

For Many in Las Vegas, the Rec Center Is a Casino

Las Vegas – Freddy Granado likes to gamble every once in a while, but that's not why he went to a neighborhood casino one recent evening with his wife and five children. They went for the movies. Sometimes they go to bowl. And their 8-year-old loves to play at the child-care center.

„It's a good family place for us,“ Granado's wife, Veronica, said of Sunset Station as all seven Granados waited in line for movie tickets. „We live down the street from here. This is like an overall hangout for us.“

In any other city on a Tuesday night, the family might go to a mall or a community center or a local theater. But this is Las Vegas. Three-quarters of the city's movie theaters are in casino complexes. The restaurants are here. Business luncheons, weddings and bar mitzvahs are held here. Nineteen public high schools hold graduations in an arena attached to a casino. The community is here.

Neighborhood casinos have sprouted like mushrooms in the suburbs of Las Vegas, the fastest-growing city in the nation. They cater to locals and serve as substitutes for senior centers, parks or street life. They offer bowling alleys, arcades, restaurants, multi-screen movie complexes, inexpensive child care, nightclubs and sometimes extras such as ice rinks along with the slot machines and card tables.

Ten years ago, half a dozen of these full-service casinos dotted the landscape off the Strip. Today there are 20, with at least six more in development. On a continuum of casino attractions, they lie somewhere between the two dozen gigantic gambling palaces, such as the Bellagio and MGM Grand, that line the Strip and draw tourists from around the world, and

the clusters of slot machines found in nearly every bar or grocery store in Nevada. The neighborhood places are fun, but not wild.

„In a city like Las Vegas, where most people have moved here fairly recently and they don't have the kind of family structure you might find in an older community," casinos are central social spaces, said David G. Schwartz, director of the Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. „If you win, people are happy to know you. If you lose, they're happy to commiserate with you. You can talk about the intricacies of video poker or about the slot machines, so you have something in common.“

Shamy Badal, 68, goes to the Orleans casino about once a week to gamble, eat a meal and socialize with friends, she said from a seat in front of a slot machine. Badal said she budgets \$ 10,800 to \$ 12,000 per year for gambling, considerably more than the \$ 1,480 that market researchers estimate the average southern Nevadan spends on gambling every year. „My retirement money," she said with a sheepish laugh. „I come just to play for fun, not to win big. It's just for fun. You sort of forget all your problems.“

At Sunset Station, across an acre of busy carpet and a maze of slot machines from the movie theater where the Granado family stood, Evelyn Romm, 76, played a Monopoly gambling machine. She perched on a stool, one hand busy with a cigarette in a long holder, the other working the big shining buttons.

„I'm here all the time," she said. „I'm retired. It gets you out. You talk to people. If you're living alone and you're a senior, you could sit there all day and not talk to anybody.“

Romm said she never bothers with the flash and hype of the mega-resorts. „I just don't go to the Strip, period," she said. „It's more comfortable here, not as crowded.“ Romm, like other locals, also thinks the machines give her better odds.

That's true, said Lori Nelson, spokeswoman for Station Casinos Inc., which owns 13 casinos, including Sunset Station. The company sets its machines to pay out slightly better than at the more famous casinos, knowing customers will notice.

„These are the most discriminating Las Vegas guests,“ Nelson said. Local customers visit five to eight times a week, according to the company. „They know their machines, they know what they like, they're more sophisticated than most Las Vegas casino visitors.“

While movie theaters and restaurants get customers through the door, Station Casinos earns 87 percent of its revenue from gambling.

The company and a rival, Boyd Gaming Corp., dominate the local market. They woo locals with a point system for members, similar to a frequent-flier program, through which gamblers are rewarded with meals or gifts. Fourteen thousand people participate in the Station program, Nelson said.

For those living in senior housing developments, there is a shuttle service to Station casinos.

Although residents make up more than 80 percent of its business, Station Casinos tries to bring in tourists who want to be insiders, Nelson said. Most of the properties have hotels attached to them. „People who frequented the Strip would ask hospitality workers, ‚Where do you go?‘ “ she said. „So we started to get tourists who wanted to be in the know. They wanted the Vegas experience but didn't want the kitschy part.“

Local casinos began a metamorphosis about 10 years ago, Schwartz said. Before that they were typically small, down-market bars. „You've got the buffet, you've got the slots, you've got the movie, you have the ZZ Top cover band maybe,“ he said. „That was the original iteration of what the neighborhood casino was. Mostly Western-themed in some way.

Not that fancy.“

But when the city began to boom, Station Casinos and Boyd Gaming, which owns the Orleans, were prepared to take advantage. They bought land far from the tourist areas. They expanded and turned their offerings upscale.

„Station Casinos has really raised the bar,“ Schwartz said. Some of the higher-end casinos „really rival what you’d see on the Strip. . . . None of that kind of over-elaborate, rococo-looking stuff that you find at a lot of casinos. They’re very hip and very contemporary.“

Local casinos are expected to proliferate as the city grows. Station Casinos owns parcels of land outside Las Vegas, and the company is poised to build casinos there once the neighborhoods arrive.

„People want to try to pump life into suburbia, and it’s interesting that they’re doing it at a casino,“ Schwartz said. „In Las Vegas, gambling pretty much permeates all of life, because it’s everywhere.“