



Reinventing a City: Barstow Has Some Building to Do

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Barstow, California's population is about to double, and the city has some building to do.

BNSF, which claims to have the most miles of track in the U.S., is building a massive facility in the Mojave Desert. Deemed by the city to be the largest railway hub in the western U.S., it will bring more than 20,000 additional jobs to a city whose population now numbers just 25,415. "There's never been anything this significant proposed in this part of California," said Lena Kent, executive director of public affairs for BNSF Railway, which expects to finish the Barstow International Gateway, or BIG by 2028. "It will transform the region."

She added: "We're basically building a new city with a \$1.5 billion project. We expect it will create 20,000 direct and indirect jobs." Willie Hopkins Jr., in his second year as city manager, expects even more: 22,000. "The International Gateway is the best thing that has happened to Barstow," he said. "The entire city as it is known" will be redesigned. "Adding residential, industrial, and commercial real estate will help take Barstow to where it should have been, given its location and history," he said.

Barstow sits at the junction of interstates 15 and 40 and Route 58 in California's High Desert Region, halfway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. "Many people know Barstow, but for many, it's because they drive through it, sometimes stopping for a meal break or to shop in its outlet mall," said Lewis Group of Cos.

senior executive vice president Randall Lewis. The BNSF facility, announced a year ago, will put Barstow back on the map decades after construction of the Interstate Highway System diverted travelers from Route 66. BNSF has had a presence in Barstow for more than 100 years, and roughly 1,000 workers work at an existing facility, but many more buildings rise on the 4,600 acres BNSF owns there. And development in the surrounding area will be needed to serve the people who will work there.

“We need pretty much everything,” Hopkins said. The city’s primary retail is The Home Depot, Wal-Mart and a Stater Bros Markets grocery store. There’s fast-food, a few hotels and not much housing. No residential units are under construction, and that has been the case since the second quarter of 2022. “A lot of developers are looking at us right now,” Hopkins said. “We expect to start to turn dirt in late 2025 or 2026. Once things begin development-wise, everything else will fall into place,” he said, referring to jobs and population growth.

Why BNSF Is Building BIG, and Why It Chose Barstow

Currently, global shipping containers arrive by boat at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach and then are trucked to warehouses in Los Angeles and the Inland Empire. There, goods are transferred from the 20- or 40-foot-long global shipping containers into 53-foot domestic containers that then are trucked to BNSF rail yards in Barstow and lifted onto trains headed to destinations across the US.

Once BIG is complete, BNSF will be able to move international freight directly from the ports inland to Barstow by rail. The goods will switch from global to domestic containers within on-site warehouses and then get right back on trains to their final destinations. This not only saves time but also reduces truck trips within the Los Angeles metro that contribute to traffic, delays and air quality issues. One of six North American Class I railroads, BNSF has 32,500 miles of track spanning 28 states and nearly 8,000 locomotives.

BIG is one being watched around the globe, said Kent. “It’s applauded as a step toward taking steps out of the current supply chain, and everyone will benefit. Retailers and customers today are living in a ‘just-in-time’ environment where they want their goods. This saves time for them.”

Barstow emerged as an attractive location during COVID and the coinciding global supply chain nightmare. Shipment tankers were backed up, dozens at a time, waiting to get into the Southern California ports, as COVID restrictions on workers limited the ports' ability to offload containers. It took many months to recover from those delays, Kent said. "It was a complete breakdown of the system that extended to trucks, rail and everything in between. This brought to the forefront the idea of getting something in place to help this if it ever happened again. Barstow was considered an option for development, a new place to expand with more industrial space.

"It will lead to opportunities to support the local economy with new restaurants, gas stations and retail shops," she said. "Homebuilders will come in to build affordable workforce homes." Three-quarters of workers who live in Barstow/the High Desert commute more than three hours round-trip to San Bernardino to work, Kent said. BIG "will enable workers who live in the biggest nearby town, Victorville [about 32 miles away] and elsewhere in the High Desert to live in more affordable areas and commute to Barstow, be closer to home and earn a livable wage."



Barstow Assistant City Manager Kody Tompkins, Barstow Mayor Paul Anthony Courtney, U.S. Rep. Jay Obernolte and Barstow City Manager Willie Hopkins attend the January groundbreaking of the replacement of the North First Avenue bridge over BNSF Railway's existing facility in the city. The wood and steel bridge was built in 1930 and modified in 1943. The new concrete structure also will include a pedestrian walkway, eight-foot shoulders for bicyclists, and a lookout point. Two other bridges also will be replaced, and other infrastructure projects are in the works.

She added: “People involved see that this is the opportunity to do the right thing. We’re getting widespread support, and that’s always tough to get in California when it comes to development. They can see the vision, the jobs, the way it will relieve the congestion.”

California Development Hurdles

What could hold development back, Hopkins said, is the California Environmental Quality Act, which requires that the government disclose to the public the environmental effects of a proposed discretionary project. That can be done via an initial study, an environmental impact report, a declaration that there will be no significant negative impact or a declaration that there will be a mitigated negative impact. “It’s not a showstopper, though we’ll get through it,” he said.

Barstow’s location is the key. “We have space, and there’s room to grow,” Hopkins said. “There’s no better location in California or the West Coast for this type of development growth, given the International Gateway. Being between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, this is where people are moving through. With logistics, we’re in the distribution center’s path.”

BNSF “will be a great corporate partner for our area for 100 years,” he said, adding that Barstow defies the refrain that development in California is a struggle. “When there are five to 10 people in a room discussing our city, at least eight of them will have some relationship to the railroad; either they work there or they do work that affects or involves the railroad. Everyone is excited about the prospects of the growth that is coming.” As the economy vacillated over the years, “projects in Barstow would shift from being viable to not,” Hopkins said. “Now, everything planned will pencil out economically.”

Lewis said the city asked if his company would build a master-planned community to provide some of the housing and shopping needed. The U.S. Bureau of Land Management owns a great deal of property in the area, he said, and he hopes the city can acquire some for development, as it’s suited to master-planned communities. “California is a challenging state in which to do development, so when a city approaches us with an invitation, we definitely pay attention.” There are opportunities for smaller-scale development, as well, he

said. “We like that everyone in the city government there has an entrepreneurial spirit. The city leadership seems very pro-development, focused on the future, and is action oriented. Barstow is a very logical location for future growth.”

He added: “With the addition of housing, there will be a strong need for retail. Barstow wants to capitalize on the demand for retail that the job and housing growth will generate. Barstow is a cooperative city and has a goal to build great places and do outstanding long-term developments.” The traffic flowing through the area should mean good daytime demand for merchants, he said.

There are existing demand generators, as well. Ontario International Airport is 76 miles southwest, and Lenwood, California, six miles west, has outlet malls, truck stops, hotels and restaurants. Many of Barstow’s citizens are military civilians who work at the Fort Irwin U.S. Army training ground 40 miles north of Barstow. “It will remain a major factor in Barstow’s redevelopment,” Hopkins said. Another lure for developers is the Brightline West high-speed rail project that will connect Rancho Cucamonga and Las Vegas, including a stop in Apple Valley, a 40-minute drive away. The hope is it will be operating by 2028, when Los Angeles will host the Summer Olympics, creating more demand, Lewis said.

“This revitalization provides economic opportunities for Barstow, which currently relies a great deal on the gas tax,” Hopkins said of the city government’s funding. “But the gas tax is unsteady as a revenue source, given California’s push to sustainability measures, such as electric and alternative vehicles. Knowing California’s priorities, we’ll become a sustainable city for the long term.” More important, he said, modernization would mean that “the quality of life will improve to levels that our residents have never experienced.”

Michael Lewis is a lifelong Barstow resident. He was educated in the local school district and at the local community college. His family has owned businesses in the city since 1975, and he owns Fosters Freeze, a fast-food and ice cream shop that was built in 1949 and remains at its original location. Four generations of families have operated the restaurant, and some of those family members still work there to this day. He also owns a local commercial printer, Printing Solutions, and the Print-N-Play screen printing and embroidery shop, and he’s part owner of the local Anytime Fitness, a state-of-the-art facility for Barstow.

“I have invested heavily in Barstow because I believe in the city and its people and want to see it grow and offer more for our youth,” he said. “We have a very good workforce in Barstow and the surrounding communities. Employees are loyal and care about the community and the people they serve. I have no doubt that Barstow will grow and prosper and become the gem of the High Desert. The new developments will bring in more choices for our community, more housing, more shopping, more careers and more entertainment. I am super excited for the growth of Barstow and can’t wait to see it all happen and make Barstow even better than it is.”

By Paul Bergeron

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