



Reno's Riverwalk has been created along the banks of the Truckee River offering public space and pedestrian access to the waterway.

Living up to its nickname, Reno, Nevada, is taking on many attributes of a big city.

# The Biggest Little City in the World

SAM NEWBERG

SINCE THE 1990s, medium-sized Western U.S. cities such as Boise, Idaho; Fort Collins, Colorado; and Missoula, Montana, have attracted young professionals, families, and empty nesters seeking a higher quality of life. Northern Nevada, primarily the Reno area, is no different, particularly among Californians pursuing relief from both congestion and the higher cost of living.

Like Boise, Fort Collins, Missoula, and similar cities, Reno has a pleasant climate and plenty of recreational opportunities, especially with Lake Tahoe nearby. Reno is just two hours east of Sacramento and four hours east of the San Francisco Bay Area on Interstate 80. It is also easily accessible by air from Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Seattle, Portland, Phoenix, and San Diego.

Known as the Biggest Little City in the World, Reno has long relied on casinos like Harrah's and Silver Legacy to generate tourism, revenue, and employment. Over the past

decade, though, Reno's economy has grown in the high-tech, medical, and logistics sectors, which has contributed to rapid population growth. Along with this growth, the city has added cultural attractions and is taking on many attributes of a big city.

Reno is taking advantage of an attractive tax structure and its key location along I-80 to draw employers and development. With that have come residents, most of whom move to the Reno suburbs and nearby rural areas. Land supply is constrained, however, because 93 percent of all land in Nevada is government owned. As a result, recent housing development is increasingly dense in order to accommodate demand.

The days of building single-family tract housing to keep pace with demand are over because of a realization in the community that uncontrolled growth is not desirable. "With the sudden and rapid growth, there was an awakening in the region," says

Rosanna Coombes, interim director of regional planning at the Truckee Meadows Regional Planning Agency (TMRPA) in Reno. "People realized the need to think smarter about growth to avoid uncontrolled sprawl."

The TMRPA creates a regional plan every five years—the last was completed in 2002, and another is due by the end of this year. The 2002 plan recognized the shift in growth policy, created an urban service area, pushed for a more compact urban form, and prompted a study of bus rapid transit corridors.

Development patterns have begun to shift as well, with multifamily housing, mixed-use projects, and pedestrian-friendly development increasingly common in the area. Retail development also is changing and becoming more focused on destination themes and more diverse in nature. Cultural attractions, particularly in the downtown area, are enhancing the livability of the metropolitan area as a whole.

Nearby Lake Tahoe is experiencing additional resort development (see “Lake Tahoe Rediscovered,” page 134). East West Partners, under the Tahoe Mountain Resorts umbrella, is developing a variety of housing and hotels, including fractional ownership units and mixed-use villages. The Ritz Carlton Highlands, the area’s first five-star resort, is scheduled to open in 2009 with 172 rooms, 75 condominiums, 78 fractional ownership units, and a spa.

A surge in sustainable development can also be found, not only in Reno, but also statewide. The Nevada legislature in 2005 passed a bill providing a 50 percent tax break for ten years for green buildings meeting a state-determined environmental standard. Since passage of that legislation, the number of buildings statewide certified under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program has increased nearly tenfold. While the tax break could cost the state nearly \$1 billion in lost revenue over ten years, the upside is that Nevada has seen nearly 100 buildings pursue a LEED designation since 2005. One example is outdoor clothing manufacturer Patagonia, which has received a LEED Gold certification for a 171,000-square-foot (15,900-sq-m) expansion to its Reno distribution center.

Easy highway access to and from Reno, a major freight railroad line, and an uncongested international airport with nonstop service to more than 15 cities, coupled with the state’s policy of no personal income tax or corporate tax, increase the area’s appeal for businesses. Helping attract residents are a cost of living that is lower than major cities in California, as well as an unemployment rate that is among the lowest in the country.

According to the Economic Development Authority of Western Nevada (EDAWN), numerous businesses have moved to or expanded in the Reno area in recent years, adding jobs and office, manufacturing, or distribution space. In the past year alone, Microsoft Licensing, Trex (outdoor deck and railing products), SK Food Group, and General Motors have expanded or built facilities in the city. Two years ago, James Hardie, a manufacturer of siding, tile backerboard, wallboard, roofing, drywall, and gypsum, built a 350,000-square-foot (3,250-sq-m) manufacturing plant in Reno employing 125 people.

With access to I-80, one of the key east-west U.S. highways, and significant freight rail service, Reno is a booming logistics center. The market has over 60 million square feet (5.6 million sq m) of industrial space, a large amount for a metropolitan area its size. The Tahoe Reno Industrial Center, located ten miles (16 km) east of Reno, is a 30,000-acre (12,000-ha) business park focused on manufacturing and distribution. Just starting occupation of its initial phase of 6,000 acres (2,400 ha), existing tenants already include Prologis, Kraft, and Wal-Mart. With the supply of industrial land limited in established areas of the metropolitan area, the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center is expected to grab a large percentage of development in the coming years.

Washoe County, which includes Reno and its neighbor to the east, Sparks, had a population of 340,000 in 2000, according to Jeff Hardcastle, Nevada’s state demographer. By 2006, that had increased 20 percent to 410,000. The area’s proximity to California is one reason why the growth rate is so high: Hardcastle notes that 40 percent of the state’s population increase from 2004 to 2005—the most recent period for which data is available—can be attributed to migration from California.

Sparks is accommodating a large share of the metropolitan area’s growth. Until recently, though, it was a bedroom community and is just now beginning to see retail and mixed-use development, with corresponding job growth.

Kiley Ranch is a master-planned community in Sparks that will comprise 4,000 housing units and 5 million square feet (46,500 sq m) of commercial space when completed sometime in the next decade. Planned around an irrigation canal that is being preserved as active

and passive open space, Kiley Ranch is among the first examples of greenfield development in the Reno area that is mixed use and not simply a response to housing demand. “Kiley Ranch is one of the shining stars, and is a good example of the shift away from Euclidian zoning,” says Coombes.

The Planning Center, based in Costa Mesa, California, is working with the developer to create at Kiley Ranch a community with a wide variety of housing and a dense land use plan that includes trails, bike lanes, and

**Kiley Ranch, a master-planned community in Sparks, Nevada, offers a variety of housing, including townhouses (top), apartments (middle), and single-family detached homes (bottom).**



KILEY RANCH COMMUNITIES



KILEY RANCH COMMUNITIES



KILEY RANCH COMMUNITIES

roundabouts. The master plan accommodates double the number of units originally planned for the site, a signal that developers and government officials are beginning to understand that the amount of buildable land is somewhat limited in the area and that greater densities are required to accommodate growth.

Ground was broken on the housing a couple of years ago, the information and visitors center opened this summer, and a major retail power center will open in 2009. Following that will be a mixed-use town center that will form the core of Kiley Ranch. Moreover, the community stresses sustainability and green design, using a higher-density, mixed-use plan that encourages walking and use of alternative transportation, thereby reducing automobile emis-

course and a par 3 course, and will include nearly 2,700 housing units when completed.

National homebuilders are increasingly attracted to the Reno market. Among the builders at Somerset are Toll Brothers, Pulte, and Del Webb, producing a variety of styles of attached and detached homes, as well as custom-built homes.

The centerpiece of the Somerset project is the 24,000-square-foot (2,230-sq-m) clubhouse and 18,500 square feet (1,700 sq m) of commercial space in a town square setting. The clubhouse has a fitness center, a pool, and tennis courts. The retail and office portion of the project, which opened this past summer, is a mixed-use village with two-story buildings facing a pedestrian street. It has convenience shops targeted to the community, including a restaurant, a coffee shop, a wine store, and professional service businesses.

Even formerly rural counties are experiencing growth pressure. Lyon County, with a population of just 34,500 in 2000, had added nearly 20,000 people by 2006. Residential development there traditionally has been single-family homes on large lots, but recently multifamily housing has been added

to the mix and new development is significantly denser in form.

Rapid population growth is driving a substantial amount of new retail development. According to the Colliers International retail report for Reno, 1.2 million square feet (11,500 sq m) of retail space was added in 2006 to an existing market of 13.2 million square feet (1.23 million sq m). More impressive, another 4.5 million square feet (418,000 sq m) is under construction or planned in the metropolitan area.

Not all retail development in Reno is a reaction to housing growth. Retail development is branching out, adding tenants not previously seen in northern Nevada. It is also changing in form, and the terms *lifestyle center* and *destination retail* are becoming commonplace. One example is Summit Sierra, a new shopping cen-

ter developed by Birmingham, Alabama-based Bayer Properties. Opened in 2006 and anchored by a 200,000-square-foot (18,600-sq-m) Dillard's department store and a 16-screen movie theater, Summit Sierra was designed with high-quality landscaping and ambience to attract upscale shoppers.

Another example of a retail project that fits the destination retail category is Legends at Sparks Marina. Legends is a 1.1 million-square-foot (102,000-sq-m) retail and entertainment project scheduled to open in 2008 to complement other residential and mixed-use development in the marina area. Kansas City-based Red Development is developing the destination retail portion, and Olympia Gaming is developing a 1,000-room hotel/casino. Roxanne Stevenson, senior vice president of retail properties at Colliers International's Reno office, believes the Summit and Legends projects are bellwethers for future retail in the area. "Summit Sierra and Legends at Sparks Marina are bringing new brands and restaurants to the trade area and catering to evolving demographics and consumer tastes," she says.

Known best for the numerous casinos that dot the central district, downtown Reno is evolving into a diverse mix of activity, with new retail, entertainment, housing, and recreation uses. "It is not the old line of thinking," explains James Graham, economic development manager for the Reno Redevelopment Agency. A high-quality downtown in Reno involves "a series of things that need to fit together," he says.

Downtown Reno has added a number of housing projects in recent years, and several more are in the pipeline. Significant projects include the Riverside Artist Lofts and Palladio. The Riverside Artist Lofts are affordable units that opened in 2000 in the historic Riverside Hotel building, which dates to 1927. The 35-unit project was developed by Minneapolis-based Art-Space, in collaboration with the Reno Redevelopment Agency and the Sierra Arts Foundation. Palladio, a new mixed-use project overlooking the Truckee River, began occupancy this year. Containing 92 condominium units and 20,000 square feet (1,900 sq m) of retail space in a 13-story tower, it is a prime example of recent condominium development in the downtown.



**In northwest Reno, the community of Somerset is focused around a 24,000-square-foot (2,230-sq-m) clubhouse and commercial space in a town square setting.**

sions. The master plan also preserves wetlands and open space, and the developer encourages green construction practices. "Kiley Ranch is a resource-conservative, environmentally sensitive, live/work/shop/play, connected community that will promote a healthy and balanced lifestyle for its residents and businesses," says Paul Curtis, chief executive officer of Kiley Ranch Communities.

Somerset, in northwest Reno, is another example of the high-end master-planned communities being introduced in the area. Located on 2,375 acres (960 ha) of rugged terrain, Somerset has both an 18-hole golf

An unusual form of redevelopment has occurred on several occasions when closed casinos and hotels have been converted to residential use. The Residences at Riverwalk are one recent example, with the renovation of the Comstock Hotel and Casino into a 125-unit condominium project.

Recent retail and entertainment development includes the 12-screen Century Theatres and a growing number of restaurants in the Riverwalk area, a district lining both sides of the Truckee River in downtown Reno. The Riverwalk Merchants Association has a growing roster of shops, galleries, restaurants, and bars.

A burgeoning arts scene is adding to the livability of Reno, with much of the activity downtown. The Nevada Museum of Art opened its new facility, designed by Will Bruder, in 2003. Also located south of the Truckee River in downtown is the Nevada Discovery Museum, a children's museum set to open next year.

ReTRAC, a major infrastructure project, was completed in 2005, lowering 2.25 miles (3.6 km) of at-grade railroad tracks into a 33-foot- (10-m-) deep trench at a cost of \$265 million. Locating the tracks cutting through the middle of downtown below grade reduced traffic delays caused by passing trains. Bridges provide street crossings at every block, and overall the project greatly adds to the livability of downtown.

The diversity and activity are tied together by the downtown's key natural amenity, the Truckee River. In recent years, the city has reclaimed a significant portion of the land bordering the waterway as public open space. The Riverwalk has been created along its banks, offering public space and pedestrian access to the river, and open-space improvements include the Virginia Street Plaza, which features a seasonal outdoor skating rink.

The most dramatic development on the river is actually *in* it—the Truckee River Whitewater Park, a 2,600-foot (792-m) section of the waterway engineered for whitewater kayaking. The whitewater course is perhaps the most significant development downtown, says John Hester, Reno community development director. “It physically demonstrated that the city was no longer turning its back on the river and instead has embraced it,” he says. “It is like the downtown now has a beach for the residents.”



Long-term plans for the city include five rapid-transit corridors that will connect the University of Nevada at Reno, the Reno-Tahoe International Airport, and several neighborhoods with the downtown, where a multimodal hub will be built next to the existing Amtrak station. Already, the Virginia Street corridor, which runs south from downtown, is intensifying development in anticipation of future transit improvements.

The biggest hotel/casino development now underway in Reno is not taking place downtown, but near the airport. With nearly 2,000 guest rooms and 200,000 square feet (18,600 sq m) of meeting space, the Grand Sierra hotel project is a ten-year renovation and expansion of the former Reno Hilton. The 145-acre (59-ha) property also will include 12 restaurants, a water park, 825 condominium units, and an 1,800-seat theater.

Downtown Sparks is experiencing infill development. Under construction is the District, a 171-unit condominium development by Trammell Crow Company, due to open next year as part of the redevelopment of Victorian Square. It is intended to complement existing and

**Overlooking the Truckee River, Palladio, a new mixed-use project, contains condominiums and retail space in a 13-story tower, plus the 12-screen Century Theatres.**

planned retail and entertainment uses to create a mixed-use district, complete with a future city hall.

Reno is beginning to live up to its billing as the Biggest Little City in the World. Big-city development trends such as mixed-use projects, destination retail space, and perhaps most important, a lively, diverse downtown bode well for the future of Reno. Overall, there is a rising awareness of the impact of land use decisions in Reno as the area continues to grow. Although Coombes believes Reno is headed in the right direction, she cautions that change is gradual. “These are baby steps,” she says. “The built environment won’t change overnight.” It only seems that way. **UL**

**SAM NEWBERG** is an urbanist, writer, and founder of Joe Urban, Inc., based in Minneapolis, Minnesota.