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## City blooming in desert

### Coyote Springs developer touts natural element

By **Launce Rake** <[lrake@lasvegassun.com](mailto:lrake@lasvegassun.com)>

Las Vegas Sun

The Coyote Springs Valley sprawls between three Southern Nevada mountain ranges in an area rich with creosote, cactus, purple sage, jack rabbits and tortoises.

In the midst of this classically Western setting, thousands of homes are expected to sprout soon. Already, workers are busy carving out a Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course to help entice residents. Harvey Whittemore, the powerful lobbyist-turned-developer, says he is as proud of the natural elements of Coyote Springs as he is of the golf course.

The work under way is the product of a decade of scientific study, land-use planning, cajoling governments and sometimes acrimonious debate. It is the product that some once thought impossible: a new city in the desert, 55 miles north of Las Vegas, halfway to just about nothing at all.

"People said I was crazy," Whittemore says while touring the nascent development Tuesday. "What I said was:

#### Coyote Springs facts

Total land area: 43,000 acres/67 square miles

Area set aside for wildlife: 13,000 acres/20 square miles

**Number of homes, including multifamily units, at build out:** 159,000

**Number of homes in Clark County:** 49,000

**Number of homes in Lincoln County:** 110,000

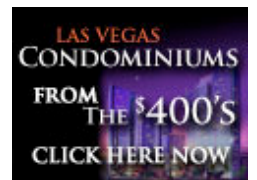
**Number of planned golf courses:** 16

**Years to build out:** 25 to 50

#### For comparison

Land area, North Las Vegas: 82 square miles

Number of homes in North Las Vegas in January: 61,363



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You have all this land, the best land in Southern Nevada, and you've got water."

Most people still believe the project is confined to blueprints, he says, but the movement of heavy equipment on the site belies that belief: "When people talk about it, they think it's another four or five years. I tell them, no, it's another four or five months."

While land and water provide the essential ingredients for desert development, Coyote Springs would not be possible without federal and local governments.

The project's roots date to a controversial land swap Congress approved in 1988 for a rocket-production company. In the swap, Aerojet, which owned land in the environmentally sensitive Florida Everglades, traded that land for 29,000 acres at Coyote Springs and a 100-year lease on another 14,000 acres.

In 1996, the company agreed to sell the land to Whittemore's holding company.

Two years later, Coyote Springs Investment finalized the deal and began the process of winning federal and local approval for the development. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has an interest because the land included habitat for the endangered desert tortoise. The Bureau of Land Management had oversight of the leased land and surrounding land.

Both Lincoln and Clark counties also had zoning oversight, and wanted to ensure that municipal services would be provided without charging existing taxpayers. Whittemore and a small army of consultants overcame the permitting challenges, in part by creating self-funding districts for the municipal services, and in part by providing land and water for habitat protection.

Among the agreements, Coyote Springs Investment will provide 460 acre-feet of water annually - about 150 million gallons - to sustain the endangered Moapa dace, a 3-inch fish found in northeast Clark County.

The dace would receive the water through releases within Coyote Springs' Pahrangat Wash, which feeds the Muddy River 15 miles downstream. The wash is part of the land set aside from development, and the set-aside and agreement to release water for the dace helped Whittemore and the project win an award this spring from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Water is, understandably, a crucial element of the Coyote Springs project. Whittemore is working to win state approval to import water from Lincoln County for the project.

In 1998, however, he made news by selling a portion of the water he controlled by purchasing the land. The Southern Nevada Water Authority, the water wholesaler for all of urban Las Vegas and its suburbs, paid Whittemore \$25 million for 7,500 acre-feet.

The money was helpful, but so was the strategic alliance with the Water Authority, Whittemore says. Even with the sale to the authority and the portion going to sustain the Moapa dace, Coyote Springs still has 4,140 acre-feet - more than 1.3 billion gallons annually - for the project, more than enough to support thousands of homes and the first golf course.

That water is already pumping to the project, filling lakes on the golf course and watering thousands of plants in the project's greenhouses. The project's well goes 700 feet into Coyote Springs Valley's deep aquifer.

Pardee Homes is among the homebuilders who have dived into the project. Klif Andrews, Pardee's division president, says his company and four other builders will begin selling custom lots later this year. Homes in the master-planned community will go on sale in August 2007, and people can open their front doors by the end of that year.

Andrews anticipates selling "1,000 to 1,200 homes a year for the first two, three years."

Not everyone is as impressed with the project. Some environmentalists have opposed the project from the beginning. Jane Feldman, a Sierra Club activist, served a few years on a technical committee that advised Whittemore's firm on how to limit the development's environmental impacts.

The basic problem is the location, miles away from existing urban development, Feldman says: "We have tremendous concerns about what's going on out there. Leapfrog urban development is just not smart by any definition of the word."

The distance means long drives for commuters working in Las Vegas, meaning more cars and pollution, she says.

While Feldman says federal and local governments should have blocked the development, she still credits Whittemore with providing natural space in the development: "That's how he's going to market his villages - as a place with a lot of open space, a lot of green space. It's as light as you can live in a leapfrog sprawl development."

Whittemore says he's done everything he can to make the project environmentally friendly. He was under no obligation to provide 13,000 acres for green space, he says, and would have received federal and local approval without it.

"The land is going to be developed," he says. "Don't you want it done to the highest standard? We have a true commitment to protecting the natural resources."

Whittemore realizes that his argument won't convince skeptics: "Some people suggest there should be no development at all. That's just not going to happen. What we can do is hold ourselves to the highest standards."

Coyote Springs does have some advocates within the conservation

movement, although those supporters are from organizations that work closely with companies.

Mike Ford, Southwest director for the Conservation Fund, a nonprofit group that supports the purchase and conservation of sensitive land throughout the country, worked as a consultant on the Coyote Springs project.

"I'm pretty proud of what we've been able to accomplish," Ford says.

The development sets a new standard for development in Clark County, he says. The 13,000-acre set-aside "will be protected in perpetuity. It's exactly what we had envisioned."

The project also could get a thumbs-up from Audubon International, a nonprofit group not affiliated with the National Audubon Society.

Audubon International has given its endorsement to developments such as golf courses the organization views as environmentally sustainable.

"I'm interested in working with any company that's committed to building in a sustainable way," says Audubon International President Ron Dodson .

Dodson says he's worked with Whittemore before and that Coyote Springs could be "a model development for Audubon International."

Whittemore says he hopes the endorsements will win support for the project. Some opposition will always be there because of his history as a lobbyist , he acknowledges.

Looking over the valley that one day could be home to thousands of houses, condominiums, stores, clinics and schools, Whittemore says his success has generated some opposition:

"I think people are a little bit jealous. I am very blessed. I am the luckiest guy in America."

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