

4.0 PROJECT CONTEXT

4.1 BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Barstow's history is rooted in its strategic location as a crossroads for trade and travel, from indigenous trade and Spanish missionary routes to its evolution into a vital hub along railroads, Route 66, and modern interstate highways, connecting southern California with the rest of the nation and international trade.

4.1.1 Precolonial History (pre-1776)

Barstow's precolonial history began with the Native American tribes of the Mojave Desert region, being the homeland for thousands of years before the arrival of European settlers. While an exhaustive list of all Native Peoples that overlapped with the Barstow area is not available, below are notable tribes that inhabited the Barstow region and interacted with other cultural groups for the purpose of trade and cultural practice.

- **Vanyume:** A branch of the Serrano people, the Vanyume were among the earliest to settle along the Mojave River, which runs through the Barstow area (San Bernardino County, 2025a)
- **Serrano:** The broader Serrano group, to which the Vanyume are related, also inhabited parts of the Mojave Desert, including the Barstow region (Yuhaaviatam of San Manuel Nation [YSMN], 2025).
- **Chemehuevi:** The Chemehuevi, a Southern Paiute group, ranged through the Mojave Desert and were present in the broader Barstow region (Mojave Desert, 2025).

4.1.2 European Exploration and Settlement (through 1879)

Traditional Maara'yam lifeways were permanently disrupted in the 1700s during the Mission Period (1769-1821). The first recorded European to pass through the region was Father Francisco Garces, a Spaniard who later became a guide to Juan Bautista de Anza, who had been commissioned to set up quarters at the Mission San Gabriel in 1771. At this time, it is estimated that thousands of Native Americans, including the Maara'yam desert clans of the Antelope Valley and potentially the Mojave River region, were either taken to the Mission, removed to work as forced agricultural labor at the estancia in Redlands that served as outpost for the Mission, fled the region, or were killed (BIG Cultural Resources Assessment, 2025).

As Europeans settled, trading and migration became important factors for survival, and the Old Spanish Trail which combines Indigenous and European routes, emerged as the main path to bypass the harsh terrains of the San Bernardino Mountains and the Mojave Desert (National Parks Service, 2025a).

In 1821, Mexico overthrew Spanish rule, and the Missions began to decline. By 1833, the Mexican government passed the Secularization Act and the Missions, reorganized as parish churches, lost their vast land holdings, and released the indigenous people that remained. However, the remaining Maara'yam continued to face issues under Mexican rule and were eventually forced to provide labor for various industries, such as agriculture, lumber, etc. By the mid-1800s, little to no Maara'yam remained in the area, and it soon became a historic settlement that would eventually grow to the City of Barstow known in the present day (BIG Cultural Resources Assessment, 2025).

4.1.3 Silver Mining: 1880 to 1890

In 1880, Robert W. Waterman discovered silver four miles north of Barstow and established a silver mine and an ore mill along the Mojave River that is now considered present-day Barstow. Additional silver mines were discovered in the Calico Hills, leading to Calico becoming the center of California's silver-mining industry. Nearby Daggett and Barstow also boomed.

The Southern Pacific Railroad started a line from the Mojave Desert going east to the Colorado River in 1882. This contributed to Daggett becoming a key location in the transport of silver on the railroads. Hinkley emerged as a railroad town and grew quickly due to its natural resources and viability to grow various types of agricultural products and farming, like cattle ranching and poultry operations. In 1885, Waterman Junction was created as a critical railroad intersection and a water stop for steam locomotives, providing a place for trains to refill their water tanks in the desert. In 1886, this budding town of Waterman Junction was renamed “Barstow” after William Barstow Strong, then president of AT&SF Railway (Barstow, 2025).

In the 1890s, Barstow and other nearby towns faced a major setback because of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which caused the price of silver to drop precipitously and reduced the economic viability of further silver extraction. Though some milling operations continued into the early 1910s, most of the silver mines closed soon after, marking the end of Barstow's mining era (San Bernardino, 2024, 2025a,b).

4.1.4 Railroad Depot: 1890 to 1925

Despite the decline of mining activity in the early 1900s, Barstow remained a major rail hub. As travel continued to expand via train, the need for larger railroad depots emerged, particularly as trains generally lacked dining cars prior to and during this period. These depots formed a series of dining rooms and boardinghouses along the Santa Fe Railway Line. Barstow's first railroad depot was built in 1887 but experienced a series of fires that burned down the initial depot and the next two reconstructions. In 1911, entrepreneur Fred Harvey opened the fourth, fire-proof iteration of the railroad depot, named Casa del Desierto or Harvey House. Barstow's Harvey House stood out for its service and cuisine. Women across the region were employed as expert hostesses referred to as “Harvey Girls” (San Bernardino, 2024).

By the late 1800s and early 1900s, Barstow became a major transportation junction, for both the Santa Fe Railway and the Southern Pacific Railroad, creating increased traffic and boosting the town's economy (Amtrak, 2025). The United States entered World War I in 1917 leading to thousands of troops travelling to training camps by rail to stop in Barstow (Mojave Desert, 2025). Barstow's Harvey House became a popular place to support traveling soldiers through the end of the war, and for other travelers through the 1920s (CHRA, 2025).

4.1.5 Route 66, the Military, and Incorporation: 1926 to 1957

The automobile market exploded in popularity in the 1920s and shifted transportation in America, replacing the railroads' monopoly in transporting people and goods. Barstow benefitted from both the continued economic activity driven by the railroad and growing travel by car. Route 66 was officially established in 1926 as part of the then newly initiated federal highway system. The highway's popularity, especially during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s, led to a surge in travelers

seeking new opportunities in California. This influx created a boom for local businesses—gas stations, motels, diners, and auto repair shops flourished to serve the needs of motorists.

Many of these were small, independent, "mom-and-pop" operations reflecting the decentralized economic structure fostered by the highway. Route 66 became known as the "Main Street of America," with Barstow's Main Street serving as a busy commercial corridor and social hub for both residents and travelers. Businesses like the High Desert's first movie theater, The Forum Theatre, and Foster's Old Fashioned Freeze opened along Barstow's Main Street. The Standard Oil gas station was converted from a Chevrolet dealership in 1937 and became the busiest gas station in America in the 1940s, signaling the growing importance of automobile travel and Barstow's role as a stop for motorists journeying across the Mojave Desert. The legacy of Route 66 in Barstow remains visible in its historic architecture, public art, business remnants, and ongoing cultural celebrations of the "Mother Road" (NPS, 2025b).

Piped water service came to Barstow in 1929, when the Golden State Water Company began providing water to the community. Prior to this, residents and businesses in Barstow relied on other means for water, such as wells or transported water (GSWC, 2025).

Roughly 30 miles north of Barstow, the federal government established the Mojave Anti-Aircraft Gunnery Range in 1940 (later named Camp Irwin and what is known today as Fort Irwin). In 1942, the U.S. Marine Corps Depot of Supplies was established as a secure inland location to protect vital supplies from potential Japanese attacks (what is known today as Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow) (MCLBB, 2025).

The influx of military personnel, travelers, and general commerce led to a growing population and increased demand for municipal services, housing, and infrastructure. By incorporating in 1947, Barstow gained the authority to govern itself, manage land use, and direct economic development, ensuring that the City could respond effectively to the challenges and opportunities presented by its strategic location and expanding economy (Barstow, 2025).

4.1.6 Institutions, Commercial, and Logistics: 1957 to 1980

Barstow Community Hospital first opened in 1957 and, after addressing some financial difficulties, reopened in 1958 to serve as a key healthcare provider for the Barstow community (Barstow, 2025). Barstow Community College District was founded in 1959, initially holding classes at Barstow High School before moving to its permanent campus in 1964 (Barstow Community College, 2024).

The Barstow Bypass, a key component of Interstate 15 (I-15) through Barstow, officially opened to traffic in 1961 as part of the roll out of the interstate highway system. As the new freeway served as a bypass to Route 66 (Barstow's Main Street), travelers no longer passed by the City's small businesses. However, the new freeway bolstered Barstow's role as a transportation hub and a major junction between southern California and points beyond for travelers and commercial vehicles. I-40 begins its westward journey at a junction with I-15 in Barstow and runs east through the Mojave Desert. The construction of I-40 in the 1960s replaced much of Route 66 as the primary east-west corridor through the region (California Highways, 2025).

The City greatly bolstered its ability to support growth through the construction of a wastewater reclamation (sewer treatment) facility in 1968; the facility added secondary level treatment capabilities in 1975 (Barstow, 2025).

As the Route 66 era ended, Barstow continued to attract new commercial opportunities. Del Taco traces its origins to the Barstow/Yermo area, with the store in Barstow representing the oldest continuously operating Del Taco in the country. The Rock-A-Hoola Water Park near Barstow, originally opened as Lake Dolores in the 1960s, went through several transformations and ownership changes before permanently closing in 2004 (Business Insider, 2025). The original McDonalds at Barstow Station was built in 1969 and was then considered the world's largest McDonalds. Its train-themed design and use of actual train cars made it a memorable and photogenic stop along the new freeways (Barstow Station, 2025). By the 1970s, Barstow's location began to draw additional commercial and logistics interest. The Standard Oil gas station was demolished in 1971, replaced eventually by a doughnut shop (initially Winchell's and then Starlight Donuts) (VDP, 2019). Barstow Mall opened in 1976, with K-mart and Sears serving as the original anchors of what was then the first shopping mall in the High Desert (San Bernardino Sun, 1976).

BNSF's Barstow Yard was expanded into its large classification yard size in the early 1970s. During this period, the railroad facilities were developed into a major flat yard stretching nearly five miles along the Mojave River, establishing Barstow as a key classification hub for freight traffic to and from southern California (Barstow Desert Dispatch, 1976).

In 1980, Fort Irwin was designated as the National Training Center, greatly increasing its role from a training area for National Guard and Reserve units to a premier training facility for the U.S. Army. As on-base housing was not provided, many active-duty soldiers and their families settled in nearby Barstow (U.S. Army, 2025).

4.1.7 Development Ventures: 1980 to 2015

The City of Barstow and the surrounding areas continued to draw interest from various business types throughout the subsequent decades. Some have been successful while others, due to factors including delayed state level review processes, market changes, high costs in utilities, and/or regional competition, failed to materialize. Notable examples are listed below.

Solar One was a pioneering solar power tower facility built in 1982 just east of Barstow, conceived as a large-scale demonstration project to test the feasibility of central-receiver solar power technology. Solar One was decommissioned in 1988 and its tower remained a local landmark until its demolition in 2009, but the technological advances made at the site have had a lasting influence on solar power development worldwide (EBSCO, 2025).

Starting in the late 1980s, the factory outlet mall format emerged in Barstow through the Factory Merchants Outlet Mall (1988) and the Outlets at Barstow (circa 1991). Both were developed to take advantage of Barstow's strategic location as a major stop for travelers between Los Angeles and Las Vegas along I-15. The concept—selling directly from manufacturers to consumers at discounted prices—quickly proved successful and became (and remains today) a key economic driver for the City (VDP, 2016).

In the 1990s, Barstow was considered as a location for both a cold food distribution warehouse facility and a medium security correctional facility (California, 1999)/juvenile detention center, though other locations were ultimately selected (Barstow, 2025). In the 2000s, SunCal Development introduced plans to bring nearly 25,000 homes to the Barstow area, but the 2008 housing market crisis intervened leading the developers to shift their attention and investment elsewhere (VDP, 2008). The passage of California Proposition 2 in 2008, which sought to improve animal welfare (particularly for egg-laying hens), led to a proposal for a vast egg farm in Barstow where the hens would have room to roam. Eggs imported from other states eliminated this Project from further advancement (Barstow, 2025). An aluminum plant was proposed in southwestern Barstow in 2014, with the potential to add roughly 2,000 skilled workers. The Project was ultimately shelved, deemed infeasible due to developer instability and the relatively high costs of energy (VDP, 2014).

There are also projects that have experienced delays but are still positioned to develop and play a role in Barstow's future. The Los Coyotes Band of Cahuilla and Cupeño Indians proposed a hotel/casino along I-15 in Barstow in the early 2000s and federal environmental clearance was obtained in 2015. While further progress has not yet occurred, the City is periodically engaged with project/tribal representatives on future activity (World Casino Directory, 2025). The Spanish Trail Specific Plan was adopted in 2013 to guide the use and revitalization of land along the historic trail corridor through the creation of a large commercial mixed-use center. The Specific Plan has not yet developed due to a combination of landownership complexities, ongoing negotiations, and the need to update the project to reflect changes in the retail industry (Bradco Companies, 2025).

While Barstow grew substantially in the two decades following incorporation, from populations reported by the U.S. Census of 6,135 in 1950 to 17,442 in 1970, growth slowed over the ensuing decades, especially in comparison to its neighboring jurisdictions in the Victor Valley. Based on population estimates published by the Department of Finance, the population in Barstow grew from roughly 21,500 in 1990 to approximately 25,000 in 2023, with an annual growth rate of 0.4 percent. The incorporated jurisdictions experienced much higher annual population growth rates over the same time period: Adelanto (4.6 percent), Apple Valley (1.4 percent), Hesperia (1.9 percent), and Victorville (3.5 percent).

4.1.8 Comprehensive Change: 2015 to present

The City of Barstow last updated its General Plan in 2015; however, the effort was a stopgap measure with a short planning horizon that only extended to 2020. In 2020, the City initiated updates to General Plan to bring the City into compliance with State law and address the topics of safety, environmental justice, and housing. The Housing, Environmental Justice, Safety Elements were updated in 2021 and the Housing Element completed certification in 2024.

Since 2020, forecasted changes in economic conditions and increased interest from both community stakeholders and local businesses, including BNSF and the BIG Specific Plan (which is part of the proposed Project), created the potential to dramatically alter the Barstow landscape. The City opted to take a comprehensive look at updating its General Plan to guide growth in a manner that supports an updated vision for the future, enabling the City to plan in advance of individual projects, attract well-paid job opportunities, create new housing choices, and promote a healthy community (BNSF, 2025).

4.2 BARSTOW INTERNATIONAL GATEWAY CONTEXT

4.2.1 Supply Chain Background

Currently, most goods imported into the United States through the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach (Ports) are manufactured in Asia, transported from Asia to the Ports in international containers by ship, unloaded onto trucks or trains, transported to a warehouse, transported to retailers, and finally sold to customers. This network, from manufacturing to retailers, is called the “supply chain.” Within the supply chain, various entities are or can be responsible for handling containers at various points, including shippers, manufacturers, marine terminal operators, warehouse operators, beneficial cargo operators (BCOs), third-party logistics (3PL) companies, and more. BCOs would ultimately make the decision to relocate to BIG.

Within this supply chain, there are two types of containers: international and domestic. International containers (also known as marine containers) are either 20 or 40 feet long (measurements are set by international standards).¹ However, within the U.S., “domestic” containers are allowed to be up to 53 feet long based on each state’s Department of Transportation standards.² Due to domestic containers being larger, companies, in general, can condense the goods of three international containers into two domestic containers. Therefore, if goods need to be taken further inland, companies may want to sort and consolidate goods from multiple international containers into fewer domestic containers, and this reduces the number of containers needed to transport the goods inland. This process of consolidation, sometimes referred to as “transloading,” requires international containers to be offloaded at the Ports, trucked to nearby warehouses, unpacked and sorted, and re-packed (i.e., transloaded) into domestic containers. After containers have been transloaded, they are then taken by either truck or train inland to their end destination. Overall, the process of transloading requires transport of containers by truck trips around the Ports and southern California region, and BCOs incur additional costs in the delivery of the product to the consumer due to the truck trips between the Ports and transload warehouses. Despite these costs, large-scale retailers prefer transloading because it provides inventory management benefits.

During the COVID pandemic, the U.S. supply chain’s gridlock at the Ports became national news. As a result of the idling container ships, federal and State leaders began calling on key players within the supply chain, including BNSF, for solutions to minimize these delays occurring in the future. BNSF proposes BIG to meet this need.

4.2.2 BIG Local and National Benefits

By providing the critical supply chain efficiency noted above, BIG would:

- Increase the speed and reliability and lower the cost of moving containerized goods from the Ports.

¹ International Organization for Standardization. 2020. *ISO 668:2020: Series 1 Freight Containers – Classification, dimensions, and ratings*.

² Federal Highway Administration. May 2015. *Compilation of Existing State Truck Size and Weight Limit Laws*.

https://ops.fhwa.dot.gov/Freight/policy/rpt_congress/truck_sw_laws/index.htm (see “National Network” noting that all states today allow 53-foot domestic containers (sometimes referred to simply as “trailers”) on at least some highways).

- Remove approximately 800,000 truck trips per year (hundreds of millions of truck miles traveled each year) by converting those container moves from truck to train.
- Reduce regional highway congestion and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by converting these truck trips to train trips, in furtherance of the State Rail Plan (BIG is noted in the State Rail Plan as the solution needed for goods movement in California).
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions due to the reduction in truck trips.
- Reduce highway maintenance costs to taxpayers by converting truck trips to train trips.
- Enable container transloading through the on-site transload warehouse center, minimizing truck trips on local roadways.
- Only utilize electric hostlers to transport containers between the transload warehouse center and intermodal facility, avoiding emissions associated with heavy-duty trucks.
- Increase efficiency within BNSF's network by allowing trains to recombine based on "blocks" of cars going to similar end destinations.
- Increase equity, opportunity, and economic competitiveness in the High Desert by providing thousands of quality jobs, prioritizing hiring local residents, and coordinating with the City of Barstow and Barstow Community College on workforce training.
- Enable BNSF customers to track the container movement through a single technology platform that would now be able to track the container from the Ports to the end destination.

Therefore, BIG is a transformative project with widespread benefit at the federal, state, and local level.

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