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HOUSING: Living the high life

Strip high-rises draw dwellers seeking switch from suburbs

By [JENNIFER ROBISON](#)
[REVIEW-JOURNAL](#)



The Strip will be the neighborhood where Tom and Amy Garcia will raise their 2-year-old daughter, Grayce. The family plans to move into the 45-story Sky Las Vegas condo tower as early as December.

It's the heart of Sin City, a resort corridor focused on nonstop, what-happens-here-stays-here licentiousness.

For Tom and Amy Garcia, however, the Strip will soon be something else: the neighborhood where they'll raise their 2-year-old daughter, Grayce. In early 2005, the Garcias purchased a condominium at Sky Las Vegas, a 45-story high-rise under construction next to Circus Circus on the Strip. They could move in as early as December, when their unit is scheduled for completion.

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Photo by [Clint Karlsen](#).



Shirley and Gordon Murray said they'll enjoy avoiding the work and worry of yard maintenance when they move from the suburbs to a condominium at Turnberry Place.

Photo by [Isaac Brekken](#).



Dave Pawl bought a residence at Panorama Towers on Industrial Road. He said he looks forward to living near the Strip's bustle.

Photo by [John Gurzinski](#).

majority of those buyers say they plan to live in their units, rather than rent them out as investments.

"A lot of people who have lived in Las Vegas a while have some nice equity in their homes," said Paul Scaringe, vice president of sales at Panorama Towers, a high-rise community under construction on Dean Martin Drive between Tropicana Avenue and Flamingo Road. "They're looking to cash out and put their equity in a home that will allow them carefree living."

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Garcias' future digs are an unconventional choice for family living, their route to the Strip is even more unusual, for it runs through master-planned suburbia. In a reversal of two decades of demographic and development trends in the Las Vegas Valley, increasing numbers of locals are, like the Garcias, swapping big houses in the city's outskirts for smaller high-rise condominiums in its urban core.

Specific statistics on the number of suburbanites moving to the city's center are hard to come by because the phenomenon is relatively new. But sales executives at high-rise projects downtown and around the Strip estimate their properties' proportion of local buyers range from 15 percent to 35 percent. Salespeople add that the vast



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'A MORE COMPACT LIFESTYLE'

The Garcias started family life typically enough.

After they moved to Las Vegas from San Clemente, Calif., three years ago, they bought a 4,000-square-foot home on a quarter of an acre in suburban Summerlin's Vistas neighborhood.

A career transition is partly behind the Garcias' planned move into a 1,400-square-foot condominium on the sixth floor of Sky Las Vegas. Tom Garcia is a pilot for Delta Air Lines; the company's September bankruptcy filing has left him uncertain about his professional future and encouraged him and Amy, who has an eBay-based home business, to consider streamlining their lives.

"Given my job prospects, we're looking to live with less space," Garcia said. "This would definitely be a consolidation for us -- a smaller, more compact lifestyle. But we're preparing for a potentially life-altering change."

The move isn't just about downsizing, though. Garcia is planning a second career in real estate sales, and he said he wants to be close to "the hub of growth activity." He also believes upcoming development on the north Strip, such as Boyd Gaming Corp.'s Echelon Place on the Stardust site, makes for a good investment in the next few years. Besides potentially boosting the value of the Garcias' condominium, new developments will also place shopping, fine dining and entertainment within hoofing distance.

"I've always been intrigued by the idea of the New York City lifestyle, where people can walk from their homes to restaurants and stores, and not have to fight traffic," Garcia said. "I like what I see going on near the center of the Strip. I think it will take five or 10 years to mature, but we're getting in early, and to actually see it all happen will be quite compelling."

Gordon and Shirley Murray began considering a move to the city's core five years ago.

That's when the couple bought a unit in Turnberry Place's third tower, while the first tower was still under construction. They weren't ready in 2001 to move to the four-building high-rise community on Paradise Road south of Sahara Avenue, Shirley Murray said, and the long time horizon

would both give them time to make a decision and help them build some equity.

The equity materialized in the 2004 housing boom; the Murrays bought their unit for \$800,000 and could sell it today for \$1.6 million, Shirley Murray estimated.

Now, the move is about to happen, too.

When interior work is complete on their unit this spring, the Murrays will exchange their 3,000-square-foot home on a quarter of an acre in Desert Shores for 2,800 square feet on their tower's 18th floor.

"We're tired of hiring people to do the yard and clean the swimming pool," said Shirley Murray, a teacher at Cimarron-Memorial High School. "We've decided we want a change. We want to try condo living."

Gordon Murray, a dentist, agreed.

He said he and his wife spend about \$1,000 a month on maintenance for the house, yard and pool, as well as water and sewer bills. At Turnberry Place, they'll shell out about the same amount in monthly association fees and avoid the hassle of coordinating upkeep on a pool and home exterior.

"Time is a factor. Our time has become more valuable to us," Gordon Murray said. "We want to enjoy our lives more and not have to worry about whether the swimming pool needs to be cleaned and the grass needs to be mowed."

For Dave Pawl, a visit to the Foundation Room at the top of Mandalay Bay about two years ago turned him on to the possibilities of life on Las Vegas Boulevard.

"I was looking out across the Strip and it hit me that living down there would be pretty awesome," Pawl said.

By early 2007, Pawl will leave his 2,400-square-foot home in Summerlin's Vistas for a 1,200-square-foot unit on the fourth floor of Panorama Towers' second building. Pawl, who said he paid \$328,000 for his Panorama Towers unit when he bought it in June 2004, will rent out his Summerlin home after he moves to the resort corridor.

"I'm looking forward to just being a part of the Strip, and having that excitement and energy," Pawl said. "I want the lifestyle it offers, with shopping and restaurants."

Even more important for Pawl, the number of minutes he spends commuting to his construction company's offices near the Spaghetti Bowl will drop by more than half.

"Having a shorter commute will make life easier, and having the condo lifestyle means I won't have to take care of a pool," he said. "I'll have concierge services to help me with errands."

On the surface, suburbanites have different motives for heading into the city.

However, Steve Bottfeld, an analyst with the research firm Marketing Solutions, said those varied reasons have an underlying theme: Time. Aging baby boomers want every moment to count, Bottfeld said, so they're outsourcing chores and simplifying their lifestyles. Parents with young families are looking to shorten commutes to free time for their children. Single professionals want efficiencies that will give them more time to concentrate on their careers. Among all demographic segments, smaller homes translate into less time spent cleaning, while living on or near the Strip means quicker access to four-star restaurants and Broadway shows.

"The most important commodity today is not money, but time," Bottfeld said. "People want as little difficulty as possible getting to work, entertainment, retail and restaurants."

Bruce Hiatt, broker-owner of Luxury Realty Group, agreed.

"Many condo buyers are empty nesters or young adults who don't feel they need the space they used to have," Hiatt said. "They don't want larger properties with all their operational and maintenance costs and issues. In a condo, they don't have to spend the weekend on home repairs or maintaining a garden. They feel they'll have more free time."

SHOPPING FOR SERVICES

Residents of the resort corridor might find themselves with additional down time, but they'll have some trouble finding the basic services that populate a typical suburban shopping center. After all, the Strip is light

on grocery stores, health clubs, schools and dry-cleaners.

Developers are adding amenities to counter the shortage of services. Sky Las Vegas, for example, will have restaurants, a dog park and dry-cleaning on-site. Panorama Towers will house a tanning salon, a coffee shop, a small grocery store, a bakery and a delicatessen. Executives at Allure, a high-rise at the Strip and Sahara, are discussing a grocery-delivery agreement with Albertsons.

Yet, condo buyers agree maneuvering around scarce services will demand some logistical creativity.

The Murrays are self-professed "foodies" who love to cook gourmet meals at home, Shirley Murray said. Picking up ingredients for dinner will require a little extra planning so that Gordon Murray can stop in for groceries at a supermarket across the street from his office at Rampart and Lake Mead boulevards. The Murrays will also use the grocery-pickup service that Turnberry Place offers its residents.

Pawl has also scoped out a grocery store at Rancho Drive and Sahara, near his offices. He plans to shop online, too, and tap Panorama's concierge for assistance with dry-cleaning and other errands.

The Garcias agreed ferreting out places to serve life's necessities could be a struggle at first.

"Right now, it's a little inconvenient, because you do have to go a little ways for some services," Tom Garcia said. For Grayce, the Garcias will look into private schools. The family will also frequent the restaurants planned for Sky Las Vegas, and wait for other services to emerge in the area.

"We're counting on companies coming in to meet the needs of residents once high-rises start to go up," Garcia said.

Strip-area residents might not have to work at hunting down grocery stores for long: Where residential developments mushroom, services soon follow.

Hiatt, who himself has sold his home in Summerlin's Red Rock Country Club to move into Sky Las Vegas, said he believes the Strip's permanent denizens will reshape the area's amenities in coming years. High-end grocery stores such as Whole Foods will open up shop on or near the

Strip, he predicted, and upscale movie theaters with VIP services will also make an appearance. He also expects small business centers with meeting and conference areas to proliferate.

"Those are the kinds of services residents will want to see," Hiatt said. "Hopefully, new developments such as Echelon Place and Fontainebleau will plan a blend of Strip and local services."

And what of the suburbs former residents leave behind?

Few experts argue that existing outskirts will empty out as homeowners flee for the center of town.

What could ultimately suffer in the battle for buyers, Bottfeld said, are planned suburban areas that have yet to be built, as rising land prices and a need for housing near economic hubs drive future homeowners and builders alike into the city.

"Within 15 years, single-family, new-home subdivisions in Las Vegas will be extinct," he said. "There's only a certain amount of land near or adjacent to employment areas, and it's pretty full up. (Land) prices are \$1 million an acre, and you simply can't afford to build single-family homes on land that costs \$1 million an acre."

As evidence of the dwindling supremacy of the single-family home, Bottfeld points to planned condominium projects in the suburbs, including the two-building, 18-story One Queensridge Place in Peccole Ranch, the six-building, 372-unit Echelon in Centennial Hills and a two-building project planned at Red Rock Resort in Summerlin.

But locals who have already bought on and around the Strip don't seem too keen on heading back out toward the city's boundaries.


"We might find we miss having a garage and a yard too much, but we're going to give it a good trial period of at least a year," Gordon Murray said. "If we don't like it, we'll buy a house somewhere in Red Rock Country Club or Seven Hills. But we don't feel right now like that's where we want to go."

Pawl agreed.


"I think I might reconsider (living in the suburbs) in a few years, with condos at Red Rock Resort opening up," Pawl said. "Summerlin is a nice,

family-oriented, master-planned community, but for my needs, being on the go and working all the time, Panorama is just a better fit for me."

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