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WATERLOGGED YARDS

Aerial photos draw attention to valley's top 10 grassiest areas

By HENRY BREAN REVIEW-JOURNAL



Grass sprouts in the front yards of homes near Sonatina Drive and Corista Drive in Henderson's Anthem master-planned community. Photo by Gary Thompson.

It's noon on a weekday, and North Las Vegas resident Warren Gilbert is grooming the edges of his front lawn with a cordless weed whacker.

If his neighborhood had an official song, this high-pitched whir would be it.

Gilbert's turf-lined street lies within a one-mile square that water officials have declared Southern Nevada's grassiest neighborhood.

The area bordered by Centennial Parkway, Revere Street, Ann Road and Clayton Street is home to 654 homes with at least 600 square feet of grass, earning it the top spot on the list compiled recently by the Southern Nevada Water Authority.



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"That one had, far and away, the most homes with turf," said

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J.C. Davis, spokesman for the water authority.

A Boulder City neighborhood with 421 so-called "turf homes" within a square-mile area ranks second. Another neighborhood in Boulder City, three in Las Vegas, two in Henderson and two in unincorporated Clark County round out the authority's top 10.

As little as a decade ago, landing on such a list might have been something to crow about. Now a lush lawn is seen by some as a symbol of excess in the drought-stricken desert.

But Davis said the list is not about "beating folks up" based on what they have growing in their yards.

"It's just a function of when their homes were built and what kind of landscaping was being used at the time," he said. "Just because someone lives in one of these neighborhoods doesn't mean they have a turf landscape or that they're a high water user, necessarily."

Davis said most neighborhoods on the list are at least 15 years old, and all of them predate the communitywide drought restrictions that generally prohibit front lawns and limit the size of back lawns for homes built after 2003.

The one possible exception, perched at No. 6, is a square-mile of homes built between 2000 and 2003 at the northern edge of the Anthem master-planned community in Henderson. There, nearly every tract home has a small patch of grass out front that was installed after the current drought was well under way.

Bob Fulkerson, state director of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada, considers that reckless, especially in light of the water authority's \$2 billion plan to pipe groundwater to Las Vegas from across Eastern Nevada.

"I think it's unconscionable that people are using potable water on



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grass at the same time they're considering taking scarce water from ranchers, farmers and wildlife whose lives depend on it," Fulkerson said. "Before Las Vegas decides to sacrifice rural Nevada for some growth, Las Vegas needs to get rid of its lawns. This isn't Massachusetts."

Three members of the water authority board -- Andrea Anderson, Steve Kirk and Lois

Tarkanian -- live in neighborhoods that made the list. So do former Gov. Kenny Guinn and, in the interests of full disclosure, Review-Journal Editor Thomas Mitchell.

"I'm not really surprised," said Anderson, a resident of Boulder City. "The neighborhood was built in the '70s, and that's when they built lawns front and rear."

"There's a lot of grass; there's no question about it," said Kirk, who lives in the decidedly green Silver Springs neighborhood in north central Henderson. "Sometimes I think we forget we live in a desert."

Tarkanian lives in Nevada Estates, just east of the Springs Preserve and west of the tony Rancho Circle gated community. The historic area near Rancho Drive and U.S. Highway 95 ranks seventh on the authority's list.

Changing that could be difficult, Tarkanian said, because the landscaping is part of the neighborhood's history.

"I do believe we have to conserve all we can," she said. "Maybe there is a way to do it so that we have a win on the side of conservation and a win on the side of maintaining the historical aspects."

Kirk said many people, himself included, are much more likely to pay an extra \$30 or \$40 a month for water than shell out several thousand dollars all at once for a landscape conversion.

"We all know water is a scarce resource," he said. "I think if it wasn't such a big financial hit more people would do it."

Back in the green expanse of North Las Vegas, Warren Gilbert, weed whacker still in hand, points out that his lawn was already there when he bought his house nine years ago.

Over the past five years, he has replaced about half of it with decorative rock, mostly in areas where he couldn't get the grass to grow anyway.

Gilbert said he and his wife have talked about getting rid of the rest of the lawn, but they're not quite ready to give it up yet.

"I don't mind working on it. I'm retired," he said.

Mike Amburgey has lived in Southern Nevada's grassiest neighborhood since the area was developed in 1991 as part of the Eldorado master-planned community, North Las Vegas' first large residential development.



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"The push back then was grass," Amburgey said.

His house used to be surrounded by the stuff, but he has whittled it down over the years to one 15-by-20-foot patch in the front yard that he carefully leveled so water from his sprinklers won't run into the street.

Most of the lawns in his subdivision slope toward the sidewalk. About 7:30 each night during the summer, small rivers appear in the gutters throughout the neighborhood as residents switch on their sprinklers, Amburgey said.

"I think a lot of people would love to change (their landscaping), but the cost is horrendous if you can't do the work yourself. A lot of people can't."

Amburgey's neighbor, Laura Martinez, just dropped about \$5,000 on a landscape conversion in her front yard.

The job would have been done sooner, Martinez said, but her homeowners' association took several months to sign off on the plans.

And throughout the delay, the association continued to issue fines -- about \$800 in all -- to Martinez and her husband for the condition of their lawn.

"They just gave us a hard time all around. We just couldn't understand it," she said.

A message left for the company that manages the Eldorado Ranches neighborhood association was not returned.

The top 10 list was compiled using aerial photographs taken last summer as part of a \$250,000 effort to develop a turf inventory for the water authority's service area.

The photos were shot from an altitude of about 4,800 feet using a special infrared camera that renders plant life in shades of red.

Water authority technicians have been poring over the images since March with the help of a computer program that recognizes patches of grass in the photos and tallies them up.

The process is painstaking and requires a measure of guesswork.

"The tree canopy is what throws it off. You don't know if what's underneath is grass or not. You can't see that from above," Davis explained.

Authority officials plan to use the data to develop a valleywide lawn inventory of sorts. Once they know where the grass is, they can target it using the Water Smart landscape program, which pays rebates to residents and business owners who rip out their lawns.

Residents of the top 10 grassiest neighborhoods can expect to hear a lot more about the rebate program in the coming weeks. Davis said some sort of direct marketing campaign, possibly involving door hangers, is being discussed.

Water planners also hope to use the aerial images to see how developers and homeowners' associations are using -- and in some cases abusing -- turf grass in their streetscapes and common areas.

More than 86 million square feet -- or 3 square miles -- of turf has been removed under the rebate program since it was launched in 1999. The effort is credited with saving 17.5 billion gallons of water a year, which is enough to supply more than 100,000 homes.

To date, the authority has paid out \$76.5 million in rebates for more than 23,600 separate landscape conversion projects.

Under the program's current rules, residents can collect \$2 for every square foot of lawn they replace with authority-approved water-smart landscaping. They also should see a drop in their monthly water bill, since ripping out even one square foot of grass will save an average of 55 gallons of water a year.

Davis insists the Water Smart program is not a scorched earth approach. "You know you're not going to get every scrap of turf at single-family homes, nor would you want to."

Instead, the goal is to eliminate areas of grass that planners call "nonfunctional."

"I call it useless. It's just for looking at," said Davis, whose Boulder City home, like Anderson's, lies within the square-mile area that ranks ninth on the authority's list.

Davis said he ripped out his front lawn and put in desert landscaping in 2004.

"There are really good uses for grass, but it shouldn't be just an ornamental landscaping choice."

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Marnie Vantine wrote on *July 31, 2007 11:03 AM*:

I take offense to Bob Fulkerson's comments. As State Director of a non-profit organization that needs support from all over the State to be successful, he has alienated me and other residents of the Southern half of the State. I noticed on PLAN's website that he lives in Reno. I grew up in Las Vegas and have never been to Reno, but I doubt they have issues relating to turf and water restrictions there. I have followed the issue of taking water from rural Nevada, and while no expert, am not very supportive of the plan. I don't know the answers to the water problems (and by the way, only have a small patch of grass in my backyard for my dogs and small children ... and because I like grass to play in too), but I am aware that I don't live in Massachusetts and find Mr. Fulkerson irritating to say the least. I don't plan to support PLAN any time soon solely based on it's executive director's rude comments. I do take it personally and so should each of you.

Carolyn J. Smith wrote on *July 30, 2007 10:31 PM*:

Dear Mr. Brean, As one of the residents living in the area highlighted in 'Waterlogged Yards' I must also add similar comments as Ms. Martinez. We, too, experienced a lot of frustration with Terra West, who manages the Eldorado Neighborhood First HOA. We were denied three times on our application to convert to desert landscaping without any explanation as to what we were doing wrong on the application. Finally, someone in the office felt sorry for us and told us what we needed to do to make sure it was approved. We had no clue as to how to figure out the square footage of a mature plant and apply it to come up with the 40% green that the HOA demands. They had a formula which ultimately was shared with us. It took us about eight months to finally get an approval. On another occasion, the HOA informed us as well as our neighbors that we would be fined \$100 if we did not fix brown spots in the lawn. At the time, I think it was a few years ago, we were on watering restrictions and there was nothing we could do about it. I had to call the water authority to get some relief on the pressure from the HOA.

Growth is already beyond the point where it should have been stopped but it's never

too late to limit it. People must remember that Las Vegas is and always will be a desert environment. We can't and shouldn't try to turn it into something else.

Carolyn J. Smith

CAROL STUBER wrote on *July 30, 2007 09:41 AM*:

We have a lush lawn in our front yard and it does not mean that we use a lot of water. We use the lawn tonic recipe from channel 3 news every 3 weeks and it works great. Everyone should have that recipe! Try controlled growth in the valley and you won't have to worry as much about water usage.

Voting for the Lawn! wrote on *July 29, 2007 11:02 PM*:

This is a joke! People are ripping out their beautiful lawns to conserve water, yet builders are building homes that are VACANT with little to NO yards. Get a grip, the boards need to take a flying leap and let the grass stay!

Sam wrote on *July 29, 2007 10:09 PM*:

Correct me if I am wrong but isn't Vegas sitting right above one of the biggest aquifers around? Isn't it so deep that it can't even be measured?

J wrote on *July 29, 2007 07:21 PM*:

I agree with the article and with most of the comments. Limit growth, do not allow 18-home-an-acre type of communities.

Vegas Man wrote on *July 29, 2007 05:35 PM*:

Clark County voters need to wake up and kick some county and city officials butts to stop this uncontrolled growth. Who are they fooling with Strip construction and home builders continuing to build with 23,000 home currently on the market and 14,000 of them vacant!!! Stop the madness and I will stop watering my piece of land!

Paul wrote on *July 29, 2007 04:55 PM*:

I was very shocked to see that Spanish Trail did not make the list. Aside from the golf course (which is making some changes now) the rest of the ENTIRE common area is GRASS. Maybe the heavy tree cover didn't allow it to be seen from the air. Lets think that this is an area bounded by Tropicana on the north; Hacienda on the south; Rainbow on the east and Durango on the west. That's a lot of grass.

A Rapp wrote on *July 29, 2007 03:39 PM*:

Boy, do I agree with this article! I'm trying to do something about it but the Homeowner's Association makes it difficult. I agree with Michael. I have it in my back yard and am trying to get it in front. Can't walk on it when it's hot but no mowing, no brown grass, no weeds, no fertilizing and it's not a problem with my dogs.

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