

From Casino Past to Entrepreneurial Future: Reno Remakes Itself

By Zachary Draper and Douglas Erwin

Since the 1930s, Reno, Nevada's image and economy have been dominated by a collection of downtown casinos. Across the nation and within the community, Reno was known as a gambling town. But in 2008, as the housing market crashed and gaming revenues fell drastically, Reno found itself tethered to a decaying downtown and a dominant industry in steep decline.

It was during this period of economic turmoil that Reno found immense opportunity; however, there were some major obstacles to overcome before its potential could be realized. The leaders envisioning the community's new future recognized that Reno lacked the entrepreneurial sophistication of established start-up hubs like Boulder, Colorado; the community faced an identity crisis as it confronted the decline of gaming; and existing efforts to build an entrepreneurial ecosystem had been fragmented and scattered.

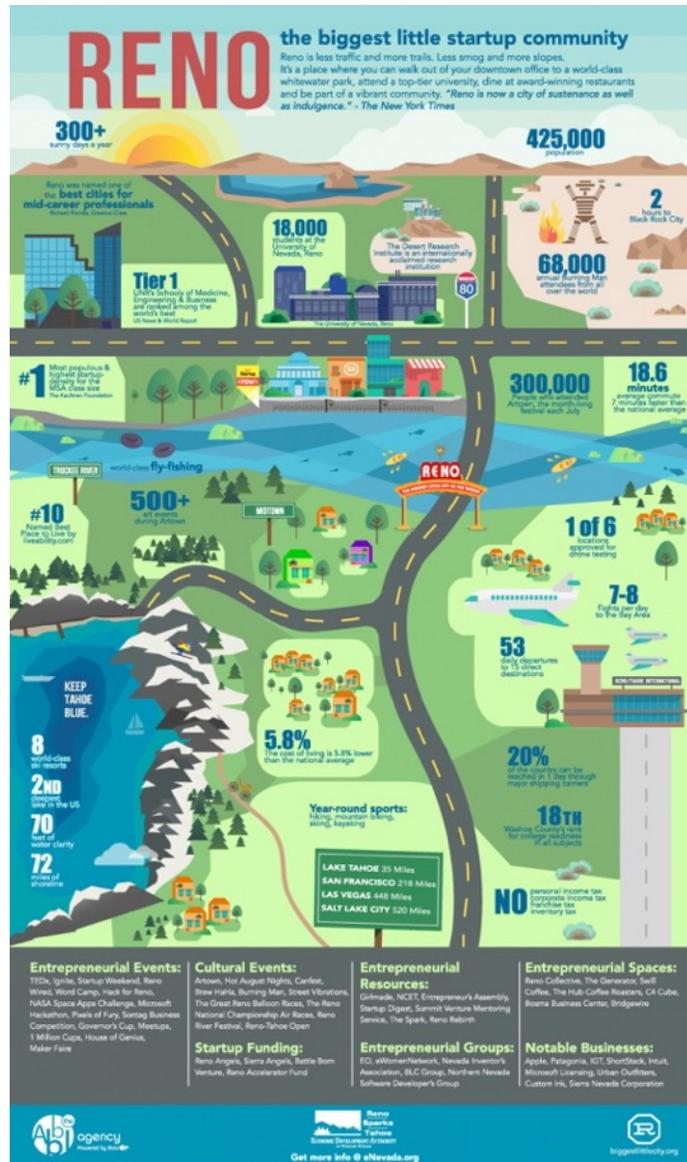
Essentially, Reno leaders tasked themselves with building an entrepreneurial ecosystem from the ground up, forging a new future for Reno.

Connecting the Ecosystem

Reno never suffered from a lack of entrepreneurial energy, but the entrepreneurial support community lacked cohesion and much of its programming was dated.

Two catalysts helped change the conversation about entrepreneurship in the community. The first was the creation of [Entrepreneurship Nevada](#), an organization comprised almost exclusively of entrepreneurial support groups. With little formal structure and a broad mission to foster engagement and collaboration among these support groups, Entrepreneurship Nevada helped break down silos and get groups working together, instead of against each other, for the benefit of the community.

The second was Reno receiving a 2013 [IBM Smarter Cities](#) grant. Cities selected for this grant were challenged to, "be one strong voice. Present one regional economic development face to the outside world." The grant helped the city realize that a piecemeal approach to economic development was ineffective. It also helped empower the [Economic Development Authority of Western Nevada](#) (EDAWN) to be the strong voice that was needed.



Learn more about Reno's startup community ([view larger](#)).EDAWN created an entrepreneurial development strategy that leveraged the concepts from Brad Feld's *Startup Communities* and Victor Hwang's *The Rainforest: The Secret to Building the Next Silicon Valley*. EDAWN embraced these insights and developed a four-point strategy that optimized its role in the startup community:

- **Communicate:** Utilize the new profile of EDAWN to tell the story of Reno's startup community both internally and externally.
- **Catalyze:** Identify gaps in the ecosystem, find entrepreneurs to lead initiatives, and support the programs with both human and financial resources.
- **Connect:** Bridge the gaps between the startup community, the broader business community, and the regional governments.
- **Showcase:** Shine a spotlight on the successes in the community to help startups break out from the noise and highlight entrepreneurial role models.

Best-in-Class Programing

Many local support programs were in place, but more needed to be done to grow the sophistication of the entrepreneurial support system.

To add cachet and credibility to the fledgling startup scene, more focus was placed on implementing nationally recognized programs like [Startup Weekend](#) and the [MIT Venture Mentoring Service](#).

Reno was the fifth city to implement the Kauffman Foundation's [1 Million Cups](#) program. The constancy of 1 Million Cups, week in, week out, made it a keystone of the ecosystem. Its popularity spread rapidly and became *the* place in Reno for weekly inspiration, support, and connectivity.

Although many positive things (funding, connections, and startups) have come out of 1 Million Cups, its biggest impact was on the community itself. 1 Million Cups helped Reno entrepreneurs believe in themselves and recognize the growing support community around them.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are complex and multifaceted. Reno civic and business leaders realized this and started assembling all the pieces of the puzzle, including funding, mentorship, support services, and education.

Agile Community Development

The entrepreneurial ecosystem is in constant flux, and it's very difficult to determine which initiatives will succeed or fail. Utilizing concepts from agile development and *The Rainforest*, community leaders started experimenting with new initiatives.

Through this process, a theme emerged that may be at the core of Reno's revitalization. The common theme is pretty basic but also profound when you deconstruct it: simply put, everyone in the ecosystem loves living in Reno and is passionate about shaping Reno's future. Community leaders recognized that everyone has a unique role to play in the ecosystem, and as leaders they are simply helping channel people's intrinsic motivations toward a broad common goal.

Today, the results of Reno's efforts already are materializing. Reno's downtown is in transition. Vacant casinos left over from a difficult evolution from gaming to entrepreneurship still are scattered throughout the downtown core, but at the south end of downtown, the new Reno economy is taking shape.

A growing number of tech startups have collected in an area now referred to as "Startup Row." It is home to growing businesses like microcontroller hardware developer [Pinoccio](#), game developer [Crazy Tooth Studio](#), business intelligence company [Inqiri](#), and fitness software company [TrainerRoad](#)

At the center of Startup Row is the Reno Collective, a collaborative working space where many startups have been spawned, grown, and spun out on their own.

Reno always has been an events city, and the entrepreneurial efforts also have impacted that aspect of the community. Now, people are just as likely to participate in a [TEDx](#) event, [MakerFaire](#), or Hackathon as they are to go to Hot August Nights or the National Championship Air Races.

Reno's story is still being written. The city still is in transition from the gaming capital of Northern Nevada to a vibrant entrepreneurial economy. The city has succeeded in attracting large corporations like Apple, Microsoft, and Intuit, and nurtured a homegrown crop of tech startups like Pinoccio and TrainerRoad.

The transformation still is ongoing, but Reno's determination to use a deep recession as an opportunity to reinvent itself already is succeeding. A dedicated team of local leaders with a collaborative mindset and singular focus on entrepreneurship is assembled and laser-focused on seeing its efforts through until Reno's entrepreneurial ecosystem is fully thriving and transforming the landscape for generations to come.

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