

PHOTOS BY AARON MAYES / STAFF

**THE VISITOR CENTER** at Hoover Dam, at a cost of \$123 million, also will accommodate special events.

# Embattled dam center ready

By Rachael Levy

LAS VEGAS SUN

**BOULDER CITY** — Dan Jensen landed in the hot seat during a recent jury duty appearance after he told the judge he made a living as manager of Hoover Dam's new visitor center.

The next thing Jensen knew, he was having to justify spending \$123 million on a tourist stop and parking garage, \$91 million over budget.

But Jensen and other federal Bureau of Reclamation officials don't like to come to the buildings' defense.

The construction of the drum-shaped visitor center rising from a cut in Black Canyon wall and the russet-colored garage wedged into a ravine was a misuse of public money, the officials admit.

"But certainly now that it's built, we're not going to close it up and run away," said bureau spokesman Bob Walsh in Boulder City. "We need to make it work."

The responsibility of making the visitor center "work" rests on the shoulders of Jensen and his 44

employees who are busy washing the copper-tinted windows imported from Italy and sweeping tiles shipped in from Australia in expectation of next week's opening.

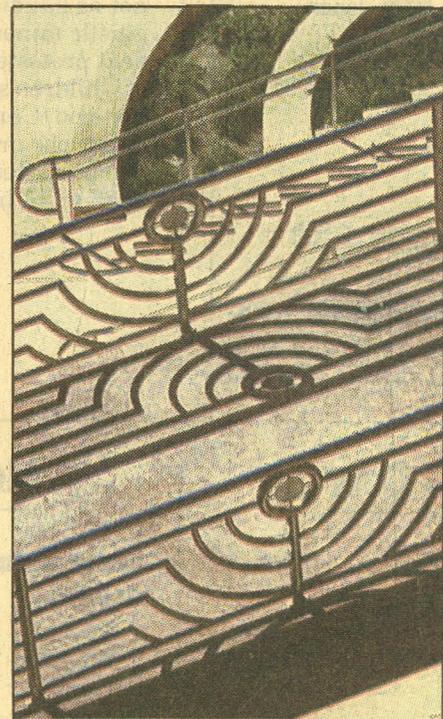
Jensen not only wants the visitor center to pay for itself, he expects it to chip in \$3 million each year to pay off the \$123 million construction debt.

Right now, the construction, financed over 50 years, is expected to total \$435.5 million — all to be repaid by power users in Southern Nevada, Arizona and California.

Jensen is optimistic he can reach his goal — not June 21 when the visitor center opens its doors — but eventually.

After all, he reasons, Hoover Dam attracted 712,000 people last year who waited 40 minutes in sizzling heat to tour one of the seven engineering wonders of the world.

This year, more than 1 million people are expected to pay \$5 to walk through the bowels of the



**KEEPING** with the dam's design, several Art Deco features were included in the facilities.

**SEE CENTER, 8A**

# Center

CONTINUED FROM 1A

dam. Children 10 and 16 and senior citizens with Golden Age Passports pay \$2.50.

But while the visitors are expected to willingly open their wallets, Southern Nevadans grumble about their share of the "Disneyland in the desert," said Kent Bloomfield of Overton Power Co.

"I know what their (bureau's) best efforts can do in spending money," Bloomfield said. "I have yet to see what their best efforts can do in saving money."

For the next 50 years, residents of the rural community 60 miles northeast of Las Vegas will see their portion of the construction debt in the form of an extra \$20 tacked onto their annual electric bills.

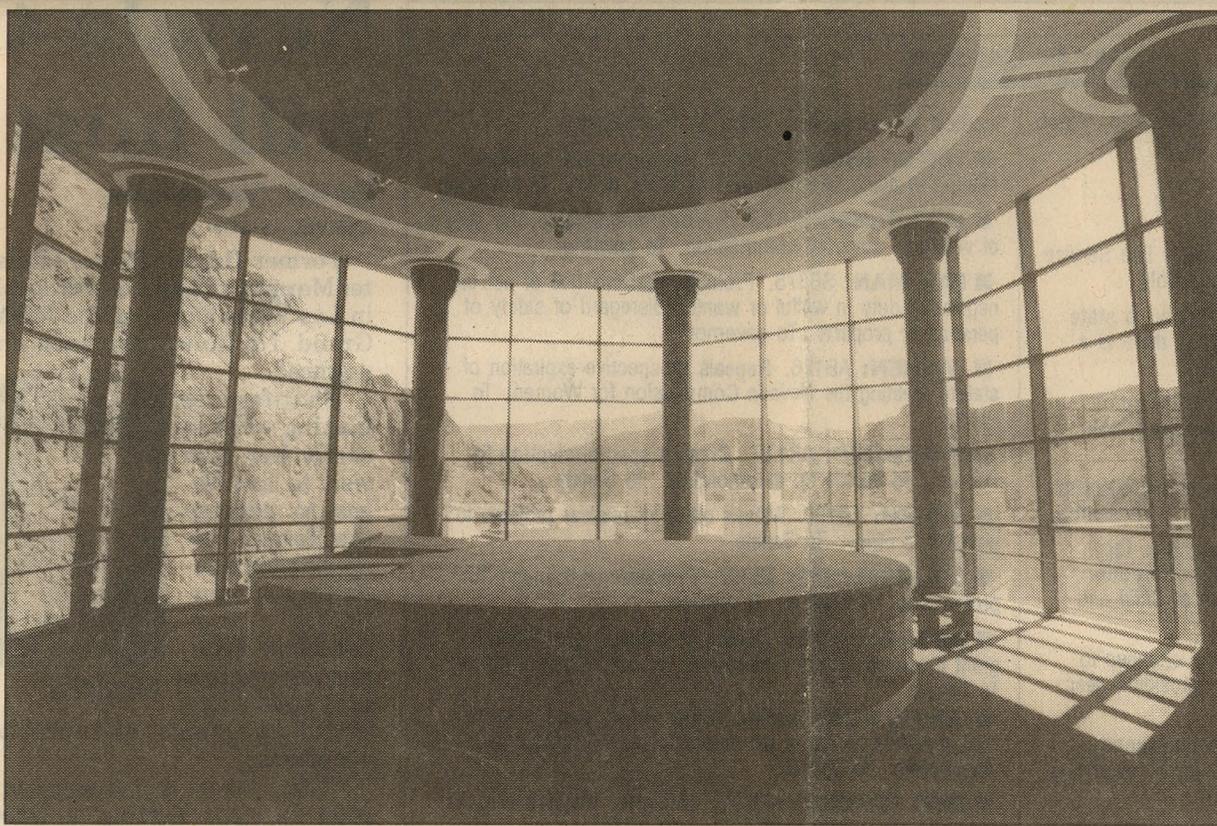
Las Vegas, who receive a smaller percentage of their power from Hoover Dam, will pay an estimated 84 cents per year on the debt.

Bloomfield has been a leading critic of the visitor center, which has come to represent the ills of government spending: cost overruns, management indifference and lack of oversight.

But Bloomfield may eat his skeptical words if Jensen is successful with his plans for the visitor center.

The bureau is negotiating a contract with the commercial paddlewheel boat that tours Lake Mead to drop off visitors on the Nevada side of Hoover Dam. Now the Desert Princess makes a U-turn in front of the dam.

Jensen envisions - for a fee - the breathtaking view of the 70-story dam and aquamarine Lake Mead serving as a backdrop for weddings, banquets and meetings. And he is quick to sell Hoover Dam as a site for commercials and Hollywood



NEVADA, Arizona and California are working on an exhibit to fill the top floor of the center.

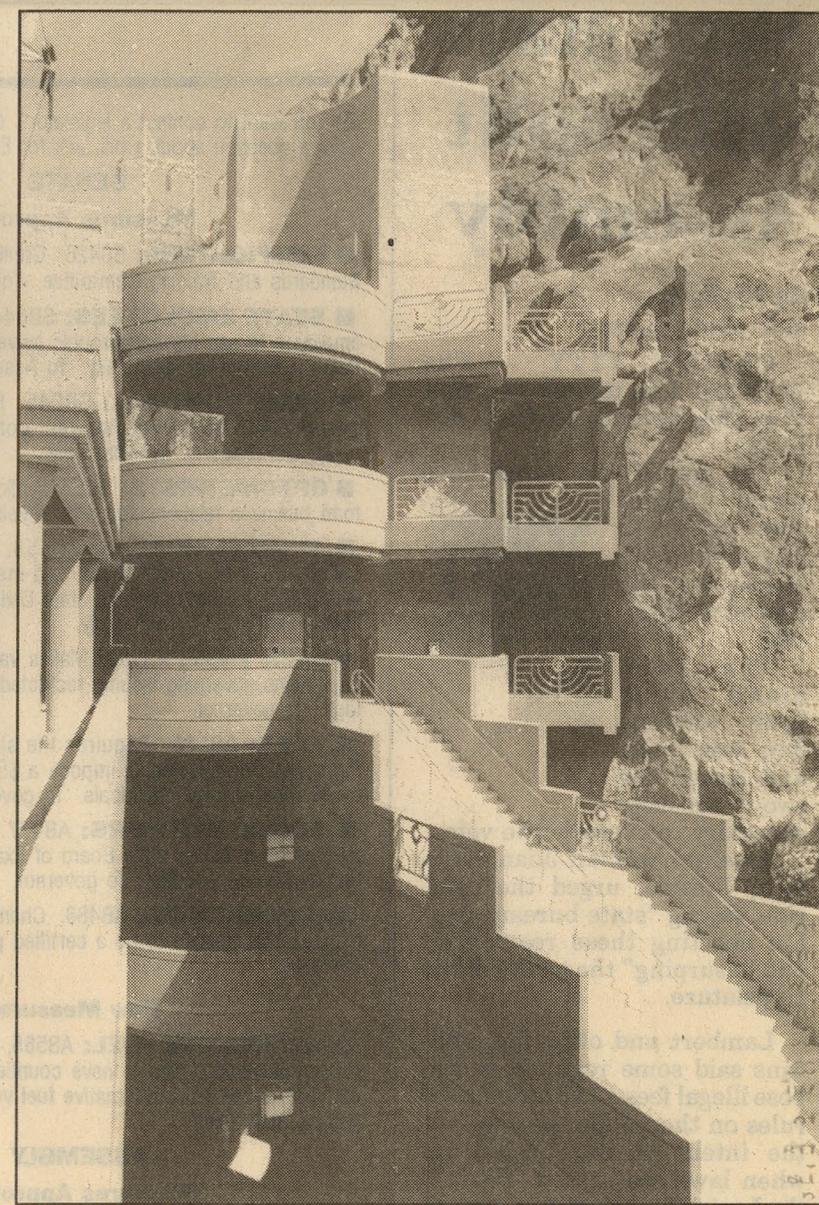
movies.

But the federal employee is not the only one with money-filled dreams for the visitor center.

Jensen has been approached by 40 businesses wanting to sell everything from candid photos of visitors entering the dam to copper medallion images of it. And don't forget the cappuccino maker, hot dog stand and horse stable.

"If we can make visiting the dam easier, more enjoyable and different, we can attract a larger audience," Jensen said. "Seven million dollars is not an unreasonable goal."

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THE NEW garage looks as if it fades into the mountains.