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Requiem for Red Rock Canyon?

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A proposed development threatens Las Vegas' Crown Jewel



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It's beautiful, isn't it?" says Manuel Ayala, a lifelong Las Vegan, gesturing to the wide expanse of rusted red hue. "Can you believe they want to build on this land?"

Ayala's disbelief is shared by many Nevadans who want to keep Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, a rim of undeveloped wilderness on the outskirts of the vice capital of the U.S., from the clutches of suburban sprawl. Red Rock Canyon, Nevada's first National Conservation Area, is popular with climbers, hikers, bikers and even car-bound sightseers who enjoy it's 13-mile scenic tour. The area, under federal Bureau of Land Management administration, serves as habitat for the endangered desert tortoise as well as such wildlife as bighorn sheep and wild burros. The lustful eye of development, however, has cast its gaze towards to Red Rock once again.

Ayala and his friend Leslie Lucaz agreed to take me into Red Rock Canyon for some first-hand experience. Before dawn, we chugged along the mountainside and settled somewhere in the 197,349 acres of National Conservation Land to watch the sun rise. As light seeped in between the jagged mountains, Lucaz said, "This land is for everyone right now, for all to enjoy and visit. If they build on it, it'll be privatized."

Ayala and Lucaz both worked for the NextGen Climate, an environmental group, and Lucaz currently works for the League of Conservation Voters. Both are worried about the potentially effects of developing on Red Rock Canyon.

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Las Vegas, like most of the cities in Nevada, is a boom town, requiring seemingly endless expansion and development to sustain the steady influx of migrants seeking well-paying jobs that do not require a college degree. Both the population and the gaming-based economy of Las Vegas have grown exponentially, with no indication of stopping or slowing down. Despite concerns about gambling, the NFL's Oakland Raiders are moving to a \$1.9 billion stadium in Las Vegas in 2020 and the NHL is seriously considering putting a franchise in Sin City. These plans also mean stadium

construction, upkeep, and an expansion of the hospitality industry to accommodate spikes in tourism and strain on infrastructure.

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Las Vegas occupies the eastern edge of the Mojave Desert, a hostile environment for most living things, let alone humans. The city's relentless growth has been supported by the sheer amount of undeveloped land in the state. Nevada has seen boom and bust since its first mining ventures, and has more abandoned settlements than anywhere else in the country. The majority of the state is unoccupied, 82.9 percent of the land is owned by the Federal government according to the U.S. Department of the Interior.

So why are developers turning to Red Rock Canyon? While the majority of the state is rural and unoccupied, potential areas for development in the Vegas Valley are slowly shrinking as the city expands. Red Rock meets an ideal criteria for high-income buyers: it's close enough to the Strip to enjoy Las Vegas' many indulgences, but far enough away to afford the air of rustic isolation.

As we drove along Red Rock Canyon's famed 13-mile scenic route, Ayala points out where the proposed development would go. Southern Nevada developer Jim Rhodes owns the land in question through his company, Gypsum Resources. Rhodes' land is just outside the boundaries of National Conservation Land and would be visible from the scenic drive inside the park.






photo courtesy of The Mountain Project

The land currently hosts the Blue Diamond Hill Gypsum mine. The mine has been operating since 1925, making it one of the oldest in the country. Rhodes has proposed a development on this land before. In 2013, the County Commission voted down Rhodes' plan for over 7,000 houses and a surrounding community including a school and police department. It would have been the third largest city in Southern Nevada.

Rhodes argues that development on this land would be minimally invasive to the area and would serve as a rural community. However, Ron Krater, the projects spokesman, explained at a Clark County Planning Commissioner meeting in October of 2016 that the plans are in beginning stages and are not specific. Clark County has a multi-step process for large scale developments, and the company was not able to freely discuss details of the project until after preliminary rezoning was approved.

Krater also commented that the land proposed for development has, “No environmental resource value, as a result of 70+ years of active mining.” Since they can’t mine the land anymore, development is being used as a method of reclamation. This idea has floated around for decades, even before Rhodes’ company purchased the land.

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The vision of a rough-and-tumble, jewel-of-the-desert, Nevada community may be clever marketing, but the plans conflict with that image as well as the local zoning rules. The land is zoned Rural Community, which only allows for building of 1,500 homes. Rhode’s vision calls for building 5,000 houses on 2,010 acres near the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area. To the dismay of those who want to preserve Red Rocks, the Clark County Commissioners approved the plans after whittling the scale down from an originally proposed 7,000 homes.

The ecological effects of Rhodes proposed village are unclear; his company is doing research on how the impacts of nearly 100 years of gypsum mining on any eventual residency. Even if it’s determined that the development would pose no significant risks to humans living, the landscape will be totally changed.

Water, sewage, and power lines must be brought to the area at taxpayers’ expense. “People here live alongside the drought as if it’s our neighbor, you respect the water we have. I think people will feel uncomfortable using valuable resources in a development we don’t know will succeed, when there are communities in the Valley where people need it,” says Ayala.

The current two-lane, winding I-95, extending all the way through Las Vegas up to Reno has nowhere near the carrying capacity to sustain the kind of traffic needed to settle thousands of acres and support a community. New roads, stop lights, and sidewalks would have to be put in, again at taxpayer expense. Biking is popular in this area, and increased traffic would pose a threat to cyclists’ safety.

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The natural, mountainous barrier of Red Rock Canyon has kept much of Las Vegas's pollution out, but placing a small city right on the edge of conservation land is a surefire way to harm the environment. The devastation of wildlife habitats during construction and human residency would permanently alter one of the most pristine sights in the Mojave desert.

During Gypsum Resources' community outreach phase in 2016, concerned citizens asked about a buffer zone between developments and the national conservation area.

Rhodes' plan for a sparsely populated, salt-of-the-Earth village that will have low traffic and focus on sustainable development is unlikely to come to fruition. Houses in comparable neighborhoods, like Red Rock Country Club, start in the 230k range and go above a million, far higher than the average house value in Las Vegas of \$209,100. Save Red Rock, an activist group devoted to the preservation and protection of the canyon, worries that there's little reason to believe Rhodes' development will not go beyond the initial scope. Shiny, new houses in a unique area is a recipe for gentrification, the chance to design a new area to cater to the wealthy.

Save Red Rock was around before Rhodes, the group has also helped create bike lanes, lowered the speed limit on the roads leading to and from the national park, and banned commercial trucking through the canyon. Now, their efforts are concentrated on keeping Red Rock rural, and developers out.

Developers have been trying to build in this area for decades, and have always been turned down by the Clark County Commissioners, until now. On February 22, the County approved Rhodes' preliminary plans, the first of many steps. Rhodes owns the

land and technically can build on it whenever he want, the only reason the County is involved is because he wants to build more houses than the property is currently zoned for. Next, Gypsum Resources has to submit the Specific Plans and a Public Facilities Needs Assessment that outlines the environmental and economic impact of the development.

Las Vegas residents are nervous about this development. The Save Red Rock petition in circulation hit 45 thousand signatures, ironically, the day the County approved Rhodes' plan. Expensive developments in isolated part of town is a story Las Vegans are familiar with; it's the story of Summerlin, Boulder City, Henderson, and Blue Diamond, all communities that fit the same criteria and have seen massive growth.

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Knowing this, as Rhodes, who has been developing in Southern Nevada for decades certainly does, is it worth disrupting the untapped environment near a national park? Is it worth it to build new roads, water pipelines, electric power lines, for a community that has a reasonable chance of failure given the history of these developments? Despite public opinion, the Clark County Commissioner seems to think so.

In 2003, laws and ordinances were adopted by the state of Nevada as well as Clark County to specifically prohibit the development within 46,000 acres of the Red Rock Overlay District. Gypsum resources sued the state and county and the Nevada state Supreme Court declared the laws unconstitutional, as it was specifically drafted to prevent Rhodes or like-minded developers in the area. This decision from the Courts was a set-back for the Save Red Rock movement and its endorsers, including Congresswoman Dina Titus (D-NV).

However, on April 25th, the Nevada State Assembly passed AB277, which “Revises

provisions governing land use planning.” The bill directly references the 2003 ruling, and extends provisional protection to all national park areas and adjacent lands within a five-mile radius of the state of Nevada. Red Rock Canyon, Sloan Canyon, and Black Rock Desert-High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails come under its protection. Nevada Assemblyman Steve Yeager (D-NV 9) introduced the revised bill and explained earlier this week, “If the bill passes, it essentially freezes the existing zoning, and would preclude higher density zoning.”

Assembly bill 277 could throw a wrench in the Gypsum Resources development plan, and legal action from Rhodes’ company is anticipated. The legal course of action is unclear at this point, but Clark County’s initial approval the plans sent a big message to developers and activists alike.

“Big-money developers like Rhodes are a dime a dozen, but unfortunately, land like Red Rock Canyon is not,” Lucaz said as we piled back into the car, taking one last look at the morning sun glowing above the protected land.