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Perception takes some time to catch up to reality, if it ever catches up at all. Media references to urban and rural Nevada are a case in point. We seldom read or hear a fact that would surprise many of us: Nevada, despite its rank as the seventh-largest state in size in the country, is one of the nation's most urban states and growing more urban all the time.

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Carson City: Nevada's Third Urbanized Area

Nevada's two long-standing urban areas are Clark and Washoe counties. Based on 2006 U.S. census estimates, Las Vegas and Henderson rank first and second in population among the state's communities. Third is Reno, then North Las Vegas, with Sparks fifth.

Carson City, the sixth largest city in Nevada, consolidated with Ormsby County in 1969. The 2000 U.S. Census gave the state capital 52,457 residents. The Federal Register notice of May 1, 2002 officially designated Carson City and the contiguous areas of Mound House in Lyon County and northern Douglas County as an urbanized area (58,263). This is defined as an "area consisting of a central place(s) and adjacent territory with a general population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile of land area that together have a minimum residential population of at least 50,000 people."

With an urban designation comes federal dollars to help address infrastructure including mass transit issues. Carson City has enjoyed urban status for five years now, which includes federal money to support its Jump Around Carson (JAC) public transit system dating back to October 2005. The Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) intercity bus route also provides a transit link for commuters between the Reno and Carson City urban areas. In addition, Carson City is scheduled to be connected to the federal interstate highway system in 2011 with the completion of I-580 to Reno.

So why is that that we hear or read time and again that Carson City and its consolidated city/county government is one of Nevada's 15 rural counties? It's probable that many reporters and others aren't up-to-date on Nevada census and demographic data. However, there also appears to be a general reluctance to accept the fact that Carson City has left the ranks of rural Nevada and is now part of a booming megalopolis at the eastern base of the Carson Range. Novelist Robert Laxalt once wrote that during his boyhood it was a point of pride that Nevada had the smallest capital. That hasn't been true for many years, but we seem reluctant to surrender the impression.

More than forty years have passed since Carson City was the nation's smallest state capital. With Carson City's population exceeding 55,000, adjacent areas to the east in Lyon County (Mound House and Dayton) and south in Douglas County (Indian Hills, Jacks Valley, and the Stephanie/Johnson Lane area) now include more than 25,000 additional residents.

Projected growth by the State Demographer suggests that Carson City may be augmented by larger parts of Douglas and Lyon counties as officially designated urban areas after the 2010 U.S. census. Storey County is already included in the Washoe County urbanized area because a large majority of Storey County residents commute to Washoe County to work.

While western Nevada's rural character outside the Reno-Sparks metro is rapidly disappearing, area residents are all over the board in their thinking about rapid change in the region. Some seemingly embrace sprawling growth as a sign of progress and prosperity, but apparently fail to recognize, or don't care, that by the 2020 U.S. Census there could be over one million people living within a sixty-mile radius of downtown Reno (inclusive of Lake Tahoe and the Truckee, California area). Others are fighting non-contiguous development and annexation to Reno.

Old-timers generally feel helpless in the face of booming growth; some have moved to smaller rural communities. On the other hand, many newcomers point to the fact that western Nevada is a far better place to live than the major urban areas where they moved from.

One thing is for sure, the type of expansive growth experienced in southern California, the Bay Area, the greater Sacramento-Stockton area, and southern Nevada, is now being felt in western Nevada.

Between horizontal lines: masthead of the Nevada State Data Center newsletter of November 2002.

Photo credit: "Urban sprawl," Carson City style, ca 1951-1953, looking north with the Nevada Children's Home in the right foreground. Photo by John Nulty collection, Nevada State Archives.

The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the *Reno Gazette-Journal*; the *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley; the *Humboldt Sun*; and the *Battle Mountain Bugle*.