

A Positive Outlook

Events, Venues and the Evolution of Las Vegas



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More than 60 years ago, the resorts along the dusty two-lane Las Vegas Strip had a problem. Business was booming during the warm summer weekends, but during mid-week and off-season periods, the number of hotel rooms far outnumbered the guests. Seeking to boost visitor counts during these slow times, a group of civic and business leaders developed a plan to publicly finance and build a convention center to help capture a piece of the emerging convention and meeting business.

Funded by a newly created hotel room tax, the \$5.4 million Las Vegas Convention Center opened in 1959, featuring a 90,000-square-foot convention hall and the 6,300-seat Rotunda. That initial facility started a decades-long growth cycle for the convention and meeting business in Southern Nevada. Through the lens of today, that investment in the Las Vegas Convention Center was a no-brainer. Yet at the time, skeptics called the proposed center a “white elephant” that would never live up to promises

or justify its cost. Good thing they were wrong. Today, the Las Vegas Convention Center is one of the largest in the U.S. and has helped the region become the nation’s top trade show destination, hosting a record 6.6 million delegates while generating \$9.8 billion in economic impacts during 2017.

The original convention center not only helped catapult Southern Nevada into the convention market, it also ushered in a new era of sports and entertainment events—and the venues that hold them. The aforementioned Rotunda was not only a meeting and trade show space, it was also an arena that could host a wide variety of musical, sports and entertainment events. One of the earliest and most famous events was the visit by The Beatles during their 1964 coming-out tour through the U.S. For three decades, the spaceship-shaped Rotunda was a go-to venue for major boxing matches, musical headliners and concerts, the UNLV Runnin’ Rebels and countless other events.

The Rotunda was demolished in 1990, and while it may be gone, its legacy as a multipurpose venue lives on in the many facilities that thrive throughout Southern Nevada today. Sam Boyd Stadium and Thomas & Mack Center were the first to follow in the Rotunda’s footsteps, and they still host sports and entertainment events decades later. Other venues followed in the continuing evolution of the sports and entertainment scene, including MGM Grand Garden Arena, Las Vegas Motor Speedway, Mandalay Bay Events Center, Orleans Arena, South Point Arena and T-Mobile Arena. Many of these venues are among the best-performing in the nation.

The diversity and appeal of special events in Southern Nevada have evolved along with the locations that host them. Today, the calendar is filled with high-demand events such as National Finals Rodeo, NBA Summer League, Electric Daisy Carnival, NASCAR weekend, USA Sevens Rugby, the Vegas Golden Knights, celebrity-studded UFC and boxing matches and headliner concert tours. These events have been important additions to the transforming landscape of Las Vegas amenities, with special events now accounting for roughly 2.5 million annual visitors who generate an economic impact of \$3.4 billion annually. These events, and the economic impacts they create, would not be possible without the venues to hold them.

Could the founding fathers of the first Las Vegas Convention Center have foreseen the future that we live in today? Not likely. Though they did see an opportunity to diversify and broaden the region’s all-important tourism economy, and they came through with conviction and commitment to make that happen. Today, Southern Nevada is the dominant convention destination and is known as the entertainment capital of the world.

The Las Vegas Stadium is currently rising from the desert, and it will soon be joined by the groundbreaking MSG Sphere, a new venue concept that will push the boundaries of the audience experience. When the stadium opens in two years, it will host the region’s second major professional sports franchise, the NFL’s Raiders, give UNLV football a new state-of-the-art home and provide a stadium-sized venue for sports and entertainment events that just aren’t possible today. Much like the original Las Vegas Convention Center, the Las Vegas Stadium has faced its share of questions and doubts as to whether it will ever live up to the public investment and expectations. Respecting the uncertainty of the future—if history is to be any guide—the stadium will become a vital community asset that will thrive alongside the many other venues, current and future, that play a vital role in the ongoing evolution of Southern Nevada’s sports and entertainment landscape.

