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Editor's Note: The Las Vegas of the future

MGM Mirage's \$4 billion CityCenter project, announced last week, says several things about Las Vegas.

First, it argues persuasively that Las Vegas is and will continue to be the center of the gambling universe for years to come. MGM Mirage could invest its dollars anywhere in the world, and trust me, if the better investment were somewhere else, that's where the company would put its money. The company is loyal to shareholders first and its hometown second. But MGM executives have surveyed the planet and concluded that the wisest place to put their money is Las Vegas.

Second, the project represents the next generation of development on the Strip. While Wynn Las Vegas, slated to open in the spring, likely will make a creative leap ahead of the current crop of megaresorts, CityCenter promises yet another jump. The combination of megaresort, boutique hotels, retail and residential high-rise condos spread across 66 acres between the Bellagio and Monte Carlo is, if not revolutionary, a bold vision of the Strip as an "urban center" where all of a visitor's--or resident's--needs can be satisfied without having to get into a car.

"We are talking about an environment where people don't simply visit resort after resort on the Las Vegas Strip but an environment where people want to live and work and interact with one another," Jim Murren, MGM president, said.

Murren, not as well known as some other local resort bosses, seems to be an interesting guy. Although he came to town from Wall Street, he has his degree in urban planning and art history, which makes him a bit more idealistic than many of his gaming brethren. And MGM Mirage has hired Ehrenkrantz, Eckstut and Kuhn Architects, known for designing New York City's Battery Park and Baltimore's Inner Harbor East district. In short, CityCenter promises to be something distinctly different from your typical hotel-casino-shopping mall-restaurant row.

What's more, it appears that MGM Mirage's concept will be echoed to the north. Friday's *Las Vegas Sun* reported that Steve Wynn "is exploring a long-range plan" to develop the 142 acres behind Wynn Las Vegas into a "large, mixed-use hotel, casino and residential resort complex." This is the old Desert Inn Golf Course property where Wynn first will build a new 18-hole golf course. Wynn, also not a typical gaming exec, has twice as much land to work with as MGM Mirage.

The third thing the CityCenter project says about Las Vegas is that building up instead of out will be a long-term trend. This is not easy for many of us suburban ranch house denizens to get our heads around, but we'd better start getting used to it. Sunday's *Review-Journal* had a story about the dozens of high-rise residential projects on the drawing boards in the valley, most of them clustered around the Strip and downtown. While there's still room to build on the valley's edges, the future lies in a more urban lifestyle. The "Manhattanization" of Las Vegas is imminent.

And, by the way, for those who care about the environment, that's a good thing. On the surface, this may sound strange. Isn't environmentalism all about pristine forests, clear lakes and wild animals? Yes and no. Sure, preserving natural areas is the great goal, but the best way to do it is to house humans in dense urban centers.

And so, high density is a good thing. David Owen, writing recently in *The New Yorker*, makes a compelling case that Manhattan is "the greenest community in the United States, and one of the greenest cities in the world." "New York City is more populous than all but 11 states," he writes, but "if it were granted statehood, it would rank 51st in per-capita energy use."

The main reason is that most Manhattan residents don't own cars. To get around, they either use public transit or walk. "The average Manhattanite consumes gasoline at a rate that the country as a whole hasn't matched since the mid-1920s, when the most widely owned car in the United States was the Ford Model T," Owen writes.

Sprawl has been the name of the game in Las Vegas for 50 years, producing a community almost completely

dependent on the car for transportation. Las Vegans drive 10, 15, 20 or more miles to work every day, creeping along freeways during rush hours or idling every half-mile along surface streets. And many of us make these commutes in low-mileage pickups and SUVs. You may love your very own patch of grass (or colorful rocks with drought-tolerant plants scattered about), but this is not an environmentally sound way to live.

Studies also show that single-family homes use more energy than high-rise dwellings. Owen explains: "Tall buildings have much less exposed exterior surface per square foot of interior space than smaller buildings do, and that means they present relatively less of themselves to the elements, and their small roofs absorb less heat from the sun during cooling season and radiate less heat from inside during heating season."

Added to the equation in Las Vegas is the water issue. Here, in this era of persistent drought and limited water supplies, it's not a small matter that high-rise dwellers consume less water than their suburban counterparts.

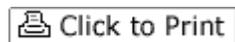
Clearly, high-rise living is not for everybody. But if Las Vegas is going to continue to grow, it must adopt a more sustainable lifestyle. We will have to change our ways if we want to have 3 million people living in this valley. (Whether we really want that is a subject for another day). MGM's CityCenter and other urban projects suggest that key players in the development industry understand this.

At the same time, less-enlightened developers are lobbying today and every day to sprawl farther and farther beyond the urban core. They are living in the past.

--GEOFF SCHUMACHER

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