

Opinion: The need to bridge the high desert

By Joe Mathews

What's the fastest way to change California?

Unless you have the power to set off a major earthquake, your best bet would be to connect Palmdale and Victorville.



Joe Mathews

These two working-class desert cities aren't often associated with economic or political power. But building world-class infrastructure to bridge the 50 miles between them might be the most powerful current idea in California. Strong Palmdale-Victorville connections could transform Southern California's traffic and economy, boost the West's energy markets, and reconfigure the path of American trade with Asia and the rest of North America. It might even save the California high-speed rail project.

Why would such a connection be so valuable? To bridge Palmdale and Victorville is to connect the Antelope and Victor valleys, two fast-growing exurban regions that each include a piece of a major North American highway corridor. Palmdale's home region, the Antelope Valley, in L.A. County, now has more than 500,000 people; its highways make it part of the Interstate 5 corridor, from Tijuana to British Columbia. Fifty miles east, the Victor Valley, where Victorville is the anchor town, has

about 400,000 people, and sits right on Interstate 15, which moves Southern Californians to Las Vegas every weekend while transporting goods from San Diego to Alberta, Canada.

Current connections between interstates 5 and 15 are primitive. Truckers either have to navigate the awful traffic of the L.A. basin, or must find a way across the High Desert. The latter requires driving surface streets, or the traffic-clogged 138, known unofficially as Blood Alley, since it's one of America's most dangerous roads.

Good news: This infrastructure gap creates an enormous opportunity.

Which brings me to the High Desert Corridor, a decade-old proposal that is one of the most underrated ideas in California. Backed by a joint powers authority of Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties, the High Desert Corridor is a public-private partnership to build not one connection between Palmdale and Victorville, but four.

First would come a 56-mile freeway connecting the two cities. Second, the High Desert Corridor would establish a high-speed rail right of way, with the goal of connecting the California High-Speed Rail's proposed station at Palmdale with the planned and private Xpress West high-speed rail project between Las Vegas and Victorville.

The third piece of the connection involves energy: Underneath the freeway and rail would run electric transmission lines, and above ground, there would be charging and alternative fuel stations for cars and trucks. Finally, the High Desert Corridor would have a 40-mile bikeway between Palmdale and U.S. 395.

If such a corridor were ever to become a reality, the impact would go beyond the convenience of connecting the 5 and the 15. The high-speed rail piece of the High Desert Corridor would connect San Francisco and Los Angeles to Las Vegas,

inspiring more high-speed rail and economic integration in the West (Phoenix and Salt Lake City should be next).

Today, international trade is slowed in the L.A. basin by dense traffic in the seaports and on the streets. Advocates of the corridor say it could become a new “inland international port,” if land for logistics is closely connected to rail and airports in the corridor, allowing cargo to be moved between transportation modes. Such a port would support

trade, spawn more businesses, and allow the logistics industry to expand beyond the basin to the Inland Empire, bringing more jobs to the desert for local residents, shortening their commutes.

At the same time, the project could take pressure off of Los Angeles’ roads, while providing infrastructure to encourage more green technology and transportation. Supporters are also betting that manufacturers will flock to the High Desert Corridor, since it is outside the basin and its strict air regulation.

Be skeptical if you wish. The history of the California desert is filled with grand plans that went nowhere. But the High Desert Corridor isn’t grand—it’s a tightly focused connection. The environmental reviews are complete; the next steps are figuring out the exact route, and the costs of acquiring the right of ways.

Current estimates of the project’s overall cost are \$8 billion. That’s a lot—but high-speed rail is projected to cost at least nine times that. Supporters had hoped to fund much of the expense with federal earmarks, but Congress has eliminated them. So the project will require a mix of private and public money, and be built in phases (rail first). Los Angeles County’s transportation tax, Measure M, will provide some dough.

But the state should step up. California politics is dominated by the coasts, and especially the Bay Area, which is why big funds were lavished on the new Bay Bridge. It's now time to look south and inland, and build the next great California bridge in the High Desert.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.