

THE CASE FOR SCENIC 247
Facts and Some History

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THE CASE FOR SCENIC 247

Facts and Some History

State Route 247 is a 2-lane 78-mile backcountry trip through high desert vistas starting in Yucca Valley and ending at Route 66 in Barstow.

WHY A SCENIC HIGHWAY?

A major consideration for development in a scenic corridor is Visual Impact, how compatible is it with the character of the area? (Note: Many states and countries treat their rural and wild scenery as a natural resource, and it is.) The push for industrial renewable energy generation in the California desert is a threat and a contradiction to this value. Already, unpleasant visual impacts of wind turbines, massive solar fields and miles of transmission lines mar the legendary California experience for travelers.

Studies prove that people come to the desert from cities, other states and countries around the world, not for industrialization, but for wide open spaces. They seek these open spaces for relaxation, adventure and an opportunity to reconnect with nature. Encouraging visitors will benefit the residents, exporting expensively-generated power will not.

...Foreigners don't want to waste time in the freeway-strip-mall-franchise-warehouse-outlet-lowrise-taco stand burger landscape of America that we all know and don't see as it spreads. ...They want to see the magnificent things in America. They want to see where the music comes from and where the books come from..."

Garrison Keillor, White House conference on Travel and Tourism in September, 1995.

WHAT ARE THE CRITERIA FOR A SCENIC HIGHWAY?

Several criteria that have been deemed remarkably valuable in other routes in a wide variety of landscapes are met by the Scenic 247 corridor .

The renowned National Scenic Byways program looks for routes that possess two or more of the qualities that exemplify the regional characteristics of our nation...scenic, natural, historic, cultural, archaeological, or recreational... *and a road that can be considered a destination unto itself.*

WHY are they important to residents? Scenic highways enhance quality of life and improve local economies. Researchers and common sense have long told us that vacationers most want to visit beautiful places.

The National Scenic Byways Program states, "Scenic byways are a source of local pride, a chance for citizens to showcase their region. Moreover, scenic byways provide communities with what one activist has called a 'road map to the future' — a way for stakeholders to determine what they like about their communities and how to preserve these qualities while encouraging economic growth."

"We have to believe that place by place, mile by mile, we can preserve scenic America and even reclaim ugly America. I haven't a doubt from all these years of wandering that Americans want to do that."

Charles Kuralt in speech at Scenic America's national conference in Baltimore, May 1997.

TOURISM – STARTING WITH ROUTE 66

Barstow has long experience with the value of tourism to the community. It has been the highway and railway hub of the California high desert since all the roads were dirt. The oldest paved spoke in that hub is Route 66.

The allure of Route 66 has just been magnified with the inclusion of its California miles in a national monument.

Scenic 247 connects the traveler on Route 66 to the equally alluring destinations of Joshua Tree National Park and the year-round attractions of Big Bear in the San Bernardino Mountains. The traveler coming to or from the mountains, the national park, the Palm Springs area, and/or the Los Angeles megalopolis rolls on Scenic 247.

Barstow to Big Bear via Scenic 247 to Lucerne Valley and Hwy 18: this route takes you from an altitude of about 2,000 feet in the Mojave River Valley to the 6700-ft mountain high of Big Bear; from creosote bush desert through Joshua tree-yucca-cactus zones to tall conifer forests, all in about 60 miles.

Yucca Valley to Lucerne Valley: Scenic 247 carries you past Black Lava Butte and Flattop Mesa, unique in California, through the historic Homestead Valley, into the undeveloped wildlands of Johnson Valley.

Barstow to Lucerne Valley: Scenic 247 climbs to the dramatic pass through the Ord Mountains from the Mojave River Valley and descends the slopes leading to the expanse of Lucerne Dry Lake with the San Bernardino Mountains as a backdrop.

San Bernardino County is now marketing itself as a Mountain and Desert Outdoor Playground to a wide variety of vacationers and recreational travelers. Three key destinations known worldwide are Joshua Tree National Park, Big Bear and Route 66.

Scenic 247 dovetails exactly into this campaign. It is the only feeder route leading to all three; from the low desert to the high desert to the mountains.

Scenic Highway designation will bring outside revenues to an entire region through drawing visitors to the highway itself.

San Bernardino County suffers from lack of revenues, lack of jobs. Population losses concern schools and businesses. The County is now weighing the unknowns of industrializing private properties in Rural Living zones for renewable energy generation.

The County exports mineral resources, but little else to bring outside money into the region – except exporting the story of our attractions, to build tourism to support resident-serving enterprises.

Highway businesses cannot survive on local population alone. The stores, restaurants, medical offices in our communities are supported by visitor revenues. We are seeing too many close their doors.

Sponsors for the Scenic 247 campaign include businesses, tourist and recreation destinations. See the list on the Scenic 247 Mission Statement.

California Environmental Quality Act. A consideration in evaluating projects subject to CEQA—*is it in the vicinity of a Scenic Highway?*

HISTORIC ASSOCIATIONS DRAW THE TRAVELER

The origins of Scenic 247 are evolutionary, originating from prehistoric native tribal roads followed by early miners and freight haulers, over very logical land forms, easy for human and animal to traverse while staying close to springs in the foothills. People stayed with this easy route, it was “re-used and re-worked and re-used and re-worked over time constantly,” as one scenic road expert has phrased it.

The story is, at the time of the arrival of an early surveyor in 1856, the camp that gave the Old Woman Springs its name sheltered an old woman or old women of a nomadic tribe, no longer able to travel.

For over half a century, cattle ranching in the Scenic 247 corridor made history as wells were dug and ranching improvements were constructed. The enterprising Heart Bar Ranch found winter grazing along the Old Woman Springs Road from Johnson Valley into the Morongo Basin to Twentynine Palms. For the summer they would then drove the herds up Rattlesnake Canyon to Big Bear. After World War II, changing rainfall levels and the influx of Small Tract homesteaders reduced the herds to a tiny remnant, and only the southern half of the Heart Bar remains visible from the road. Old Woman Springs Ranch lives on beside the small lakes developed by Heart Bar, surrounded by cottonwood trees and hosting flocks of migrating water birds. And some small homestead cabins still remain, scattered over the former ranching terrain like Monopoly houses.

In 1972, the road became part of the state highway system, designated State Highway 247. The grading and eventual paving of 247 deviated from Old Woman Springs Road. It was re-routed, moved to align with the northern edge of the grid of homestead parcels in Johnson Valley. Traces of the old route remain in the desert. Visible as a weathered road for several miles meandering across community roads, it goes right between the Johnson Valley Community Center and the Fire Station. Part of the route in daily use is permanently preserved in the recently-established desert garden adjoining the Community Center.

The vistas are largely unchanged. Five-acre homesteads appeared in the 1950's, making up the four settlements now included in the Homestead Valley. A few established small orchards. Some of the homestead cabins have been remodeled into nice vacation getaways and full-time residences, some have been abandoned to the weather. Today we see many retirees as residents and many who have bought homesteads as weekend retreats close to the renowned recreational opportunities in the region.

Over 50 years old, the BLM says the remaining cabins could be eligible for historic status. Most however are vanished, derelicts cleared away, leaving only a slab to mark their sites. Agricultural homesteads in Lucerne Valley are mostly ghostly, victims of chronic water problems. The vivid green seen from the highway of a surviving alfalfa farm utilizes reclaimed water delivered down the mountainside by pipeline from Big Bear.

The highway remains a two-lane road, currently receiving shoulder improvements from Caltrans. Although traveled by commuters and big rigs, it endures as a favorite trip with bicyclists and motorcyclists, as well as campers, desert riders, astronomers, explorers...and last, but not economically least, the film industry.

The Town of Yucca Valley and the City of Barstow have developed into urban bookends for 247 with plenty of travelers services. Lucerne Valley keeps its rural atmosphere, with a modern supermarket/general store that caters to recreationists. All will benefit from the Scenic Highway designation for 247.

CALTRANS and the SCENIC 247 CAMPAIGN

Highway 247 is labeled by Caltrans as "eligible" for Scenic Highway status. Since its views do not include power towers, huge wind turbines and solar fields, it could well be one of the least despoiled series of desert views left in California.

Ray Desselle, Caltrans Landscape Architect, who knows the route, confirmed what the Scenic 247 Committee reported in answering questions about development in the scenic corridor:

- County, Town or City codes already promote development that maintains the existing character of the area.
- Caltrans safety requirements are more stringent than any scenic corridor guidelines.
- Mining is governed by the Reclamation Act requirements, mining certainly is part of the existing character of the area, and can be a tourist attraction besides.
- BLM restrictions apply to a major part of the route.

The wide variety of supporters listed on the left of the Scenic 247 letterhead, include:

- prominent tourist and vacation destinations
- Chambers of Commerce
- recreational groups frequently visiting the high desert
- community associations of residents along the route
- environmental activists
- business interests
- museums and historical societies

The Lucerne Valley-Johnson Valley Municipal Advisory Council and the Morongo Basin Municipal Advisory Council, advisors to Third District Supervisor James Ramos have both recommended support for the Scenic 247 campaign.

Supervisor James Ramos in a letter to Malcom Dougherty, Director, California department of Transportation, wrote, "I respectfully request State Highway 247 enter the California Scenic Highway program. This recognition is long overdue, and would be greatly beneficial to both local residents and visitors."

A MYSTERY OF HISTORY

In 1970, The *Lucerne Valley Leader* published a story of a celebration; that S.R. 247 had been declared a State Scenic Highway and what a boon it would be to the area's economy.

No other records of this have been found. S.R. 247 remains on the Caltrans list of eligibles, the last on the list to be designated a Scenic Highway...or was it?