

June 30, 2005 - Going Green: Nevada is finally taking advantage of its seemingly endless sunshine

BY RYAN SLATTERY

When you think of eco-friendly green states, Nevada doesn't really jump to mind.

Washington or Oregon. Sure. Vermont. Of course. But Nevada? Come on. How many solar panels, wind turbines and cars running on bacon grease do you see? Not all that many, right?

But with a bill signed into law by Gov. Kenny Guinn on June 17, Nevada could become a national model for green building. Assembly Bill 3 requires all state-funded projects meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards set by the U.S. Green Building Council. The bill changes regulations relating to energy, conservation, construction and renovation, and creates incentives for businesses that construct green buildings.

"It's leaps and bounds for Nevada. It's quite significant," says Lance Kirk, president of the Las Vegas regional chapter of the U.S. Green Building Council.

Nevada is just the second state, following Washington, to pass a law requiring all building construction with state money to meet certain green standards. Other states have simply suggested it would be a good thing for developers to consider.

"Nevada's reaction was all or nothing," says Kirk.

The move is receiving high praise from the Green Building Council's national president Rick Fedrizzi, who was in Las Vegas last week to celebrate with fellow green-thinkers at a Bahama Breeze mixer. He says the direction Nevada is taking when it comes to environmentally conscious construction will set an example for others to follow.

With tax incentives that allow for the abatement of up to 50 percent of property taxes for a period of up to 10 years on buildings that meet the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design's silver standard, it's sure to catch the attention of developers.

Fedrizzi points out two planned projects for Las Vegas as examples. The first, spearheaded by Janie Greenspun, is for a green animal shelter. The second is MGM Mirage's massive 66-acre Project CityCenter. Its developers plan to use energy-saving techniques in its construction.

"These are people who don't have to be doing this right now," says Fedrizzi. "They are, to use a Las Vegas term, taking a

gamble. It blows my mind to see one of the largest, most elaborate construction projects [CityCenter] jumping onboard. It sends a message to everyone that it's time to approach construction practices differently."

Not only do green buildings provide tax relief, but business owners can expect a fatter wallet as well. Fedrizzi says buildings outfitted to meet Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design standards can save anywhere from 30 to 70 percent in energy costs and cut water bills in half. One example Kirk mentions is the use of waterless urinals, which can save 40,000 gallons of water per unit each year.

Expect owners of older buildings to take advantage of the law as well, explains state Sen. Randolph Townsend, R-Reno, who along with Assemblywoman Chris Giunchigliani, D-Las Vegas, was instrumental in getting the bill passed. Townsend called AB3 one of -- if not -- the "strongest bill on renewable energy, conservation and green building standards" to ever be passed in the nation.



Fedrizzi, president of the U.S. Green Building Council, chats with Susanne Sanders of Molasky Companies.

In 2001, Townsend helped get a law passed requiring utilities to increase their use of renewable sources including wind, solar and geothermal. Despite the regulations, many of the major projects inked with utilities to build renewable power plants, such as wind farms, have stalled because low bond ratings posed a bankruptcy risk.

But Townsend believes AB 3 will attract new companies to the state and quickly turn things around when it comes to the use of renewable energy.

"I think we'll see a serious focus on solar in Southern Nevada -- not just solar panels and home design -- but in developing new technology associated with it," Townsend says.

Meanwhile, "companies coming to the north will set their sights on geothermal," he adds.

With all of the pats on the back, you have to wonder why developers haven't already taken advantage of Nevada's seemingly endless sunshine and tapped into solar energy. Kirk admits the "market is not there yet" and hopes the law will lead to new research and opportunities, although Fedrizzi says that it still takes too long -- anywhere from eight to 12 years -- for a business to see the payback.