



Las Vegas's Winning Ways

An Interview with the Honorable Oscar B. Goodman, Mayor, Las Vegas

EDITORS' NOTE A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, Oscar Goodman moved to Las Vegas in 1964 and soon became one of the city's top criminal defense attorneys. Elected its 19th mayor in 1999 (his second term began in April 2003), he serves on the board of the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority.



Hon. Oscar B. Goodman

Does the general public understand the many facets of Las Vegas?

I think of Las Vegas as three cities in one. The Strip, which is the gambling capital of the world and home to the world's best restaurants, shopping, and entertainment, is one Las Vegas. The second Las Vegas is the downtown area and one of my key challenges. I intend to make it the glistening, gleaming place it once was. Over the past four and a half years, just about every downtown casino has changed hands. The new owners are younger and more aggressively putting money into the area. I've also been meeting with major developers like Donald Trump to spark interest. Downtown may never compete with the Strip, but it can still be a fun first stop for visitors. The third Las Vegas is the residential area, where our citizens live and thrive. Las Vegas is the fastest-growing city in the United States; we erect a new home every 23 minutes. We're also building new schools, fire stations, and so on, left and right. This community is in very good shape.

How has gambling on Indian reservations affected Las Vegas?

I view Indian reservations as the greatest threat to legalized gambling in Nevada. While they can never compete with the Strip, I do worry about our downtown area, which we have to make a compelling first stop in the Las Vegas community. About half our gaming business comes from drive-in visitors from Southern California. If people get stuck in traffic on I-15 and decide to turn off and gamble on a nearby reservation, using the finite sum of money they had intended to spend here, it could be

very detrimental to our city in the long run. We have to ensure that there's no comparison between what we have to offer and what the reservations have to offer. We're also working with our counterparts in Southern California to make sure that I-15 is opening up, and we've made tremendous strides.

Have you been successful in fostering a positive dialogue between the private and public sectors?

When I was first elected, I thought the mayor could do everything himself. But I've learned a lesson: I can't accomplish my goals without the support of local business leaders. Since raising the white flag and enlisting their help, I probably have a better relationship with the private sector than any other elected politician in Nevada.

How much have you focused on public education?

I don't have direct jurisdiction over public education, but I have met with Superintendent [Carlos] Garcia and the school-district trustees. They've elicited my help in accomplishing their goals, which I'm happy to do. I've also developed a wonderful relationship with President John Lilly of the University of Nevada at Reno. Las Vegas is the largest city in North America without an academic medical center; our medical school is up in Reno. So, I've worked out an arrangement with him to move the medical school down here, to land we acquired right in the heart of the city.

Las Vegas is also the first U.S. city to become a city of asylum, or city of refuge. In conjunction with President Carol Harter of the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, we've made it a hub for writers and artists who aren't welcome in their native lands for political or censorship reasons. The International Institute of Modern Letters, heretofore located in Europe, will be centered here. Nobel Prize laureates will actually be living in Las Vegas.

You're pushing the arts in other ways as well, aren't you?

Yes. We have an embryonic arts district here. We were able to entice Jack and Carolyn Solomon, who had a world-class lithography studio in SoHo [New York], to make Las Vegas their home, and they've interested other folks to move to the community. We're now building lofts and garden apartments downtown, and many artists are moving there and opening galleries and antiques shops. No one would have dreamed of this four years ago. The arts district is symbolic of renewed vibrancy in the downtown area.

Have you made much progress in combating homelessness?

I'm the meanest mayor in America according to homeless coalitions. I have no tolerance for able-bodied people of sound mind who panhandle, urinate, and defecate in my citizen's backyards. I do everything I can to run them out of town. As for people who can't take care of themselves and are ready to abide by minimal rules, our charitable sector is doing a darn good job of caring for them.

And you've been successful in fighting crime.

Yes, we've made tremendous strides. The marshals and police department have a very heavy presence in the three-block area facing Freemont Street. They've cleaned it up, and the neighboring residents are just delighted.

What other developments will we see in the coming years?

We're planning to become the furniture capital of the world, and it's already happening. The first stage will be 1.25 million square feet of furniture showrooms. Then, the developer plans to build a convention center, perhaps an adjacent hotel. Las Vegas will immediately come to mind for anybody who's involved with furniture display anywhere in the world.

What will you do when this mayoral term ends? Seek reelection?

Everybody wants me to run for governor, but I'm the happiest man in the world. With all due respect to our governor and both our U.S. senators, everybody knows the mayor of Las Vegas. ●