

# LAS VEGAS SUN

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## FEDERAL BOONDOGGLE

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# Dam center costs should be probed

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation officials should be ashamed of themselves.

They turned a reasonable plan for a visitors center into an overpriced monster, and threatened the very livelihood of rural Southern Nevada residents.

In 1983, the cost of the center was estimated at \$32 million. A decade and lots of goodies later, the tourist site has an \$85 million price tag. Southern Nevada power users, who are paying for this boondoggle, will get a whiz-bang building replete with escalators, waterfalls and a multistory parking garage to dazzle the tourists.

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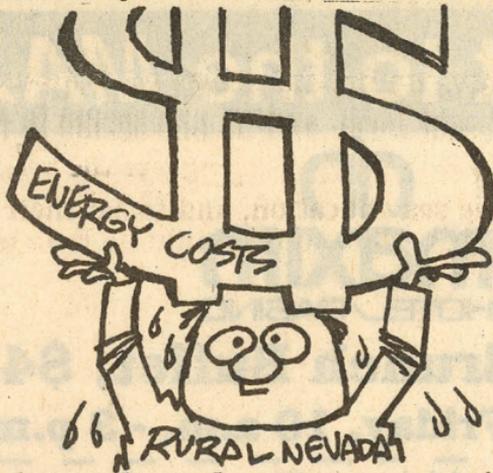
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The cost will be financed over 50 years, bringing the total tab to \$435 million.

Las Vegas power users are getting away with only a minuscule portion of the cost, about 84 cents a year.

But rural power users in Nevada, Arizona and California are being socked with horrific increases in bills. Farmers dependent upon irrigation water have cost hikes approaching \$20,000 a year, the difference between profit and bankruptcy for many operators.

Bureau commissioner Dan Beard is understandably hot over the cost overruns



and tried to shut down construction at one point. He's, of course, correct. But the principal question about this project is where we go from here.

Small power companies have challenged the bill, claiming they should pay only the original \$32 million estimate. They also want associated equipment purchases for the dam not counted as a one-time bill, but spread out over the life of the equipment. That seems reasonable.

So do congressional hearings called for by Nevada Sens. Harry Reid and Richard Bryan that could answer just how this project got so far out of hand. The SUN reported that in 1983, the original estimates given to Congress were known to be faulty by the people who prepared those figures.

The bureau needs a "real world" check on its projects to ensure cost estimates are realistic and that the project is critically needed.

If the bureau wants to expand its tourist business, why must it be done on the backs of those who would never benefit? Should not the power users themselves have a say on a project that may cripple regional agriculture?

For years Hoover Dam made do with modest tourist facilities. Then, bureau employees who had no economic stake in it decided to build the "Taj Mahal," of visitors centers. If Congress reviews this spending binge, it should look at the rationale of building such centers, who benefits from them and who should pick up the tabs.

Hoover Dam was built in the Depression, in part, to help bring agriculture to the desert. It seems ironic that a visitors center touting the dam should be so expensive that it would endanger that same agriculture.