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Concurrent panel session 1: Challenges of economic growth & diversification & labor preparation in Las Vegas

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Presenters
Maggie Arias-Petrel, Cedric Crear, Somer Hollingsworth, Mike Majewski, John Restrepo, Mary Riddel, Keith Schwer, and Dina Titus

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Shaping the Future of Southern Nevada:  
Economic, Environmental, and Social Sustainability  

Challenges of Economic Growth and Diversification  
and Labor Preparation in Las Vegas  
October 24, 2007

Moderator:  Mel Jameson, UNLV Department of Finance

Panelists:  
Maggie Arias-Petrel, Global Medical Professional Consulting  
Cedric Crear, Crear Creative Group  
Somer Hollingsworth, Nevada Development Authority  
Mike Majewski, City of North Las Vegas  
John Restrepo, Restrepo Consulting Group  
Mary Riddel, UNLV Department of Economics  
Dr. Keith Schwer, UNLV Center for Business & Economic Research  
Dina Titus, UNLV Department of Political Science / Nevada State Senate

Scribe:  Angela Moor, UNLV Department of History

The panel began with moderator Mel Jameson speaking about the importance of UNLV’s involvement with the community. A research university best serves its community when it helps resolves local issues and that universities could help in understanding what issues are the most critical. The university can play a role in solving problems through its teaching and research missions. He hoped the conference would go into more detail about issues are facing our community and help us form a more collaborative approach to address these issues.

He moved on to address the meaning of sustainability. He recognized that the panel could not arrive at a complete answer, but could at least begin to figure out which issues are the most important and talk about how future conferences can start to solve these issues.

Dr. Jameson introduced the members of the panel and they each spent a few minutes speaking about their interest in sustainability.
John Restrepo (Restrepo Consulting Group) said that people assume that because the economy is healthy it will always be good. But we cannot count on that to be true because things are changing in Las Vegas. Projections tell us that we need to look at Southern Nevada in a different way and look deeper at what challenges and opportunities are facing us. He gave a list of the top nine challenges he sees for the future of Las Vegas.

- Land availability/land use
- Technical/professional education of workforce
- Housing costs/affordability
- Diversification of the economy within or outside the gaming industry
- Wealth of citizens and the community — What kind of wealth are we are producing?
- Fiscal/tax structure — Is it broad based? How is the revenue being spent?
- Globalization/direct involvement by foreign governments
- Infrastructure and how it will be funded.

Dr. Keith Schwer (UNLV Center for Business & Economic Research) said the history of Nevada is important to give us perspective on the difficulties of economic growth and diversification. Nevada is the state with the smallest native population; on average, a resident of Clark County has only lived here for 13 years. Nevada is also one of the most urban and rural states at the same time, because of the big differences in population and distances between the urban part of the state in Southern Nevada and other parts of the state.

For 19 of the last 20 years we were the fastest growing community, and that brought money but it also brought problems. Some of the problems will be solved in the private sector, but others will have to be solved in the public sector. He recognized that there are difficulties and doubts about solving things in a public way, but he believes we can.
Las Vegas lacks traditional comparative advantages, such as the ability to grow crops. But it does have other resources: we have location and travel and tourism, and these have been built up over a long time. We have a head start with our economy that will give us time to figure out what we want to pass on to the next generation.

Maggie Arias-Petrel (Global Medical Professional Consulting) spoke about her work with the Latin Chamber of Commerce and the community to ensure the future of children in the community. The Hispanic population is the fastest-growing minority community in the state. It is sometimes difficult for other people to understand why immigrants do not assimilate faster. First-generation immigrants are here to work and they come from small towns with little education. These immigrants do not speak or read Spanish well, and it is very hard for them to learn English. The Latin workforce in Las Vegas can be found in gaming, construction, and other industries, and these workers are very entrepreneurial.

The Las Vegas Latin Chamber of Commerce is the fifth largest in the nation and has been recognized nationally. The Hispanic community here is an important group that wants to do more for its community and the community at large. The Hispanic population is young, with the median age being 18-35. One way to address the problem is to express more sensitivity toward them and embrace them.

We have a problem with high school dropout rates. In her opinion, Las Vegas does not have enough mentors to help children. She understands that bilingual/bicultural education is a sensitive topic for people and has heard people say “just one language,” but if you are able to communicate with more people it is better. She concluded her remarks by saying that for her sustainability is really about taking care of the children.

Somer Hollingsworth (Nevada Development Authority) pointed out that sustainability for the state really revolves around the success of Las Vegas. If Southern
Nevada does not succeed the rest of the state would go under, because many of the other counties are essentially bankrupt. This situation has put a great deal of pressure on one area and one industry. New conditions have arisen that need to be resolved if Las Vegas is going to remain successful, such as the cost of land. We need to diversify the economy with good jobs and industry. The resort industry is not the only option for Southern Nevada; there are opportunities for the future in high tech jobs, life sciences, and green industries. We need to work together as a community; people need to get involved with government to make the changes, and there are many concepts and ideas that will work. We need to make serious changes and cannot accept the status quo. Entrepreneurial DNA is part of this community and that we need to bring in new jobs and products.

The Nevada Development Authority (NDA) has three target industries it tries to attract: technology, biotech, and renewable energy. NDA does an economic model on every company to see how much each will add to the state in taxes. He claimed that once a company is successful in Las Vegas they act as a magnet for other companies. If we do it right, we can have diversified economy and gaming economy. The Nevada Cancer Institute and the Lou Ruvo Brain Institute are examples of how things are changing. Nevada is fourth in the nation in terms of family wages, but people still cannot afford housing. High quality, high paying jobs are the future of the community.

Dr. Mary Riddel (UNLV Department of Economics) said that sustainability is when social welfare is not decreased over time. She raised the question of what do we mean by welfare and quality of life. Social welfare weighs costs versus benefits. A myopic view of social welfare would say that economic growth would lead to improved welfare. She said this view was lacking; we need to measure economic growth as a measure of productivity, and to increase the productivity we must improve our schools. She also said that we need to look at Nevada’s strengths and build on those such as
renewable energy. Achieving a sustainable economy is a challenge, but the benefits outweigh the cost.

Cedric Crear (Crear Creative Group) has lived in the black community his entire life. His parents lived in West Las Vegas since 1964. Mr. Crear moved his family into his parents’ house and has improved it. People need to make a conscious decision to make an investment in their home and improve their neighborhood as much as they can. He questioned why we have not been able to redevelop the Westside and why black neighborhoods remain blighted. We need to maintain the equity that has been built up in that community. In order to overcome these issues, universities need to play an active role because they have the resource of minds to make things better, and the university has no political agenda. He ended his remarks by urging the audience and the university community to come into the West Las Vegas community and work with their elected officials to create a master plan and vision for area. Sustainability is about creating and maintaining a vision.

Mike Majewski (City of North Las Vegas) noted that other people think Las Vegas has a very sustainable economy, and it is the envy of other places. Economic development must give something back to its community that it is just not about growth for the sake of growth. We need to improve the quality of life and actually develop places to “live, work, and play” so that it is more than merely a catch phrase in marketing materials. Las Vegas needs to have a strategic plan and we have to work together. He identified some progress, and noted the Southern Nevada Regional Planning Coalition has begun a study to see what kinds of industries would relocate to Southern Nevada. The study showed collaboration between planning and economic development. One of the study’s main objectives is to examine land use and how it affects quality of life. Las Vegas also needs to look at transit-oriented development.
He went on to say that there is no way to separate economic and environmental development. One of the things Las Vegas has done is to take advantage of opportunities that have presented themselves. Some of the first major economic players that have come in (besides gaming) came to Las Vegas because they recognized we have one of the best airports, one of the best telecommunications networks, and we are a 24-hour town. We need to capitalize on our global advantage. The main thing is to keep our eyes and ears open and to focus on collaboration, because sustainability will not happen without it.

Dr. Dina Titus (UNLV Department of Political Science and Nevada State Legislature) said that over the past 15 years Nevada has been the fastest at a number of things, including having the fastest growing city, the fastest growing rural population, the fastest growing school age population, and the fastest growing Hispanic and Asian minority populations. All of these things have strained our infrastructure and government services in a negative way. Growth and building have been our mantra, but when you look at it in terms of environmental impact like dust pollution, and the effect on water quality and endangered species, it has been bad.

We need more schools and increased funding, but some people are still trying to cut education budgets. Service jobs are being promoted, but those are not good jobs and ultimately add to the strain on social services. Local government is tied to property taxes, which leads to conflicts between government and development. Gaming probably will not be slowing down, but we are seeing slowdowns in other areas, like the development market and the housing market. People can now go anywhere to gamble, and if there are no other benefits people will not come to Las Vegas. We must address those other sustainability issues to help keep gaming successful. She concluded her remarks by saying that sustainable growth is not an oxymoron: we need to focus on biotech, renewable energy, and move forward.