

Title: How Tall is Too Tall? A Capitol Tale

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Summary: Historical Myth a Month-Myth # 91
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There is a tale in Carson City that no building in the community may be constructed taller than the State Capitol. Completed in 1871, Nevada's statehouse towered over all the buildings erected before it, including the first Ormsby House, the St. Charles Hotel, and the United States Mint. The Federal Building (now the Paul Laxalt State Building), opened in 1891, rivaled but did not exceed the capitol in height. The capitol with its silver-colored cupola stood alone as Carson City's landmark feature for 100 years. The presumption that generated the legend was that city and state officials had agreed no building could be erected in Carson City that would exceed the height of the capitol. After all, Washington D.C. has a federal law dating back to 1899, and amended in 1910, that no private building can be taller than the U.S. Capitol at 288 feet. From the top of the cupola to the base of the State Capitol, the building measures 112.2 feet. The flagpole, which technically is not part of the building, adds another 40 feet. If there were a law or ordinance in place to the effect that no building could be higher than the capitol, then the current Ormsby House on the southwest corner of Carson and Fifth streets would be in violation. Opened July 2, 1972 by former Governor Paul Laxalt and members of his family, the new Ormsby House stood 117 feet tall. The Ormsby House is almost 5 feet taller than the State Capitol, minus the flagpole. Like the State Capitol, the Ormsby House dominates Carson City's modest skyline. The truth is there was no law, ordinance, or policy in place until 1991 when the Carson City Downtown Master Plan was adopted. The Master Plan established a rule of "no building taller than the capitol within 500 feet," which effectively excluded the Ormsby House. The rule was codified in Carson City's Municipal Code (Title 18.06) in June 1995. In effect, as Carson City continues to grow as an urban area and ground space for development approaches a premium, there may be commercial, governmental, and residential structures constructed in Eagle Valley that exceed the height of the State Capitol outside the 500' radius around the building. Vertical growth may equal horizontal growth before the expected build-out of Carson City. Today, Carson City--which consolidated with Ormsby County in 1969--already has the highest population density of any county in Nevada. At one time, as one approached Carson City from the west on King Street--then the Lincoln Highway to and from Lake Tahoe--you saw a beautiful, unobstructed view of the capitol. The Lincoln Highway (U.S. Highway 50) was relocated south to Clear Creek in 1928. At the same time, the Supreme Court and State Library had outgrown their small space in the capitol. Despite protests from many Carson City residents, a Supreme Court and Library building opened in 1937 that closed off King Street to Carson Street and blocked the magnificent postcard view of the State Capitol. Growth and change, then and now, have altered the character of Carson City's landscape including the prominence of the statehouse in the heart of Nevada's capital. Well-conceived urban planning can minimize the impact of growth on Carson City's friendly sky in the future, preventing its "Manhattanization"--whereby the State Capitol will not be an island in a sea of high-rise buildings. Photographs courtesy of Nevada State Library and Archives. Top: View from Capitol roof looking southwest to the Ormsby Hotel, 1979. Bottom: Photographer John J. Nulty aerial view of the Capitol showing Supreme Court building in upper left corner, blocking King Street, 1944.

(Original version in Sierra Sage, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, August 2003) For the complete "Historical Myth a Month" series, visit <http://nevadaculture.org/docs/nsla/archives/myth/sitemap.htm>