receive CM credit. Our March letter to APA/AICP summarized a number of your comments and concerns about the growing pains, operations and equity of the new program and that letter received support from other Chapters and close attention and response from National. The program is working better and faster now but there are continuing questions about costs to the Chapters and providers, about quality and diversity of programs and about the need for flexibility to permit members to attend the variety of worthwhile and high quality events in New York as well as to encourage self-study and distance/on-line training and education while gaining approved credit. Most of us are very much in favor of continuing education, and we want to make the program work for all NY Metro Chapter members as we collaborate with National APA to make the program a success.

As we look ahead, it seems to me that there are a number of practical and visionary goals that should guide the Chapter. Here is a beginning list of those goals and tasks:

- Engage in targeted fundraising to increase scholarships for students in all the planning schools in the New York metropolitan area.
- Develop a strategic plan and evaluation mechanism for the Chapter that won't just be put on a shelf, but will reflect the practical needs of members by means of a menu of programs and strategies.
- Expand the membership of committees to make them more diverse, to enable them to do research on leading planning issues and projects and to be sure that all committees (all staffed by volunteers) have a year-long agenda of meetings and targets.
- Develop an educational and advocacy structure for the


public and for the media so that NY Metro becomes the place to go for an understanding of planning issues.

- Expand NY Metro's efforts to train community boards and planning officials in new planning techniques and outreach.
- Recruit sponsors who can provide financial support for training workshops for members and for communities and planning officials.
- Improve and expand the connections with the region's planning schools to enhance the natural and sometimes neglected connections between academics and the professional planner.

In a recent piece in *The New York Times*, the film critic A.O. Scott wrote about planners (and architects) in contrast to the great 20th century film makers who depicted the city and the future. He described the moviemaker's view of the urban life as nightmarish, intimate, efficient and often dehumanizing. The architect and the planner are "both practical-minded and utopian. Their job is to solve problems, to ground their projects in collective hopes for a grander, cleaner, more rational organization of human space. The long-term results of their efforts, however, are typically ambiguous, yielding new problems on top of solutions."

It is up to us to create an exciting vision of the future metropolis and to work together to make sure that it is realized.

All the best,
Ethel



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Planners Outwit Scavenger Hunt Challenges

By David Fields

NYC Section Director, Chapter Executive Committee

Quick, where's the nearest public bath? Find an ethnic enclave! Name your City Councilperson and their committee assignments!

Know the answers? Planners who participated in the NY Metro Chapter's 2nd Annual Planners' Scavenger Hunt did. With four teams braving record temperatures, all 22 clues were tracked down. Whether finding original dedications to the City of Brooklyn or the subject of a planning-related lawsuit, the teams scoured the city on Sunday afternoon, June 8. And answers weren't easy. Some involved planners debating and defining, much like planning itself.

With four different answers to "the last of its kind" and "a result of a change in the NYC zoning code," the Scavenger Hunt was a chance for planners to shine in the knowledge of the city's planning, history and development.

At the end of the Hunt, the teams regrouped in Midtown to show pictures of their adventures and talk about what they saw. Advice for next year's hunt? Give the teams more clues and more time to prove their planning mettle.

The Metro Chapter's 2nd Annual Planners' Scavenger Hunt was co-sponsored by the Transportation Committee and the New York City section.

Green is the New Civic

By Janet Jenkins, AICP

Co-Chair, Chapter Transportation Committee
Associate, Eng-Wong, Taub & Associates

Creating livable urban and suburban environments should include substantial provision for pedestrian and bicycle facilities, prioritizing first pedestrians, then cyclists, followed by vehicles. Five experts explored these concepts on April 17 at a panel discussion titled "Non-Motorized Transportation: What Now? What Next?" hosted by the NY Metro Chapter, NYMTC and the New York Chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

Setting the stage, Alex Washburn, Chief Urban Designer for the NYC Department of City Planning, conceptualized that our future lies not in building grand civic infrastructure, but rather in the intersection of urbanism and ecology, where building "green" is our new civic responsibility. Michael King of Nelson\Nygaard Consulting discussed pedestrian and bike environments in other world cities to serve as models for our region. Current and future bikeway and pedestrian plans in the region were presented, with NYMTC's Howard Mann discussing projects from Long Island to Westchester and Hayes Lord and Randy Wade from the NYC Department of Transportation speaking about exciting developments in bikeway planning and pedestrian plazas.

The audience of over 70 planners asked discerning questions and the variety of perspectives from speakers and audience gave insight to the desire for great, sustainable pedestrian and bikeway planning in the New York region.

Dutchess County Planning Chief Lays Out Planning Prospects and Projects

Four trends are shaping planning prospects in Dutchess County according to the County Planning Commissioner Roger P. Akeley, AICP. In an article originally prepared for the Dutchess County Planning Federation newsletter, "Plan On It," he set out his thoughts and described how the County planning department would respond by shaping its work program. As Mr. Akeley has keen insight into planning in the Hudson Valley that should be of interest to planners across the Chapter's geography, we present his article below.

By Roger P. Akeley, AICP
Commissioner of Planning, Dutchess County

Several larger forces that will help to shape our communities have been experiencing notable changes this past year, including the slowdown of the housing market, shake-ups in the mortgage industry, and increased environmental awareness marked by widespread acknowledgement of the impacts of climate change. How our communities in Dutchess County will fare in the upcoming years depends, in part, on the work we are all doing now to properly plan for balancing economic growth while preserving our important natural surroundings. One advantage of being Commissioner of Planning is that I can look through a countywide lens to see how we are approaching these issues.

In reviewing planning initiatives

throughout the County over the last few years, the following four trends emerged:

1. Geographic Information Systems (GIS): Local planners and environmental advocates spend considerable time with our GIS staff and Cornell Cooperative Extension's Environment Program to use detailed environmental and property data for determining viewsheds, open-space corridors, and other relevant planning information considered inaccessible to the public just a few years ago.

2. New Town Centers: The most dramatic example of this has been the LaGrange initiative to promote a Town Center in Freedom Plains. This is a mixed-use district that allows creative, village-like development with housing up to 12 units per acre. The recent rezoning will, in effect, allow LaGrange to grow the first new village-scale development in Dutchess County since the coming of the railroads in the 1850s. Beekman and East Fishkill are also considering town center approaches.

3. Priority Growth Area: Hyde Park was the first community to begin to incorporate the priority growth area approach in its 2005 plan and zoning. This approach focuses development potential in favored, "smart" locations, while restricting it in environmentally sensitive or agricultural areas. Red Hook, Rhinebeck, and the Town of Poughkeepsie are other lo-

calities using this approach. For example, Poughkeepsie has designated the Crown Heights and Fairview neighborhoods as priority growth centers.

4. Biodiversity as a Planning Element: The trend is to view ourselves as being part of nature, not above it. This results from an ecological view of the world based on a sense of interdependence and reverence for all forms of life. Several localities, beginning with East Fishkill, have commissioned "biodiversity" studies to help them understand environmental interrelationships and to foster development policies that will identify and protect critical habitats. This fits in to the priority growth center concept as we seek compact "human habitats" to coexist with outlying areas that should see limited or no development.

These trends correspond with work we are doing here at the Department of Planning and Development. There are three County planning activities I would like to emphasize:

Local Centers and Greenspaces Maps. Working with the towns of Red Hook, Rhinebeck and Poughkeepsie, as well as the City of Beacon, our department has created model "Centers and Greenspaces" plan maps. They identify potential development areas within walking distance of existing and emerging centers, while at the same time showing priority natural and agricultural greenspaces for long-term protection. These maps also show major floodplain and wetlands systems, steep slopes, major greenway trails, and transit corridors. The County would like to make a baseline Centers and Greenspaces working map for each town and city and submit it for local review and modification. Some communities may then choose to incorporate the map into future planning processes.

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Dutchess County Planning Chief Lays Out Planning Prospects (continued)

County Centers and Greenspaces Strategy. We are simultaneously working on a first-cut draft Centers and Greenspaces map for the entire County. This draft map provides county-level GIS information and planning projections on overall landscape corridors, Greenway systems, and settlement patterns. Initial results give us a pretty good picture of the most important agricultural areas, significant habitats, and the best areas to concentrate new development within Dutchess County. The current draft shows approximately 75 neighborhood centers (city), villages, hamlets, and emerging centers in Dutchess County. As communities renew their local plans, the digital version of the countywide map will be updated with current, more accurate information, including detailed illustrative site plans for certain priority growth centers.

Local Subdivision Procedures with a "Fit-It-In" Component. These model subdivision procedures will allow some basic fact-finding and dialogue between the planning board and potential subdivider before any serious private money is spent on a survey or other site planning requirements. These procedures have been presented at a Dutchess County Planning Federation workshop and are available on the Department of Planning and Development's website. The towns of Hyde Park and Poughkeepsie have already adopted regulations similar to the model prepared by Dutchess County Department of Planning and Development.

Our lead planners will contact each community in 2008 to discuss how the above work can be adapted to local conditions. For interested municipalities, we will offer the support necessary to help develop new Centers and Greenspaces maps and make suggestions regarding local subdivision regulations. The proposed subdivision amendment, by itself, is a good start to protecting the natural and agricultural values of Dutchess County. It will be a positive planning achievement if most communities work to augment their existing subdivision regulations in 2008.

For more information, go to www.co.dutchess.ny.us/CountyGov/Departments/Planning/PLIndex.htm

Planning Awards Presented in Westchester County

The Westchester Municipal Planning Federation conducted its 35th annual awards dinner on May 29 with 200 local elected and appointed officials, professional planners and other land use practitioners in attendance at Trump National Golf Club in Briarcliff Manor.

The highest honors, achievement awards, were presented to:

- Ossining Public Library for a new LEED-certified library
- Westchester County for a GIS 2008 Natural Resource Inventory Map Series
- City of White Plains for its comprehensive Affordable Housing Program
- Town of Yorktown for a multi-

jurisdictional Trailway Connection Study

Commendations were presented to:

- Village of Hastings-on-Hudson for the new James Harmon Community Center
- City of Mount Vernon for the James Varick Affordable Homes
- Town of New Castle for development of the Route 120 Pedestrian Path
- City of White Plains for implementation of a Construction Management Protocol

In addition, two volunteer land use board members were presented with Distinguished Citizen Planner awards and a graduate student in Hunter College's planning program was awarded a scholarship.



The awards program began with a reception on the golf club terrace.

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Visitor's Comments Ignite Local Controversy

Every planner at the Las Vegas conference found making professional judgments about planning in Las Vegas impossible to avoid. As reported in the following story from the Las Vegas Sun, the final keynote speaker – longtime New Yorker Paul Goldberger – pushed one city official to fight back. The second story reports on Mr. Goldberger's presentation and captures in greater detail his observations. Many of us who went through the Las Vegas experience may have come to similar conclusions. Because his speech was the final word of the conference – and may have been missed – we thought it well worth sharing.

Planning official up in arms over putdowns of Las Vegas

By Joe Schoenmann

Reprinted with permission from the May 3, 2008 edition of the Las Vegas Sun

Las Vegas Planning Director Margo Wheeler bristled at the distinguished architecture critic's digs at her city.

When he finished, she hurried to the stage to confront Paul Goldberger — nicely.

"Judging Las Vegas based on the Strip would be like me going to Manhattan and judging all of New York City on Times Square," she told him.

Goldberger conceded as much and noted that he didn't have as much time as he would have liked to tour downtown Las Vegas, to see what's transpired in the three years or so since he'd last been there. Through a forced grin, Wheeler invited him to a tour upon his return.

After his speech at the American Planning Association conference here, Goldberger admonished himself, saying he would have liked to have "rented a car" to tour downtown.

During his speech, he clarified that in talking about Las Vegas, he was focusing on the meaning and evolution of architecture on the Strip — which is in the county, not the

city. He drew from and expanded on the 1972 book "Learning From Las Vegas" by Robert Venturi, Steven Izenour and Denise Scott Brown, which defended, even gloried in, the growing Strip of the early 1970s.

Still, he admitted later: "I should have given more credit to the extent to which Margo and the mayor have pushed things."

Hours after his speech and with more time to think, Wheeler remained staunch in her defense of the city's efforts and incensed at Goldberger's interpretation.

Who could forget one of his opening lines, which had almost everyone laughing?

"I'm not sure a session on Vegas is the way to end the conference. It might have made a little more sense to welcome you here on Monday, to set you up for what you were going to wallow in. Then again, there's something to be said for reflecting on it now, after you've presumably had a chance to wallow in it."

And this zinger: "Having many urban planners gathering in Las Vegas is not exactly the same as if a convention of temperance advocates were meeting here. Nonetheless, I think there's still a bit of a sense of discordance between this group and what it stands for and the place in which you are meeting. It seems to be a little bit of a paradox — urbanists meeting in the ultimate nonurban city."

Later Wheeler spoke with a force and emotion that had her almost gasping for air, unable to let go of Goldberger's comments about downtown Las Vegas and his belief that "Las Vegas wishes the downtown would simply evaporate."

"It's interesting that Las Vegas don't care about downtown, but the planning director and mayor live within walking distance of City Hall," she said, her words dripping with irony. "It was the ignorance of it all that infuriated me."

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Planning official up in arms over putdowns of Las Vegas
(continued)

Oh — and there was the thing Goldberger said about Las Vegas “history.”

“The one thing Las Vegas does not do well is thinking of itself in historical terms,” he said. “Anything that promotes looking back is, by definition, unwelcome in this city.”

Wheeler’s livid response: “We had historical walking tours, driving tours. Just this morning I left a session that we did on the Neon Museum and putting the neon back on Las Vegas Boulevard. That’s history. What about the Mob Museum?”

The Mob Museum is slowly filling the shell of an old post office, circa 1933, a block from City Hall. The city hopes to open the museum, expected to cost up to \$50 million, in 2010.

That said, the Strip’s well-known history of imploding history and then building over it is enough to make even Vegas residents doubt that anyone here cares much about preserving the past.

As a photographer for the planning association clicked shots of Wheeler confronting Goldberger, he called out: “Come on, Paul, say something nice about Las Vegas!”

“He did say nice things, he did,” Wheeler insisted. “I just think there’s a side to Las Vegas he’s never seen.”

Surprise! Strip’s an Urban Place
It Wasn’t Planned That Way, But Now It’s
Being Copied Worldwide



Photo by Sam Morris/Las Vegas Sun

Contrary to plans, Paul Goldberger says, the Las Vegas Strip has become a place where crowds of people walk and gather at all hours.

By Joe Schoenmann

Reprinted with permission from the May 3, 2008 edition of the Las Vegas Sun

The views of architecture critic Paul Goldberger took some urban planners by surprise in Las Vegas this week, even jolting some into derisive chortles.

But the more than 1,000 planning specialists from around the world listening to the Pulitzer Prize winner’s talk had difficulty dismissing his argument that the rest of the world is learning from Las Vegas.

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Surprise! Strip's an Urban Place

(continued)

"As cities become less and less manufacturing centers, they develop more avenues for culture and entertainment, both of which Vegas has cultivated for decades," Goldberger said after a one-hour talk at the American Planning Association's 100th annual conference at Paris Las Vegas.

Because the meeting was held here, many of the hundreds of sessions held in conference rooms, and through walking and bus tours, focused on Las Vegas. How Las Vegas and New York similarly deal with sex workers was analyzed in one session. Another featured a tour of local parkland and a discussion of federal land policy. And homelessness was looked at in a tour titled "A Homeless Plan That Works."

Goldberger's keynote speech may have been one of the conference's most memorable for the simple reason that the former *New York Times* architecture critic put into words thoughts and ideas that rarely enter the minds of those who don't live here. Mainly, that although it's easy to see Las Vegas has taken from the world — the Venetian, Paris, New York-New York — few believe the rest of the world is beginning to mimic Las Vegas.

As cities spawned from now-dying heavy industries struggle for survival, some are pouring money into tourism, service and entertainment to bolster local economies. It's what Vegas — and right now, we're talking about the Strip — has mastered for decades.

"Today, almost every older city is becoming more and more a place of culture and entertainment, less a place of manufacturing, more a place of service businesses and health and education and tourism and leisure," Goldberger said. "Every city is becoming more like Las Vegas, we might almost say."

Goldberger, who now writes for *The New Yorker* and is a design professor and former dean at Parsons The New School for Design in Manhattan, also said something that might seem heresy to residents who avoid the Strip: He sees the Strip as having created an urban environment — if urbanism is defined as a place people want to be, where people walk, go to people-watch and get out in the day and night.

"The Strip was created to get away from the conventional city, and yet the conventional city — well, not truly the conventional city, but let's just say the idea of urbanism — caught up with it," he said.

Evidence, he commented, can be found in the hordes found there at all hours. "One thing that is amazing about the Strip "... is the presence of all of those thousands of people out strolling the Strip at night, sauntering from casino to casino like pilgrims wandering from church to church in Rome," Goldberger said. "This is urbanism in spite of itself — urbanism in spite of the builders of every building showing total indifference to it."

There's no question that people love their cars. "But it is true that if you give people something they want to see, and create a situation in which, for whatever reason, it is not particularly practical to use a car, and you make walking pleasurable and even exciting — well, then people will walk," he said. "The Strip is the ultimate example of the street that was not designed for walking, and people are walking on it."

Goldberger brought his audience through a history of development, "four generations" that focused on changes to the entertainment and gaming industries. He defined the first generation as the pre-World War II era, when Fremont Street was king and before the advent of the Flamingo, Stardust and other Las Vegas Boulevard properties. The second was heralded by the construction of those Strip casinos, whose oversized signs became more iconic than the structures themselves. The third generation came with the megaresorts — such as the Mirage, MGM Grand and New York-New York — buildings so massive and distinctive they served as signs themselves.

And now comes the fourth generation, a landscape not yet built, exemplified by the \$8 billion CityCenter and its "starchitects." How this new generation will fare, Goldberger wasn't certain. "I'm not sure what these people can bring to the party, and their dilemma in Las Vegas is a difficult one, because they obviously don't want to it."

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Surprise! Strip's an Urban Place

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design things that are just like the work they have done elsewhere," he said. "But neither do they want to design anything that looks too much like what is now in Las Vegas."

What's clear, he added, is that "Las Vegas' desire to make itself a kind of theme park of highlights from the rest of the world has not disappeared."

While there's no denying Las Vegas has a character all its own, the differences between it and other cities of the world are shrinking, Goldberger noted. "I don't mean that every city will become Las Vegas, and I absolutely don't mean to forgive this city's obvious shortcomings," he said. "I don't find a 50,000-room or whatever hotel amusing because it has a fake mansard roof. But if we put that aside for a moment and try to understand the realities of Las Vegas now, we see a place that really does show us much of what people want out of cities."

"They want grandeur and excitement and novelty and stimulation. They want to come to a city for what they cannot get on the Internet. It is not a bad set of things to want, and as we try to figure out how to provide these things in other places, and how to build cities that have the sustaining, nurturing qualities that this city undeniably lacks, we have to admit that we can still, even now, be learning from Las Vegas."

Impacts of the Economic Downturn in Las Vegas

By Neal A. Stone, MCIP, AICP
Town Planner, Town of North Hempstead*



City of Lights... Glitter Gulch... Sin City... Las Vegas could not have imag-

ined (only a few years ago following the national housing boom) that it would also gain the moniker as one of the "Leaders in Residential Foreclosures." And yet, with many real estate market forecasters projecting as much as a 20% decline in overall housing values and foreclosures outnumbering sales going into 2008, the city has not wavered off-course with several of its major mega-projects. So went several discussions of the recent ups and downs of development in the city, presented in various workshops and sessions I had the opportunity to attend at the APA National Conference this year in Las Vegas.

Driving with my sister-in-law up I-15 to the Strip from her recently constructed home in southwest Vegas, she commented that in her five years since moving back to Vegas, property values had swelled through 2004, and then the speculators rushed in. Indeed, according to data compiled by Fannie Mae, investment purchases made up almost half of the 2005 and 2006 housing purchases in Las Vegas, with owners who intended to 'flip' their

property for a fast profit before the scent was even in the air of the impending sub-prime mortgage crisis. Now, sales numbers are declining, developers are scrambling to complete some 20,000+ new single-family homes and condos beyond the Strip, and the downtown and prices are tumbling. In speaking to a local planner about the housing climate, he remarked to me that because of the foreclosures in some parts of the city, many property owners with good credit have now seen their home values diminish to less than their mortgage amounts, and they are forced to pay the lender a substantial difference to buy out their mortgages if they're attempting to sell to leave the neighborhood.

Developers are seemingly banking on an eventual rebound in real estate as the market eventually corrects. And, of course, there's always gambling and tourism to rely upon – the former is what the city was built around and popularized back in the 1940s by Bugsy Siegel's Flamingo Hotel; the latter is still being fueled by vigorous marketing, new hotel construction, and a political climate desirous for a boisterous family-friendly tourism industry that will shake the city's notorious mobster image of the past. I loved the irony in another APA session where the current mayor was affectionately referred to as a champion of the new Las Vegas image; it was said that the mayor previously was also a successful defense attorney for "Fat Herbie" Blitzstein, Frank "Lefty" Rosenthal, and "Tony the Ant" Spilotro before running for office.

Continued on next page



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Impacts of the Economic Downturn in Las Vegas (continued)

MGM Mirage continues to move ahead with an \$8 billion, 76-acre, mixed-use “City Center” (below),



scheduled to open in 2009. Remarkable, in addition to its sheer size (evident when you walk past the construction site on the west side of the Strip), is the fact that the entire agglomeration of residential towers, hotel mid-rises, commercial/retail, casinos, and recreation space will all be USGBC LEED-certified at completion. As part of the development, an on-site energy plant will partially power the 2,600+ residential units, 5,000 hotel rooms and 500,000 square feet of retail. Claiming the fundamentals of New Urbanism, it remains to be seen how City Center will transform its well-marketed elements of community, affordability and sustainability into reality as it becomes yet another isolated expensive development on the ribbon of the Strip.

The City of Las Vegas Office of Business Development and developer Newland Communities continue to move forward with the rehabilitation of 61 acres of former Union Pacific

Railroad property in the heart of downtown Las Vegas called “Union Park.” This development will be Nevada’s first project certified by the USGBC under the LEED Neighborhood Development category and is projected to cost approximately \$6.5 billion. Union Park will include a new 2,000-seat performing arts center, 2 million square feet of office and medical space, 5.2 million square feet of new residential space, three new hotels with over 2,000 new rooms, one new casino, almost 500,000 square feet of new retail, a new neurological research center, and the new World Jewelry Center (2.3 million additional square feet of office, retail and residential space in a 50+ story tower). In total, the completed Union Park development will encompass more than 11 million square feet of built area and will be situated right across the street from the newly constructed Las Vegas World Market Center (a separate 12 million square-foot, eight-building development; grand opening: July 2008).

Union Park Development



World Market Center



Construction cranes by the dozen pierce the horizon in all directions as new high-rise developments race to completion. At a glance, one doesn’t get the impression that the residential market is in shambles and the glut of housing surplus will likely take years to diminish. Las Vegas is banking on its commercial projects to weather the current storm of the national housing crisis and is hopeful that the worst is behind them. A pervading theme (at the conference) about the current Las Vegas economy was the importance of their efforts to forge ahead with the large-scale projects and long-term vision. However, it should be noted that what’s happening in Vegas is not confined to Vegas, and in some way, should any of these mega-projects falter – perhaps a gamble that Las Vegas is used to taking that many other places are not – the rest of the nation had better be watching.

* I was not able to take in any sessions on affordable housing or homelessness specific to Las Vegas, but I invite anyone who attended such sessions to share commentary on how those programs and initiatives have been affected by the current housing and economic climate.

** Photo credits: MGM Mirage and VegasTodayAndTomorrow.com

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A Session that Broke the Rules

By Ed Buroughs, AICP
MetroPlanner Editor

The most stimulating conference session I attended was the one that broke all the rules for what makes a great learning session. First, there was a single presenter speaking for 75 minutes. Second, the PowerPoint presentation had more words on each slide than can be found in an abridged dictionary. And the slides without words presented indecipherable graphs of thin color-coded lines on seemingly random axis. Third, there were few pictures. So how could anyone in the large 9 am audience on the 26th floor of Bally's casino hotel with a panoramic view of the Strip visible through the windows be expected to pay attention? The key is subject matter, of course, conveyed by a speaker with fire and passion to spread his gospel to the faithless.

For the record, the motivator was Dr. Eric C. Bruun of the Department of Systems and Electrical Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. His topic was "Environment and Sustainability in Transit Evaluation." I'll leave it at that because if I give any more specifics, the more impossible it will be to picture that this session was riveting. But believe me, after spending frustrating hours in the elusive and so far pointless evaluation of transit alternatives for the Tappan Zee Bridge/I-287 corridor, Dr. Bruun provided a rush of excitement and of what could be – what should be – a hopeful future for transit. If only the federal rules could be broken as easily as he broke the session rules.



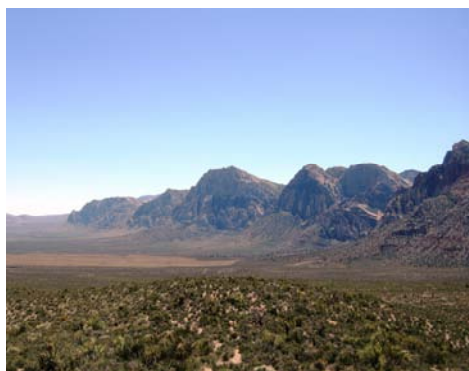
Las Vegas as Case Study Left Unexplored

By CJ Hoss
Senior Planner, Saccardi & Schiff, Inc.

The 2008 National Conference in Las Vegas provided a variety of presentations and workshops from planning professionals and public officials with varying experiences from around the country. Sustainability, downtown redevelopment and transportation issues were prevalent concepts in many of the sessions.

During my free time I had a chance to briefly explore the historic downtown Las Vegas and the "Fremont Street Experience." While downtown and the Strip are both supported by casinos, the two areas are quite different. Downtown is more of a pedestrian-friendly, walkable environment while the Strip, even with its escalator systems, is more automobile-oriented with many of the casinos setback a fair distance from street frontage.

Overall, I thought that while issues such as energy, water availability and sustainability were presented in various forms in many of the sessions, the conference could have addressed the issues more thoroughly, especially considering the location of the conference.



Las Vegas: Beyond the Glitz

By Matthew E. Schwartz
Chapter Intern, Urban Planning
Graduate Student at Columbia University

Although the conference had many great sessions dealing with sprawl, infrastructure and preservation issues, I wanted see some of the planning problems I was hearing and learning about in many of the sessions. I signed up for the "Las Vegas: Beyond the Glitz" guided bus tour which went from the strip to deep suburbia. It was sad, yet fascinating, to see how quickly sprawl has exploded in this region and is eroding natural desert life. At the conference, the statement mentioned repeatedly was that 5,000 people move to Las Vegas each month. It was interesting to visually connect that number and see all the new housing development.

The bus tour also went to the downtown portion of Las Vegas also known as "Old Vegas." Many of the cheesy, vintage casinos/hotels are being knocked down, but there are still plenty of 24/7 wedding chapels. It was nice to know from a preservation standpoint that when any of the old vintage hotels/casinos are torn down, their signs are at least being saved. The tour guide showed us a lot filled with vintage hotel/casino signs that will soon be turned into an outdoor walking museum.



GIS at the Conference

By Ana Hiraldo-Gomez
GIS Specialist III, Westchester County IT

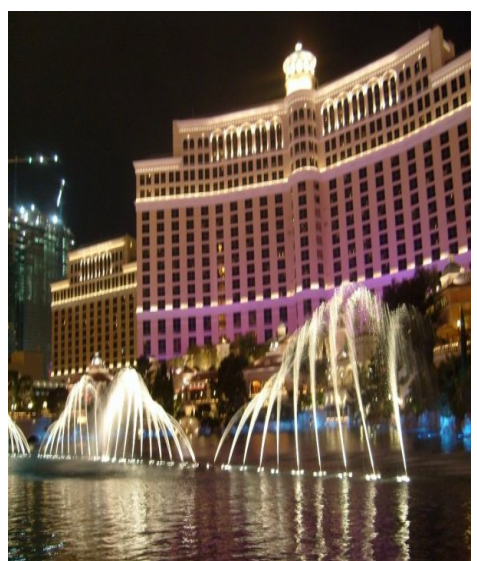
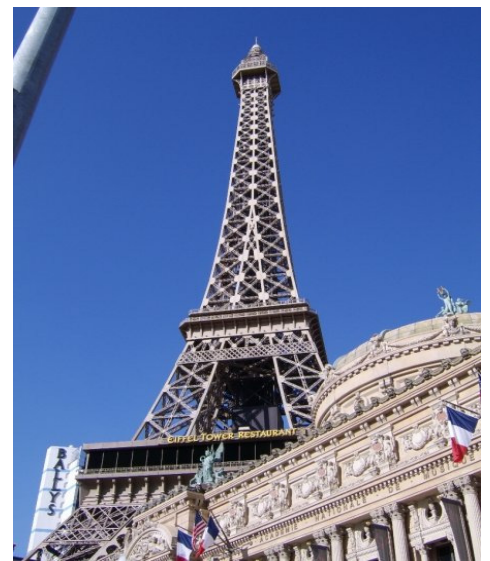
This year I had the privilege to participate in the APA conference as both session presenter and attendee. I was very impressed by the number and variety of workshops offered, particularly those related to GIS. Due to constant technology changes and advancements, the GIS landscape is evolving rapidly. The planning community is embracing the advancements with GIS technology. Innovations such as Google Earth, Microsoft 3D Virtual Earth and other GIS web-based applications are helping the planning community better visualize and analyze plans while encouraging public participation in the process. At the conference, most of the GIS-related workshops were well attended. The most interesting was "The Future of GIS in Planning" workshop which was so well attended there was limited space to even walk in the room. Currently employed in an Information Technology program - with a working and educational background in planning, I found it interesting to hear comments from both the speakers and workshop participants. It was a very rewarding conference experience. To learn more about "The Future of GIS in Planning" read the *Journal of American Planning Association*, Volume 74, Issue 2 March 2008, pages 161-174.



Vegas in Two Dimensions

By Tracey Corbitt
Hudson Valley East Section Director,
Chapter Executive Committee

I appreciate the design of fantasy environments and architecture. I looked forward to going to Vegas, because I enjoy seeing how creative designers create a sense of place in fantasy Disneyesque environments. Unfortunately, I was rather disappointed by the lack of follow through by the casinos in creating fantasy environments. I found the Strip to be more like a series of suburban malls that face a boulevard. The Strip is very two-dimensional. Travel one block off the Strip and the streetscape resembled the service entrance and loading docks to a mall. In contrast, a trip outside of the city limits to Red Rock Canyon was awe inspiring. The natural beauty of the desert in bloom is something I will surely never forget. Despite not being so impressed with the communities of Las Vegas, I did find some of the sessions really interesting.





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