



## Las Vegas, NV-AZ MSA

*Regulatory Order/Family:* Reform/Containment (Nevada portion)  
Reform/Containment-Lite (Arizona portion)

### *Summary*

Among the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the U.S., Las Vegas is the fastest growing, and also the fastest densifying. Its rank jumped from 41st to 10th densest between 1982 and 1997. With 90 percent of the land in public ownership, developers have economized on privately held land to accommodate a near-tripling of population between 1980 and 2000. They have been able to do so in part because of permissive municipal and county rules on high-density development. Additionally, the counties have generally favored urban containment even beyond that imposed by federal land ownership. "Pay as you grow" mechanisms, especially impact fees, have also encouraged more economical use of existing public facilities. A few small cities, straining under fast growth, have imposed permit caps, but these municipalities account for only about 2 percent of the metro area's population.

### *Governance Framework and Growth Trends*

With an 83 percent increase in population during the 1990s (to 1.4 million residents), the Las Vegas MSA is the fastest-growing among the 50 largest. This growth has occurred mainly in the region's three large cities (the city of Las Vegas, with 480,000 residents; and Henderson and North Las Vegas, each of which has between 100,000 and 200,000 residents) and the unincorporated portions of two large counties (Clark, which surrounds Las Vegas and has 580,000 residents in unincorporated areas, and Mohave County, Arizona, with 55,000 residents in unincorporated areas). Apart from these large jurisdictions, there are 4 jurisdictions with 10,000 to 50,000 residents (4 cities and the unincorporated portion of Nye County) and 3 smaller cities.

Metropolitan Las Vegas urbanized only about 85,000 acres (50 percent increase) between 1982 and 1997 while adding over 750,000 residents (130 percent increase). This spiked the region's density ranking from 41st to 10th among the 50 largest metro areas, from 3.2 to 5.0 persons per urban acre. Topography, hyper-growth, extensive reliance on centralized infrastructure, and public land ownership have contributed to the MSA's rapid densification. It has several significant mountain ranges and relies on public sewer and water to accommodate most growth. Perhaps most importantly, less than 10 percent of the land was privately owned in 1992, with 86 percent in federal hands. Some of the federal land under the control of the Bureau of Land Management has been sold for development, but such sales are much more complex than a private transfer.

### *Regulatory Environment*

All the jurisdictions in the Las Vegas metro area use zoning. None of them has low-density-only zoning and all would accommodate our hypothetical apartment development in at least some areas. Nine out of every ten residents lives in a municipality with a residential zone allowing at least 15 dwellings per acre. Strong federal land ownership makes it difficult to estimate the land area



coverage in various density categories, but three quarters of the incorporated land is in cities allowing at least 15 dwellings per acre, and all the counties allow development at such densities where land is privately owned. Hence federal land ownership appears to be the main constraint on density at the jurisdictional scale, aside from the availability of infrastructure.

Planning is also ubiquitous in metropolitan Las Vegas and growth management is widespread. Two of the three counties claim an urban containment program of some kind, two use APFOs, and one has impact fees. Just under half the cities use impact fees; only one or two have an APFO. A third of cities have a containment program of some kind, and a third have permit caps. None of the counties are estimated to have imposed moratoria. We estimate that only 19 percent of the metropolitan population lives in a municipality with an incentive-based affordable housing program.