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New road, new life for Central City

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People in Central City have long believed their town has much to offer: an opera, historic architecture, beautiful scenery, and, of course, gaming. Trouble is, few people made it far enough to see all of that.

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The problem was this. Highway 119, for years the primary route to the area, goes through Blackhawk first. That city, with its massive parking garages and modern casinos, attracted those weary from a one-hour drive up a windy canyon road. The vast majority never drove the additional mile to Central City, which has put a priority on preserving its historic architecture, at the expense of more parking. "I have a gift shop in Central City and I've had people tell me they didn't know Central City was even up here," said Victoria Terpening, a shop owner. "They thought when they were in Blackhawk that they were actually in Central City already," she said.



9NEWS Anchor Mark Koebrich says a new road to Central City opened today. 4 p.m. November 19, 2004.

Central City's leaders knew they had to do something different to attract visitors, and ripping down the old buildings for modern mega-casinos was not in the cards. What they needed, said casino operator, beer brewer, and Mayor Buddy Schmalz, was a better way to get people to town.

The Central City Parkway (CCP) may be the town's answer. "This dream is finally going to become a reality," said Joe Behm, president of the Central City Business Improvement District. Those words came at the beginning of a lengthy dedication ceremony at the start of the parkway. The CCP starts at exit 243 off of I-70, just east of Idaho Springs. From there it's an eight-mile journey on a smooth, modern four-lane road. The CCP ends at the foot of Main Street, affording drivers a commanding view of the town's historic 19th century architecture, it's most obvious visual attraction.

The CCP was so important to the town, residents ultimately paid for it themselves. Town leaders annexed the eight-mile strip connecting the town to I-70, and sold \$38 million in bonds to pay for the project up front. At the dedication, they sent a convoy of vintage racecars, led by former Indy 500 champion Buddy Lazier, up first. Dozens of town residents and curious onlookers followed. "It was beautiful, especially when you come off over the top the vista right there it's pretty fabulous," said Victor Sanchez, a former Central City resident.

The road is fueling a wave of optimism along Main Street that hasn't been felt for years.

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"I believe it'll bring the rebirth of Central City back into being the richest square mile on earth," said Kit Williams, part owner of the Belvedere Theater. Up and down Main Street, workers were renovating shops in expectation of the new visitors and the tourist dollars they'll bring.

When gambling came to Central City and Blackhawk in 1991, Central City chose to protect its history. After 13 years of watching their sister city pull in all the money, city leaders decided it was time to try something different. Gaming may yet prove to be a boon for Central City, now that people will finally visit in large numbers.