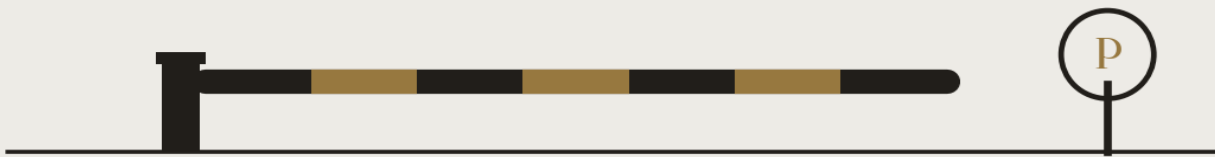


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The Price of Arrival

Ten years of paid parking on the Las Vegas Strip — and why the grievance never faded.



Executive Summary

In January 2016, MGM Resorts ended decades of free parking on the Las Vegas Strip. A senior executive predicted at the time that people would completely forget about it. Ten years of evidence say they did not.

This paper tracks the full arc of the Strip's free-to-fee transition — introduction, industry-wide diffusion, one public reversal, a pandemic suspension, reinstatement, and consolidation — using 50 archival sources under systematic content analysis and a decade of Nevada Gaming Control Board revenue data. Three results stand out.

First, the grievance intensified rather than decayed. Standard pricing theory expects fairness complaints to fade as a new price becomes the norm. Instead, consumer-fairness language in public discourse nearly tripled between the introduction period and the consolidation period — and a consumer petition launched in February 2026, ten years after the first fee, gathered more than 18,000 verified signatures within four months.

Second, operators never changed their story. The revenue-justification language used to explain the fees remained essentially unchanged across ten years while consumer grievance grew. The conversation moved; the script did not.

Third, the costs did not show up where managers usually look. We find no detectable penalty in Strip operator revenue attributable to the fees — which is precisely why they persisted. The measurable movement is in the locals market, whose revenue diverged from the Strip faster after the fees than before, consistent with survey evidence that nearly a third of residents began avoiding the Strip.

<p>~3x</p> <p>growth in consumer-fairness language, 2016–19 vs. 2023–26</p>	<p>18,048</p> <p>verified signatures on the 2026 petition (Change.org, June 11, 2026)</p>	<p>50</p> <p>archival sources under systematic content analysis</p>	<p>0</p> <p>changes in operators' justification framing in ten years</p>	<p>30%</p> <p>of residents reported avoiding the Strip (LVCVA, 2018)</p>
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PART ONE

What Happened: A Decade in Four Phases

For most of its modern history, free parking on the Strip was not a promotion. It was part of the deal — an element of the comp culture through which Las Vegas told visitors they were wanted. The record below describes how that deal ended, and how customers, competitors, and circumstance responded.

Jan 2016 DISRUPTION	MGM Resorts introduces paid parking at its Strip properties, framing the move as revenue alignment with other major markets. Reaction is immediate: a Change.org petition against the fees draws more than a thousand signatures within days, with signers threatening boycotts. A senior executive predicts the controversy will pass.
2016–17 DIFFUSION	Caesars Entertainment follows within months; Wynn Las Vegas follows. The Venetian declines and holds out — free parking becomes part of its positioning for the next seven years.
2018 REVERSAL	Wynn publicly abandons its parking fees, stating that charging guests to park runs counter to the personalized service the brand provides. The same year, LVCVA survey data indicate roughly 30% of Las Vegas residents are avoiding the Strip.
2020 SUSPENSION	COVID-19 closures empty the Strip. On reopening, MGM and Caesars suspend parking fees as a goodwill gesture. Discourse celebrating the 'old Vegas deal' surges during the free-parking window.
2020–21 REINSTATEMENT	Caesars reinstates fees in October 2020; MGM follows in June 2021 as visitation recovers. The lesson operators draw from the pandemic is not that guests dislike fees — it is that guests returned despite them.
2023 CONSOLIDATION	The Venetian, its garages absorbing traffic from the newly opened Sphere, begins charging. The last major free-parking holdout is gone; the new norm covers the entire Strip.
2026 PERSISTENCE	Self-parking runs \$20–25 per day at most properties, valet around \$40, with carve-outs for Nevada residents and upper loyalty tiers. In February 2026 — ten years after the first fee — a new petition demanding free parking for locals launches and gathers more than 18,000 verified signatures by June.

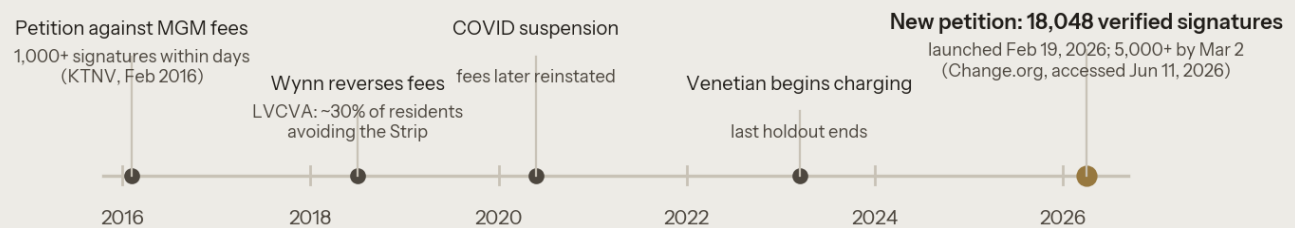


Figure 1. Consumer protest bookends the decade. Sources: KTNV (Feb 2016); LVCVA (2018); study corpus; Change.org petition 'Grant free parking for Las Vegas locals on the Strip!' created Feb 19, 2026, count accessed June 11, 2026; FOX5 Las Vegas (Mar 2, 2026).

PART TWO

What the Data Show

Fifty archival sources — trade press, local news, consumer forums, corporate statements, and petition text — were coded into four language dictionaries and compared across three theoretically defined periods, using Welch’s two-sample t-tests on paragraph-level excerpts.

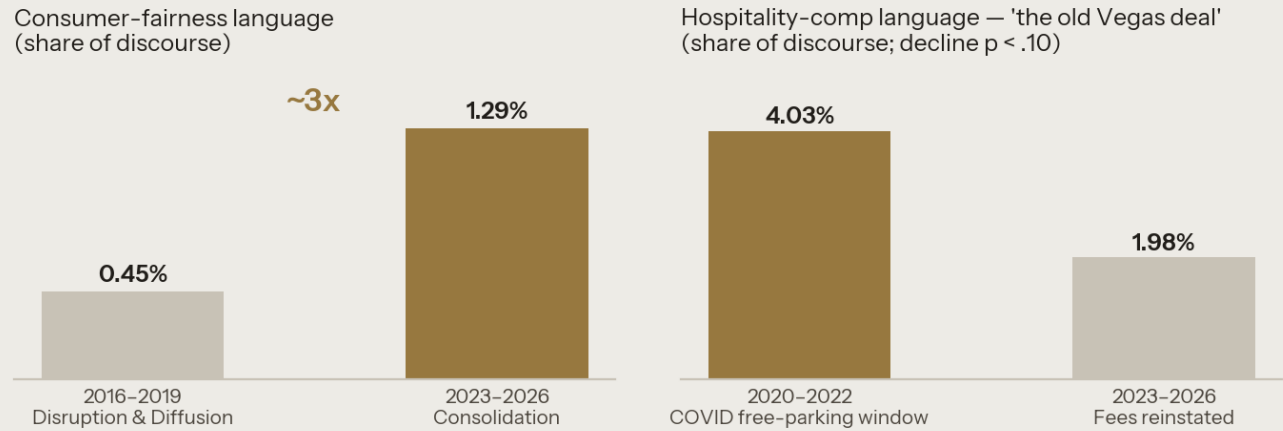
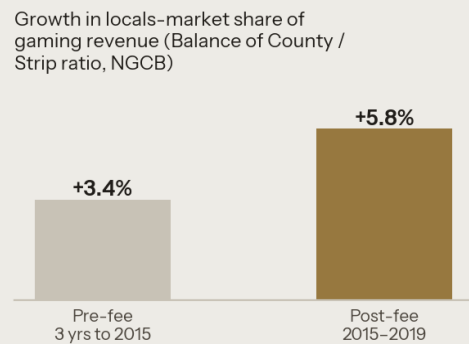


Figure 2. Left: consumer-fairness language rose from 0.45% of discourse in 2016–2019 to 1.29% in 2023–2026 — the opposite of the attenuation standard pricing models predict. Right: celebration of the comp-era deal spiked while parking was free during COVID, then fell when fees returned (p < .10) — suppressed, not extinguished. Source: author’s content analysis of the 50-source corpus.

The two remaining dictionaries complete the picture. Revenue-optimization language — operators’ justification frame — was statistically flat across all three periods: the same explanation, for ten years, against rising grievance. Competitive-field language — discourse treating parking policy as a point of differentiation — declined monotonically as the holdouts capitulated. Once every operator charged, parking stopped being a competitive variable, and the grievance lost its market outlet.

The revenue side

Nevada Gaming Control Board data tell a quieter but consistent story. In the clean pre-COVID window, the ratio of locals-market (Balance of County) revenue to Strip revenue rose from 0.151 in 2015 to 0.160 in 2019 — a 5.8% shift toward the locals market in the four years after the fee, versus 3.4% in the three years before it. The pattern is temporally consistent with resident avoidance of the Strip, though the window cannot isolate parking from all other forces.



Just as important is what we did not find: an event study and difference-in-differences analysis on the same data show no detectable financial penalty to Strip operators attributable to the fees. That null result is not a footnote — it is the economic explanation for why every operator eventually adopted the fees, and why customer grievance alone was not enough to reverse them.

Figure 3. Source: author’s analysis of NGCB Gaming Revenue Information, 2013–2024; primary analytic window 2015–2019.

PART THREE

Why the Grievance Never Faded

Pricing research offers a default forecast for what should have happened. Customers judge a new price against reference points; the reference point adapts; complaints fade. On that account, by 2020 — certainly by 2026 — Strip parking fees should have become unremarkable. The discourse data show the reverse. Three features of the case explain why.

1. Free parking was owned, not merely expected.

Research on psychological ownership shows that people come to feel that public and shared goods are theirs — and react to changes in those goods as losses, not price adjustments. Decades of free parking made the garage part of what customers felt they already possessed when they arrived. The 2026 petition's own language makes the point: what used to feel like our backyard now feels gated. A fee on an owned good is experienced as a taking. Takings are remembered; price changes are absorbed.

2. The target of the anger is the practice, not the brand.

A striking regularity in the discourse: consumers do not hate MGM — they hate parking fees. The grievance is aimed at a category-wide practice rather than a single firm. This is why standard brand-betrayal dynamics, in which anger decays or converts into switching, do not apply. Once every operator charges, there is nowhere to switch — so the grievance has no market outlet and persists as discourse: petitions, forums, the recurring 'Vegas is dead' refrain in which parking is still cited as the original sin.

3. The justification never evolved.

Fairness judgments respond to explanation. Operators offered one — revenue alignment — in 2016 and never revised it, through a competitor's reversal, a pandemic, a reinstatement, and a decade of complaint. Static justification in the face of rising grievance reads as indifference, and indifference keeps fairness violations alive.

Two natural experiments inside the case sharpen the point. Wynn's 2018 reversal shows that free-ness can be repurchased as differentiation — its stated rationale was brand logic, not spreadsheet logic. And the COVID suspension shows the old norm survived intact beneath the surface: the moment parking was free again, celebration of the old deal surged, then was suppressed — not resolved — when fees returned.

The summary judgment of the decade is uncomfortable for both sides of the standard debate. The fees worked, in the narrow sense that revenue shows no measurable harm. And the fees failed, in the broader sense that ten years later the customer base still treats them as illegitimate. Both things are true at once. That combination — financial success, persistent illegitimacy — is what this case contributes to how managers should think about monetizing what was free.

PART FOUR

Implications for Operators

- 1 Audit ownership before you monetize.
Before charging for a free amenity, ask whether customers merely use it or feel they own it. Tenure, ritual, and identity signal ownership. Monetizing an owned good is a covenant change, and customers will price it in resentment even when it is not priced in revenue.
- 2 Do not plan on forgetting.
The forecast that customers 'will completely forget' was the costliest analytical error of this case. Where ownership is violated, grievance compounds. Build the decision case assuming permanent background resentment, and decide whether the revenue still justifies it.
- 3 Update the explanation, or it will read as indifference.
A justification is a living communication, not a press release. Ten years of unchanged framing against tripling grievance turned a pricing decision into a referendum on whether the operator listens at all.
- 4 Watch the segment that can leave.
Tourists were captive; residents were not. The measurable movement in this case was locals-market divergence — and the 2026 petition is, explicitly, a locals' petition. When you monetize an amenity, your exposure concentrates in whichever segment has an alternative.
- 5 Free-ness is a competitive asset — someone may buy what you sold.
Wynn converted a reversal into a brand statement; the Venetian converted holding out into seven years of positioning. When a field abandons a norm customers love, the norm becomes available as differentiation. Price that option before you abandon it.

Method, sources, and limits

Findings are based on systematic content analysis of 50 archival sources (2016–2026) coded into four dictionaries and compared across three periods with Welch's t-tests, alongside NGCB Gaming Revenue Information (2013–2024; primary analytic window 2015–2019 to avoid post-2022 confounders such as Formula 1, the Sphere, and new property openings). Petition figures were verified directly on Change.org on June 11, 2026 ('Grant free parking for Las Vegas locals on the Strip!', created February 19, 2026; 18,048 verified signatures), with launch coverage from FOX5 Las Vegas (March 2, 2026) and the 2016 petition reported by KTNV (February 2016). All figures in this paper were produced by the author from study data; no third-party images are used. Several period contrasts are directional rather than conventionally significant; archival discourse is not a probability sample of customer opinion; and revenue patterns are reported as temporally consistent with the fee, not caused by it. A full academic treatment is in preparation for peer review; this paper reports the evidence in executive form.

About the author

Nadia Pomirleanu, Ph.D., is Professor of Marketing and Mel Larson Fellow of Experiential Marketing. Her research on services, pricing, and B2B strategy has appeared in the *Journal of Retailing*, *Journal of Business Research*, and *Industrial Marketing Management*, among others. She advises operators in hospitality, gaming, sports, and entertainment. Briefings and consulting inquiries: nadia.pomirleanu@unlv.edu.