



Courtesy: Caltrans

Blythe, California *Awakening of a New ‘Gateway City’*

SUMMARY

Blythe is a city in the Palo Verde Valley of the lower Colorado River Valley region. It is an agricultural area and part of the Colorado Desert along the Colorado River.¹ Blythe is uniquely centered between two multicultural megalopolises[†], approximately 224 miles east of Los Angeles and 150 miles west of Phoenix. “Blythe is within 4 hours via car of 10% of the United States’ population.”²

Blythe (City) has experienced challenging times and, according to some reports, it “never fully recovered from the Great Recession”³. The City reduced its workforce, small businesses left and Kmart closed. In 2022, a flood washed away part of the eastbound Interstate 10, seriously impacting travel between California and Arizona.⁴ However, city management has taken proactive steps to recover from those conditions.

In 2019, the California State Auditor, in its local government high-risk dashboard, ranked the City “number three on the auditor’s list of California cities with the greatest overall risk to fiscal health. It has since improved to ninth”⁵. (*There are over 470 California cities ranked*). In its 2021 update, the State acknowledged the City’s positive efforts to improve and that most of the audit issues have been “fully addressed”.

The 2021/2022 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury looked into Blythe’s financial status and economic outlook. Its published report cited factors, events and economic conditions which the Grand Jury interpreted as symptomatic of a city in decline. Blythe’s own independent auditor’s report for fiscal year ending June 30, 2022, expressed “substantial doubt” about Blythe’s ability to continue as a “going concern”[‡]. Blythe’s independent auditor’s report for fiscal year 2023 noted “significant improvement” in key areas, but the statement of ‘doubt’ has not yet been lifted.⁶

[†] *Megalopolis*-an area in which there are several large cities whose suburbs meet or nearly meet.

[‡] *Going concern*: financially stable enough to meet its obligations and continue its business for the foreseeable future.

By the time the 2021/2022 Civil Grand Jury report was published, the City was already succeeding in its efforts to improve.⁷ Blythe’s response, in a September 2022 letter to Riverside County (County) officials, described some projects and initiatives that, if successful, would greatly enhance the City’s fiscal and community health. Specifically, they involve marketing Blythe to attract retail development, creating a ‘distribution hub’ for commercial shipping, developing the Colorado River area, and installing vehicle charging stations to capture an emerging market.⁸ The City’s message suggested a brighter future.

Then, in December 2022, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation announced that the Chuckawalla Valley State Prison (CVSP) in Blythe will be closed by March 2025.⁹ It is anticipated this closure will negatively impact the local economy. The City launched its “**SAVE CHUCK**” movement to appeal for a reversal of that decision.

The 2023/2024 Riverside County Civil Grand Jury wanted to learn about Blythe’s plans for continued improvement, especially in light of the planned closure of CVSP. It became apparent that a new study would be timely and compelling in order to learn about the City’s new business development plans and the potential investment opportunities.

In this report, the Grand Jury considers Blythe’s drive toward economic resiliency, specifically the following plans and initiatives:

1. California State Auditor’s recommendations
2. Retail Strategies Project
3. Blythe as a ‘distribution hub’
4. Recreational Opportunities at Blythe Airport
5. Development of the Colorado River Corridor
6. Vehicle Charging Stations Initiative and proposed project plans
7. The ‘**Save Chuck**’ Movement
8. Blythe Economic Resiliency Study (Riverside County)

If the City’s proactive measures are successful, along with its continuing efforts to nurture the City’s financial health, Blythe will not only continue as a “going concern”, but will thrive.

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BACKGROUND

The City’s population is currently around 17,500, which had steadily declined over the last 10-20 years, according to census data.¹⁰

The City of Blythe was incorporated on July 21, 1916, as a General Law City. It operates as a “Council-Manager” form of government where the people elect a city council of five citizens to serve a four-year term and a mayor who serves a term of two years. The mayor appoints a City Manager.¹¹

The City provides the following services:

- Public safety (police and fire)
- Highways and streets
- Water and sanitation
- Health and social services
- Culture-Recreation
- Public improvements
- Community development (planning, building, zoning)
- General administrative services

Blythe's economy is primarily agriculture and tourism. Known for its "agricultural abundance", it produces vegetables, cotton, alfalfa, and melon crops. Blythe also benefits from being a "popular tourist destination" due to its position in the Palo Verde Valley and the Colorado River Valley. The winter months are the busiest for visitors and tourists, who come for short-term vacations, for the holidays, or for a change from colder climates.¹²

Much has been written about the City's financial health. According to an independent financial audit for fiscal year ending June 2022, certain factors raised "substantial doubt about the City's ability to continue as a going concern". But the auditor's report also states that the City has plans in place to reduce expenditures and to address liabilities in its General Fund, as well as other funds with deficit positions.

The City's ability to continue as a "going concern" will depend on their progress.¹³ A California State Auditor's report also noted that the City continues to make good progress. This will be explained in the DISCUSSION section.

The governmental agencies that supply or manage services to Blythe are: State of California, County of Riverside, Palo Verde Unified School District and various special districts. The County of Riverside has a significant stake in Blythe, which staffs and maintains the following agencies:

- Riverside County Sheriff's Department
- Riverside County Probation Office
- Blythe Courthouse
- Riverside County Behavioral Health Clinic
- Palo Verde Transit Agency
- Riverside County Department of Social Services
- Riverside County Animal Shelter

Riverside County officials, who were interviewed, believe that the County is committed to delivering high quality and cost-effective services to the residents of the City of Blythe. City officials, however, report that the County's services often "stop at the hill" (Indio), meaning the services provided are limited or non-existent due to distance from the other more densely populated parts of Riverside County.¹⁴



METHODOLOGY

- **Research:** There is a considerable amount written about Blythe, which is readily accessible on the internet. Items of interest for this report are cited in the REFERENCES section:
 - News articles
 - Grand Jury reports
 - California State Auditor's reports
 - Independent Financial Auditor's reports

- **Interviews:** The Grand Jury conducted interviews in order to learn about the City's programs, projects and plans. The interviews included:
 - Riverside County officials and department heads
 - City of Blythe leadership
 - Blythe Chamber of Commerce
 - Palo Verde Unified School District
 - State of California Auditor's staff
 - Members of the Riverside County Board of Supervisors
 - Caltrans representatives

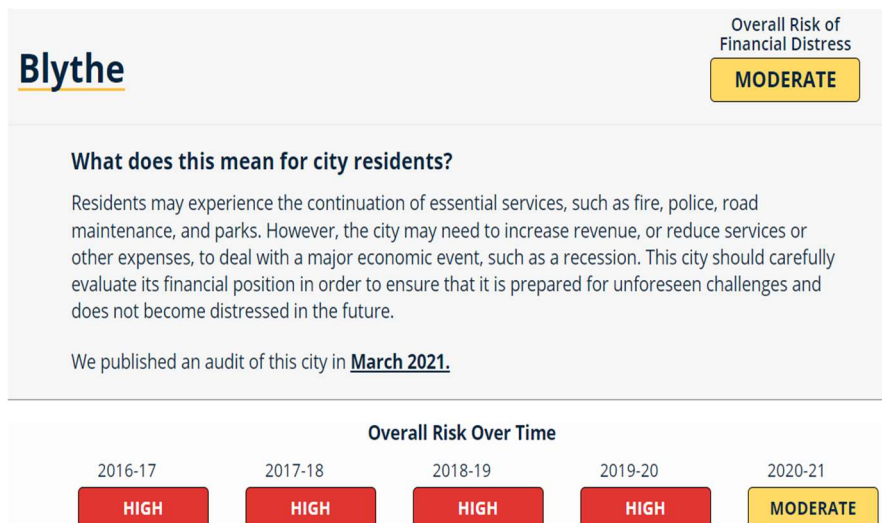
- **Visitations:** To gain a better understanding of the community, the following visits were made by Grand Jury members during the month of October 2023:
 - Riverside County Sheriff's Department at the Blythe jail
 - Sheriff Colorado River Station
 - Police Department, City of Blythe
 - Riverside County Probation Office in Blythe
 - Riverside County Fire Department/Cal Fire Station 44
 - Palo Verde Unified School District
 - Palo Verde Cemetery District
 - Palo Verde Irrigation District
 - Riverside County Behavioral Health Clinic
 - Riverside County Department of Social Services
 - Palo Verde Transit Agency
 - Palo Verde Hospital/Health Care District
 - Agricultural Commission
 - Riverside County Department of Social Services in Blythe
 - Riverside County Animal Control, Blythe
 - Riverside County Airport, Blythe Airport
 - Ironwood State Prison
 - Chuckawalla Valley State Prison

~ DISCUSSION

1. CALIFORNIA STATE AUDITOR

The Grand Jury reviewed the California State Auditor’s reports on Blythe, specifically the “Local Government High-Risk” dashboard and the “Corrective Action Plan and Assessment”.

California State Auditor’s High-Risk Dashboard: This report ranks over 470 cities in California based on detailed information about their fiscal health. This dashboard ranked cities in order of financial stability, from worst to best.[§] In the 2020-2021 City Rankings chart below, Blythe is ranked #9, which is indicative of improvement in the city’s financial position.



[§] The California State Auditor's Office removed the local government high-risk dashboard from its website in October 2023, so no further updates are available.

Blythe’s overall rating was upgraded to “Moderate” and the report documented improvements in essential categories, as follows:¹⁵

Revenue Trends: “...city’s revenues have increased, on average, 19 percent annually over the last few years. Substantial growth in general fund revenues gives the city greater flexibility to respond to economic changes and pay rising costs of services”.

General Fund Reserves: “... city has enough funds set aside in reserves to cover its expenses for about 3 months in the event of a fiscal emergency...reserves have been growing, on average, by 128 percent annually”.

Debt Burden: “... city's long-term debts = 74 percent of total government revenues... sufficient revenues to pay its debts”.

The audit was published in March 2021. The 2021/2022 Civil Grand Jury report did not reflect these improvements, but instead referenced an earlier ranking, showing Blythe as third worst on the list.¹⁶

Blythe's Corrective Action Plan from September 23, 2022: The California State Auditor’s Report #2020-802 outlined various audit issues and recommendations.¹⁷ Blythe submitted its original Corrective Action Plan in May 2021 and its fourth update in September 2022 (most recent).

The 2023/2024 Civil Grand Jury contacted the State Auditor’s office for a 2023 update and learned that no further updates are available, or being worked on, at this time. However, in its latest assessment, the State noted that Blythe’s financial position was improving, that the City showed progress on implementing some of its recommendations, and that the City’s Corrective Action Plan positively reflected its “economic development efforts”.

According to the State Auditor’s report, Blythe has completely addressed the following recommendations:

Public Safety- Blythe has taken steps to ensure that the City’s fire department has equipment that meets industry standards, has funded the replacement of its fire vehicles and has a schedule for replacing the City’s three oldest vehicles.

High Vacancy Rate- The City identified five properties for nuisance abatement, cleaned up another property and is working with the property owners on four other properties. The City also identified properties eligible for receivership. This allows the City to bring the buildings on those properties “up to code”, rather than demolishing them. City administration is working on the legal issues that must be addressed first.

Community Development Block Grant Funds (CDBG)** - The City is employing CDBG funds to make exterior home improvements to blighted or sub-standard housing to decrease vacancies in “unlivable homes”. The State understands that effectively dealing with vacant buildings will take

** CDBG funds are federal funds that provide for affordable housing, anti-poverty programs and infrastructure development.

considerable time. Since the City’s efforts have and continue to reflect good progress, the State considers this recommendation “fully addressed”.

Contract Management- The City plans to purchase new software with a contract management module that includes identifying the contract amounts and terms. In the meantime, the City will utilize a “contract tracking spreadsheet” to record total contract amounts, contract dates/durations, and any special contracts terms. The Director of Finance, or designee, will be required to review and update the spreadsheet at least monthly.

The State Auditor’s report expressed some concern related to the City’s financials:

1. General fund reserves: The City’s reserve policy is to maintain a three-month reserve balance, which it has met. In the State’s analysis, it may be insufficient to cover “other concerns”, which were not specified in their report.
2. Lack of a long-term strategic plan: A formal strategic plan is needed to “guide the City’s budgetary decision-making and address long-term needs to achieve financial stability”.

In the September 2022 update to the State Auditor, City administration responded to each of the above items, as follows:

Item #1: General Fund Reserves

As of fiscal year ending June 2023, the City’s final revenue budget reflected a substantial increase over the original budget, which was attributed to “better-than-expected favorable outcome in transit occupancy tax, sales tax, and program revenues within community development department”, as described in the Management’s Discussion and Analysis section of the Independent Auditor’s report, dated December 7, 2023.¹⁸

Item #2: Long Term Strategic Plan

Blythe’s leadership reported in its 2022 response to the Grand Jury’s report that the City initiated a plan, beginning in 2008, to reduce and control expenditures, resulting in balanced budgets each year thereafter. The City’s goal was to move out of its negative financial positions and to “rebuild the city’s financial health”. The General Fund is no longer in a deficit position, has “healthy reserves”, meaning at least 3 months to cover expenses, and the City is now focused on further development.¹⁹

The Independent Auditor’s report for fiscal year 2022-2023, as presented to the City Council on December 7, 2023, confirmed that the General Fund has improved “dramatically” (\$2.6 million improvement). An in-depth analysis of the General Fund since 2008 showed significant progress, specifically over the last 3-4 years.²⁰ Notwithstanding the City’s ‘significant progress’, the “on-going going concern” problem, which has existed since 2008, will likely continue.

The State Auditor’s report acknowledged that the City is making progress on the following recommendations:²¹

1. To attract retail businesses and increase revenue, the City should develop a plan to engage with stakeholders, such as City residents and local business owners, to initiate a formal economic development effort.
2. To ensure that the City is adequately prepared to address long-term financial, budgetary, and operational challenges...it should develop a five-year strategic plan by June 2022... [It] should define the City’s priorities...goals... intended outcomes.
3. To ensure that the City has a critical administrative component in place that will allow it to plan its next steps to improve its financial stability and continue providing services to residents, it should begin the process for hiring a permanent city manager by June 2021.

In the September 2022 update to the State Auditor, City administration responded to each of the above items, as follows:

Item #1: Develop a plan to attract retail businesses in order to increase revenues.

Starting in January 2022, the City “initiated a three-year agreement with **Retail Strategies, LLC** ²² to attract new retail development, develop a plan to attract retail businesses and to increase revenues”.

Retail Strategies LLC is a “national expert in recruiting businesses on behalf of communities....” City leadership is working closely with their team to set goals for attracting new business, rebuilding the City by increasing revenue, and attracting tourism and new business development.

Item #2: Develop a five-year strategic plan to define the City’s priorities, goals, and expected outcomes.

The City responded that it is now “focused on development and on streamlining” the City's development process (project reviews). The City’s 5-year strategic plan will include the specifics from the Retail Strategies project when completed.

In the Grand Jury’s opinion, the major components of a wide-ranging strategic business plan must include the observations and recommendations of two major initiatives, specifically, Retail Strategies and the Blythe Economic Resiliency Study (Kosmont Companies). Both programs are currently underway, works-in-progress, and have near-term completion dates. Essentially, those efforts could be considered ‘strategic planning’.

The planned closure of CVSP adds a level of uncertainty for developing such a plan in the proximate time frame. City leadership has been engaged with the Brown University studies regarding prison closures around rural communities. The studies may also provide further ideas for developing priorities, goals and success measures.

Item #3: Hire a “permanent” city manager.

The City does not disagree with the recommendation, and in its last update to the State, indicated that plans will be in place for starting the “hiring process in early 2023”. This recommendation has been in the California State Auditor’s report, the City’s own Independent Auditor’s report and in the 2021/2022 Civil Grand Jury report. Nevertheless, no hire occurred in 2023.

City leaders emphasize the importance of maintaining a consistent, focused and stable leadership with the current projects and initiatives that are critical to the success of the City. The Interim City Manager has been in her multi-faceted role for over 5 years, is at the forefront of the City’s development efforts and related projects, and has the trust of the Mayor and the City Council.

It is also important to note that her visibility and competence as the Interim City Manager is well recognized by County officials and other entities. An example of how she represents the City of Blythe follows:

On April 7, 2022, the City of Blythe hosted the 64th Annual Palo Verde Valley Outlook Conference, entitled **“BLYTHE IS A GROWING MARKET”**.²³ There were over 20 Riverside County department heads and officials in attendance.

The theme of the Interim City Manager’s presentation was **“Blythe IS Growing”**. She presented an overview of new development in the City, the cannabis market, enhanced community services, economic development, grant funded projects, and quality of life initiatives.

Business Development: The City saw an increase in PRC (Project Review Committee) submissions, along with new business licenses, since 2021. The presentation highlighted the City’s three-year agreement with **Retail Strategies, LLC**. As a “national expert in recruiting businesses and strategically developing communities”, Retail Strategies is “going to champion Blythe” and will have businesses with expansion plans take a look at the City of Blythe.

Cannabis Business: The City of Blythe now has four operations, including two dispensaries, cultivation, manufacturing and distribution operations. The four legally-licensed canna-businesses operating in Blythe include: Flora Holding (manufacturing and distribution), The Prime Leaf (dispensary), High Times (dispensary), and Lotus (cultivation, manufacturing, and distribution). Cannabis projects in development: UKPE Developments; Cornerstone International Investment Group; LG Harvest, LLC; Puffzy, Inc.; T.O.R.O., LLC; Edelweiss Sustainable Farms; and, Fitzgerald Agriculture Complex.

The Interim City Manager, in her report, explained that the Blythe City Council envisioned that the cannabis business would “revitalize the east and west ends of our City” with living wage jobs and increase in tax revenues. The City has issued over 50 cannabis employee work permits. The businesses are donating to the community, partnering with the chamber of commerce and other local organizations. The City wants to continue to see this industry grow, eventually attracting other non-cannabis enterprises.

Quality of Life: The Blythe Police Department leads the City’s Quality of Life programs that are focused on addressing the public safety issues related to homelessness, traffic violations, graffiti abatement and blight abatement/receivership programs.

The City is “investing City funding into cleaning up and removing blighted properties”. There are properties whose market value will be improved through a receivership process, bringing them into compliance. Ultimately these efforts will help to beautify the City.

2. RETAIL STRATEGIES, LLC

Blythe is investing \$135,000 of American Rescue and Recovery Act (ARRA) funds for its partnership with Retail Strategies to attract and recruit retail.²⁴ The city will receive a “tailored retail recruitment plan along with retail and broker outreach by the Retail Strategies team”.²⁵

Retail Strategies is a national expert in recruiting businesses and strategically developing communities as “alluring locations for national businesses and destinations for tourism and quality of life amenities”. The City anticipated that its return on investment (ROI) will be realized in new sales taxes, new jobs, and new businesses.

Retail Strategies has noted that Blythe has high traffic counts from cars on their way in and out of California. According to the Western Region representative, there are “several high-quality retail sites in the city that our team looks forward to promoting as we reach out to the local property owners...and Retail Strategies is excited to be entering into a partnership with the city and I am encouraged to see that the city’s leadership is willing to allocate ARRA dollars towards a partnership like this. Our partnership will help Blythe immediately and for years to come.”

The key components of the project can be described as follows:

- Conducting a real estate market analysis of the businesses located in Blythe
- Identifying “areas of opportunity with expanding businesses”
- Helping community leaders understand their market and the opportunities
- Working with potential businesses, property owners, brokers, and developers

The Grand Jury contacted Retail Strategies for more information, but representatives advised that because the work with the City is “privileged”, they could not discuss project details. However, through other informal interviews, the Grand Jury learned that there are ongoing discussions with 3-4 large retailers who have expressed an interest in Blythe. Due to confidentiality, those retailers could not be revealed at this time.

Related to these efforts, on November 22, 2023 the City of Blythe’s official social media page announced the groundbreaking of two significant projects:

“Chipotle and Grocery Outlet have officially broken ground and are anticipated to be completed by mid-2024,” stated the City of Blythe. “You can find Chipotle at 100 S Lovekin Blvd. Blythe, CA 92225 ([Southeast] corner of Lovekin and Hobsonway) and Grocery Outlet at 691 W(est) Hobsonway Blythe, CA 92225 (in

the All Star Cinemas Shopping Center). Stay tuned for some delicious and convenient additions to our cityscape!”²⁶

3. BLYTHE AS A DISTRIBUTION HUB

City officials believe Blythe is geographically in a “unique position”. Contrary to a prior report depicting it as isolated, the City wants to be known as being in the “middle of everywhere”.

In its response to the 2021/2022 Grand Jury report, city leadership emphasized that Blythe is “within driving distance of four major metropolitan areas across three States. With an increase in online shopping, Blythe is in an excellent location to be a distribution hub for the Phoenix, Las Vegas, San Diego, and Los Angeles metro areas, as well as the Coachella Valley”.

But how do large logistics centers select locations for new warehouses? According to research, there are a variety of factors, such as population density, availability of labor, transportation costs, taxes and incentives, local infrastructure, and potential customer demand. In addition to these key factors, construction costs and other costs associated with building a warehouse as compared to its return on its investment.²⁷

Other factors that large logistics centers take into account when selecting new warehouses include:

- Proximity to population centers for faster and cheaper delivery of goods to customers
- Transportation infrastructure with good highway access and proximity to major rail lines
- Warehouse size and layout large enough to accommodate the needs

These requirements may seem insurmountable for a city like Blythe, but in an interview with a city official, the Grand Jury learned of the possibility that Blythe is being considered for at least one large (100-bay) warehouse in an undisclosed location. The Grand Jury understands and accepts that details of such a development need to remain confidential and cannot be disclosed at this point.

The relative proximity of the Blythe Airport, managed by Riverside County, could provide a transportation alternative for businesses looking to expand their reach with warehouse locations, in order to better serve their customer base.

According to the Riverside County Aviation Division leadership, should Blythe attract the development of a shipping hub that could take advantage of the airport, the Aviation Division would charge a 20- to 30-year ground lease or rental contract, and private enterprise would build its own facility. At the end of the contract, the facility would revert to County ownership and the occupant would be subject to rent.

4. RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AT BLYTHE AIRPORT

The Blythe Airport, at 3900 acres, is the largest of the Riverside County’s aviation facilities. A private vendor, MFF Solutions, provides parachute training for military clients from all over the world. Recent non-U.S. military clients have included the United Kingdom and Singapore. Such training takes place throughout the year.

According to County Aviation Division leadership, the County would like to encourage private pilot-training and/or a sky-diving school at the Blythe Airport. Because the Aviation Division is an enterprise fund, she says of such opportunities that she would “chase them down and make them work.”

The Grand Jury’s research shows that the nearest pilot-training school is 89 miles away in Thermal and that the nearest skydiving school is 151 miles away in Phoenix. (There are also skydiving schools in Perris – 169 miles away – and Lake Elsinore – 180 miles away.)

Blythe Airport staff reports an abundance of uncovered space for the storage of private airplanes. There are, however, no airplanes currently available from fixed-based operators to rent to pilots who cannot afford their own.

5. DEVELOPMENT OF THE COLORADO RIVER CORRIDOR

The Colorado River Corridor Plan, adopted in March 2007, is a waterfront-oriented land use plan that will complement other areas of Blythe.²⁸ The City’s vision for this area includes:

- Providing housing opportunities with livable neighborhoods
- Preserving valuable open space in balance with traffic circulation needs
- Developing recreational and resort land uses
- Protecting existing agricultural land uses
- Creating a multi-purpose recreational trail system
- Providing additional river access points

The plan establishes connections between all of the lands within its boundaries to provide integration and balance between the Blythe riverfront and the rest of the city. Blythe is an agricultural community that offers many other amenities including golfing, camping, hunting, fishing, and off-roading.

According to its leadership, the City is working on “several projects to capture this market through development of the Colorado River, making Blythe a gateway to California and providing amenities to travelers”.

The Colorado River Corridor Plan intends to maintain a “small-town atmosphere”, encourage the development of resorts and hotels, and “other visitor-serving commercial uses”. One such business might be for the sale or rental of river recreational boating equipment, like SEA-DOO’s, which could spark other small business ventures.

The City wants to be vigilant in managing growth in the area and in the timing of development projects. For example, the City is concerned that commercial solar energy facilities, if established, may interfere with achieving the goals of the Colorado River Corridor Plan and may be incompatible with residential and other land uses in the City. City officials believe it could also adversely impact the quality of life for residents.

The City had received applications for construction and operation of a photo-voltaic (PV) solar array with battery storage to be located within the Colorado River Corridor Plan. That land is in agricultural production. The City anticipates it will receive more applications for construction of similar facilities in the Colorado River Corridor Plan and throughout the City.

Therefore, in October 2023, the City Council adopted a “moratorium ordinance” in order to study and assess approaches for regulating the scale, design, and location of such facilities to ensure compatibility with residential and other land uses.²⁹

This ordinance, with an initial duration of 45 days, will not prohibit developers from submitting new applications, nor prohibit the processing of permits during the moratorium. It only suspended the issuance of development permits.

The City’s leadership claims that there is no intent to prevent or stall development. However, as solar facilities start developing in the community, the City wants to ensure they do not contradict or compromise the development plans for this area.

6. VEHICLE CHARGING STATIONS

Pursuant to the State of California's mandate for zero-emission vehicles, all new automobiles and light trucks sold in California will be required to be zero-emission by 2035.

The National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Program (NEVI) provides funding. The White House announced the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) requirements for customers looking to install Electric Vehicle (EV) chargers. The goal is a nationwide network of 500,000 EV chargers by 2030 across the United States, creating millions of new American jobs.³⁰

*“Commercial property owners are scrambling to adjust to the changing world of transportation”*³¹

The above statement was part of a recent headline in a Los Angeles Times article about the growth of charging centers as the “first step of commercial landlords scrambling to adjust to a historic burst of change in the world of transportation...”³² The report emphasizes that “convenience stores, fast-food chains, movie theaters and big-box retailers are hoping to cash in on EV chargers”

According to this article, by next January, a nationally known coffee seller will have 40 fast-charging stations at one of its 24-hour operations somewhere on Interstate 15 between Los Angeles and Las Vegas. The developers of the charging stations are planning to handle over 10,000 vehicles per month.

It is expected that customers at fast-food restaurants and convenience stores will “buy things while their cars charge”. A major convenience store chain recently announced its plans to “build one of the largest fast-charging networks of any retailer in North America and already has chargers in four states, including California”, according to the article.

One of the world's largest restaurant brands, is partnering with a leading provider of EV charging solutions to build “EV Charging Oasis” parks. They will be known as “charging parks” with

multiple charging stations at some of its new or remodeled restaurants across the country. The charging parks will include “picnic tables, Wi-Fi, restrooms, green space and playgrounds”.³³

There are many other companies installing charging stations connected to retail services that want to “attract customers with time to kill.”³⁴

City officials believe that Blythe can establish similar facilities in order to capture a new market. The City’s vision is to provide ample, well-provisioned vehicle charging stations to serve not only passenger vehicles, but trucks traveling between Phoenix and the ports of Los Angeles. According to Caltrans traffic statistics on Interstate 10, approximately eleven million vehicles currently pass through Blythe annually.³⁵

The City has obtained grant funding for a charging station project. Initial project preparation began in November 2023. The contractor is WattEV.³⁶

WattEV Electric Truck and Vehicle Charging Station: The “WattEV Project” plans to install electric truck and vehicle charging station located and designed to serve traffic on Interstate 10. It includes a solar generation field and a set of 10 natural gas backup generators.³⁷

The EV charging station will have forty-six passenger vehicle charging stations and seventy-two truck charging stations. It will also include development of a lounge and convenience store with restrooms and an administrative office. The station will be operated by a staff of three employees per shift with three shifts per day for a total of nine employees over a 24-hour period.

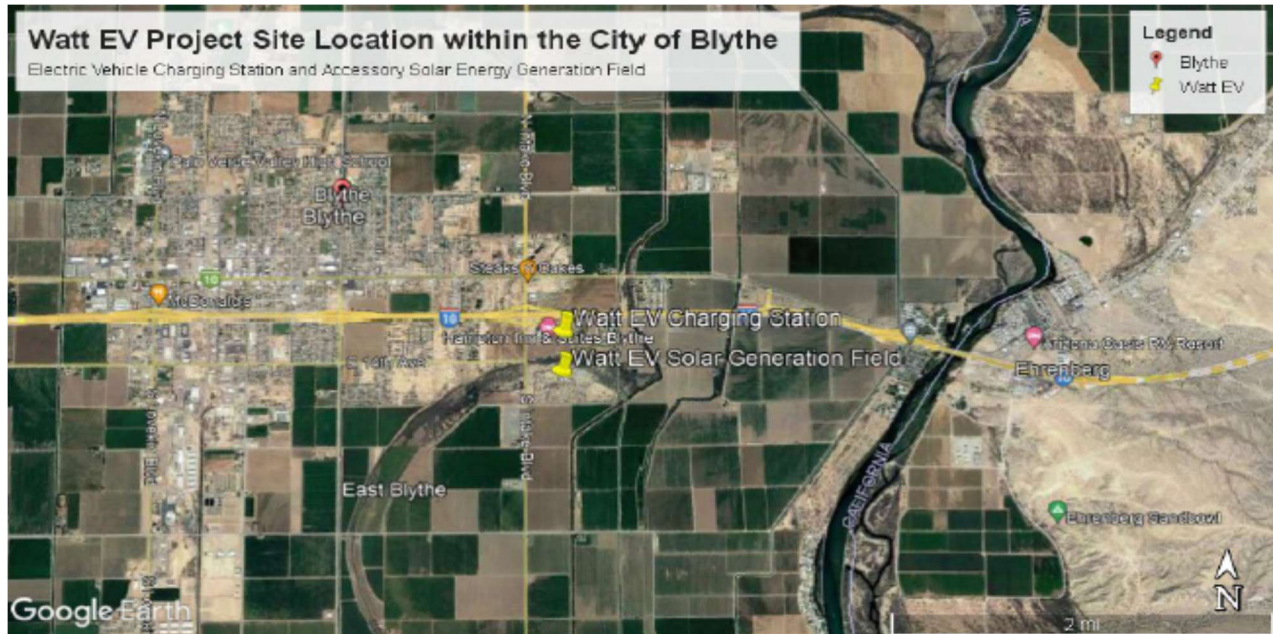
The development of the WattEV site is expected to take 6-8 months. The backup generators and solar field will be installed in stages over 24 to 48 months as operations increase.



Source: WattEV Project Plan: Solar generation field on the southern parcel and a set of 10 natural gas generators as backup power.

The current zoning and ‘General Plan’ allow for the development of electric vehicle charging stations. The City has completed its review and determined that the proposed development qualifies for a Categorical Exemption from the provisions of California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 18183. The project will have no adverse environmental impact and is consistent with a Community Plan or Zoning. The City concluded that the project does not require additional environmental review pursuant to CEQA. A detailed assessment of the potential environmental effects and of mitigation measures is provided for key resource topics such as air quality, biological and cultural resources, energy use, greenhouse gas emissions, land use and is consistent with the City’s General Plan and zoning policies concerning noise and traffic.

The City Council directed the filing of a Notice of Exemption for a Categorical Exemption pursuant to CEQA Guideline for the WattEV Electric Vehicle Charging Station Project which will be located on E. Donlon Street in southeast Blythe. The motion passed with a unanimous 'aye vote'.³⁸



Source: WattEV Electric Vehicle Charging Station Project

Update February 21, 2024: In a recent article in the Palos Verdes Times, it was reported the City of Blythe was awarded \$19,635,156 in support of its Electric Vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure project.³⁹

“In a significant step towards sustainable transportation, the City of Blythe has been awarded a groundbreaking grant of \$19 million. This marks a major milestone in the City’s commitment to environmental stewardship and public-private partnership excellence. Facilitated through the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) Charging and Fueling Infrastructure Discretionary Grant program, this grant funds the installation of the WattEV Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Station project in Blythe,” stated a City of Blythe press release on Feb. 15 via the Tripepi [sic] Smith public affairs firm. “Strategically located along the I-10 Corridor, this ambitious project promises to serve as a vital charging point for travelers navigating the route between Phoenix and Los Angeles. The collaboration between the City and WattEV aims to significantly expand publicly accessible EV charging, hydrogen, propane, and natural gas fueling infrastructure. This initiative stands as a crucial development in promoting alternative fuel options within the community and for those passing through.”

The project is described as the development of a publicly accessible, multi-class, electric vehicle charging facility in the County of Riverside. It will include:

- Six megawatt charging standard chargers for heavy-duty vehicles
- 30 DC fast chargers for light-duty vehicles
- Solar and battery energy storage systems
- Amenities such as rest areas and bathrooms

“The project not only places Blythe in a pivotal position in the nation’s electrification efforts but also ensures the City’s readiness to support the growing demands for alternative fueling infrastructure.”

Blythe’s Interim City Manager commented, “...Blythe is driving the transition to clean transportation We are proud to partner and collaborate with WattEV on this significant project that positions Blythe as a leader in the clean energy initiative ... fostering more economic growth for our future”.

7. THE “SAVE CHUCK” MOVEMENT

December 6, 2022: In a press release titled “**Planned Closure of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison**”, the State reported that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) will begin the process to close Chuckawalla Valley State Prison (CVSP) in Blythe with an anticipated closure in March 2025.⁴⁰

The State expressed that it “will support the local community and workforce with an economic resiliency plan and workers will be offered transfers to nearby facilities.” The governor’s office “plans to work directly with community stakeholders in Riverside County to help support workers and foster a bottom-up economic resilience plan for the community impacted by the closure of CVSP”.

According to the report, CDCR’s leadership carefully evaluated the options for prison closures and took into account several factors, such as the operating costs, impact on the communities and the workforce, and the “housing needs for all populations”. Other factors it considered include “long-term investments in state-owned and operated correctional facilities, public safety and rehabilitation, and durability of the state’s solution to prison overcrowding”.

The City of Blythe estimates that revenues will decline \$2.9 million from the closure of CVSP and the Palo Verde School District is projected to lose \$4.9 million over time.⁴¹ An official of the school district explained that the school district anticipates a general reduction in school enrollment caused by job losses of CVSP employees, inmate families who reside in Blythe, and other types of resident job losses due to the closure. And, in its 2023 independent audit report, the City wrote that “the economic impacts anticipated due to closure of the state prison in 2025 will be catastrophic to the City”.

City officials sent a formal letter to the Governor requesting that he reconsider the closure of CVSP, pleading that it will have a “disproportionate impact” on the City of Blythe and the Palo Verde Valley.⁴² The City also proposed that closing the California Rehabilitation Center (CRC) in the City of Norco, instead of CVSP, would make more sense based on the reasoning detailed in their letter.

There has been no reply. County administration remains committed to the “*Save Chuck*” campaign as does Norco, which supports the closure of CRC.

Early in 2023, the City hired/partnered with Tripeppi Smith & Associates and launched its “*Save Chuck*” campaign. Tripeppi Smith is a public relations firm that works with clients in developing “outreach campaigns, video production, content writing, messaging, graphic work, technology infrastructure and websites”.



In collaboration with the City, and its supporters, Tripeppi Smith created an impressive, all-encompassing website for ‘*Save Chuck*’ (savechuck.org).⁴³ A presentation by City leadership at a Community Outlook Conference on April 6, 2023 highlighted the mounting support it has garnered.

The Gonsalves & Son Firm was also hired to conduct lobbying in the State Capitol. It has extensive legislative experience representing clients before the California State Legislature and State Departments.⁴⁴

Additionally, the City announced its participation in a “collaborative research initiative” with a noted professor of Brown University who has expertise in urban studies. The focus of the research is on the “socio-economic impact of the potential closure of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison”.⁴⁵ The professor’s students presented their preliminary findings at a special City Council meeting in early December 2023 to inform on the initial stages of their research and the path ahead.^{46 47}

The research was based on the modeling from prior studies on why rural communities want prisons, what prisons mean to the community, and looking into alternatives for those rural communities to increase opportunities. They engaged with Blythe’s community leaders to assess the economic impact resulting from the prison closure, and to what extent it could impact the City’s revenues, education, and health care.

According to the report, “The City is not in a great financial position, so the closure is worrisome”. Because prison jobs help to sustain Blythe’s economy, the job losses resulting from the closure will have a detrimental impact.

The goal of their research is finding “alternative solutions” for dealing with the prison closure, which could include investing in natural resources, public safety, healthcare and energy; something the City of Blythe can build on.

In the presentation, the professor provided a list of preliminary recommendations, focusing on how the City can navigate the prison closure while “uplifting the community and generating economic revenue.”

- Investing in public safety, public health, natural resources, and tourism
- Investing in the parks and advertising the beauty of Blythe to attract more tourism, creating new jobs
- Investing in improving conditions for doctors and other healthcare professionals to attract new employees and for expanding medical facilities. The prisons are currently keeping the hospital in operation, so closure will have a detrimental impact
- Investing in renewable energy could enhance revenue for the City, while decreasing energy costs and reducing carbon emissions
- Using the airport for freight to attract new companies that may need that resource
- Opening a warehouse in Blythe to offset job losses from the prison closure
- Repurposing the prison to use as a warehouse (i.e., Amazon), a renewable energy facility or a data center should be considered

The professor also noted that Blythe's economy is primarily agricultural, but with the "loss of water and overall changes in the economy", it may suffer after the prison closes. Determining to what extent the prison closure will have on Blythe's economy will require more research and resources. At this point, however, he states that the impact will be significant.

City leadership commented: "If the State of California finalizes the closure of this prison, this promises to be a seismic change in our community. We welcome the efforts of this research team to study this transition and help us pursue a just and equitable future for Blythe."

In the City Council meeting on December 12, 2023, a staff report provided updates on the '**Save Chuck**' campaign and outlined the vast support it has garnered, which was detailed in another letter sent to the Governor.⁴⁸ It was also reported that an Assembly member plans to write his own letter to the Governor and will issue a press release, announcing that he is "still fighting this fight with the City".

The City also gained the support of two State Senators. The Riverside County Board of Supervisors, the Coachella Valley Association of Governments, twenty two cities of Riverside County, the Palo Verde Irrigation District, Cal Cities, Crime Victims United, Crime Survivors, and law enforcement in Riverside County, San Bernardino County and Orange County, sent their own letters to the governor.⁴⁹

The County has established a working group planning for the mitigation of the prison closure. This group includes representatives from the Board of Supervisors, the Office of Economic Development and the Department of Public Social Services.

In October 2023, members of the Grand Jury attended a presentation and tour of both CVSP and Ironwood Prison. The 'warm closing' process, conducted by the Human Resources team, was already underway. That process includes plans for transferring staff or finding other assignments.

Prison officials discussed plans for moving some inmates to the Ironwood Prison and for maintaining the facility in maintenance mode only.

The Grand Jury commends the City’s leadership for its concerted efforts to convince Sacramento to reconsider this action and to continue to fight for Blythe’s survival.

8. BLYTHE ECONOMIC RESILIENCY STUDY

September 12, 2023: Riverside County Board of Supervisors approved \$75,000 in federal funding to conduct an economic resiliency study in the City of Blythe.⁵⁰

Office of Economic Development (OED) leadership commented that the pandemic had “disproportionately impacted the City of Blythe and the surrounding unincorporated communities”. Therefore, OED had started working on an economic resiliency study, utilizing the economic recovery category of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA) funding.

In response to the scheduled closure of CVSP, OED contracted with the Kosmont Companies to “identify economic development opportunities and initiatives in the Blythe area.” Presumably, that would encompass Ripley and Mesa Verde. That contract was under a separate procurement, so OED proposed using ARPA funds for that project. In our interview with OED leadership, it was noted that this effort is directly involved with the “*Save Chuck*” movement.

As reported in OED’s letter to the Board, this study “will assist in understanding market demand and feasibility for new economic activity in the city and surrounding communities, including industrial opportunities and tourism/recreation that can encourage new development in the area to support the needs of residents, employees, and local businesses”.⁵¹

In an interview with The Riverside Record^{††}, leadership of the Office of Economic Development added, “What we’re trying to accomplish with this study is to identify what potential future economic development opportunities and initiatives could be undertaken in the Blythe area to create jobs, tourism, and investments”.⁵²

OED leadership further explained that while the study will not be a “detailed study with implementation plans” it should identify what could benefit the area and the “partners that should be involved in some of the things that could be undertaken.” In the same article referenced above, a County Supervisor said “the county does what it can to support the community when it comes to economic development, but said the City’s remoteness is an ongoing challenge”.

The Grand Jury requested an interview with the Kosmont Companies to obtain further details about their project, how it would support the “*Save Chuck*” campaign, and how the County would be involved as a potential partner.

^{††} *The Riverside Record* is a member of LION Publishers — a professional journalism association for independent news publishers.

A company representative simply referred the request to OED for response. It was denied, with the explanation that the study has not been completed. However, OED committed that the Grand Jury will be provided a copy of the completed presentation.

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In addition to the forgoing initiatives the following areas were considered: Riverside County Services, Blythe Courthouse, Blythe Chamber of Commerce and other City initiatives.

RIVERSIDE COUNTY SERVICES

Grand Jury panel members visited Blythe in October 2023 to gain a better perspective on the County's services, to identify potential issues and to learn about current trends. Based on interviews, City officials believe that the County needs to make more of a commitment to Blythe. Some services have been closed, or hours of operations cut.

The Grand Jury interviewed Riverside County administration to gain an understanding of how the County determines the level of services provided to Blythe. The cities in the County of Riverside are "stand alone", meaning the County does not dictate what services are provided and to what extent. There is no specific template that determines the service levels for County services in every city. Also, County services are provided on a 'full-cost recovery' basis, not based on what the city can afford, even if it is "economically depressed".

Blythe noted in its 2022 letter that, "due to the distance between Blythe and the rest of eastern Riverside County, County services routinely stop at the 'hill', so it takes longer and costs more for Blythe residents to access the services provided elsewhere in the County. For example, the County considered closing the County-operated Animal Shelter that has supported the City of Blythe and the Palo Verde Valley for several years".

According to city officials, they had reached an agreement with the County to transfer the shelter to the City in order to save the shelter from closure.⁵³ The City would have been burdened with the cost of services that should be provided by the County, but they did not want their animals "transported 100+ miles to the Coachella Valley in extreme temperatures".

Grand Jury members visited the shelter and learned about the very costly repairs and upgrades needed to keep the shelter in operation. One major system upgrade could cost in excess of \$400k.

The communication between County and City officials has apparently stalled and there does not seem to be a decisive action plan to address the repair issues and the continued operation in Blythe. Two members of the City Council serve on an Animal Shelter Committee, which is one of the ad hoc committees appointed by the mayor.

BLYTHE COURTHOUSE

Beyond County control, another example of service cuts exists at the Blythe Courthouse. The Blythe Courthouse is open 3 days a week.⁵⁴ The City of Blythe is requesting that the courthouse be

open 5 days a week. Courthouse hours are not determined by the County, but instead by the State Superior Court. City management is drafting a letter, requesting the expansion of the Blythe Courthouse hours of operation. The key points of the request are:

- Court cases continued to increase, which “puts pressure on court staff and the District Attorney's office.
- Court operating only three days a week causes hardships for residents who experience delays in having their cases heard.
- Reduced hours of operation put pressure on local law enforcement resources who are required to travel to the Coachella Valley for court hearings that could be heard in Blythe if the court was open five days a week.
- The closure of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison will not reduce caseloads or minimize the need for Blythe residents to have court service 5 days per week.

BLYTHE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

At the 2022 Outlook Conference, the Blythe Chamber of Commerce highlighted its projects, including “building stakeholder partnerships, promoting tourism, increasing community morale”.

In fiscal year 2022-2023, the Blythe City Council allocated \$30,000 in ARPA funding to support the work of the Blythe Chamber of Commerce in promoting tourism. The activities designed to promote tourism include advertising, publicizing, and distributing information to attract and welcome visitors to the City. Allocations will also be made in 2023-2024 and 2024-2025.⁵⁵

The Chamber is also working on new signage for Blythe and the Palo Verde Valley. Working with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the Chamber plans to update the freeway signage and design new **Welcome to Blythe** signs that will “showcase the Chamber's new logo”. New field crop signs will “showcase the various crops that are produced in the valley”.

The Chamber is currently working with Caltrans on an “**I-10 Blythe Pavement, Beautification, and Safety Enhancements** project.” This project is funded by the Clean CA Grant. It includes installing a large State monument sign. The beautification work on Interstate 10 starts at the State line and runs through Mesa Verde (approximately 88 miles), so “people coming either way in this direction, they will see how important we are being a gateway city.”

The beautification project also includes installing a large ‘**Blythe Gateway Monument**’, as shown in an artist’s rendering on the title page of this report, to show Blythe as a “gateway into the State”.

According to Caltrans, “The project was scheduled to start January 2024, but will be on hold until March 2024 due to some structure change orders/approvals. The Overall Estimated Cost is \$9.5 million. The overall size of the monument will be 18’H x 14’W x 6’D”.

Clean California: This project will “...beautify and enhance roadside areas along Interstate I-10 in the City of Blythe. The state entry monument will welcome visitors and serve to further the area’s economic development potential”.⁵⁶

According to Caltrans, the project objective is to improve “unsightly roadsides” to enhance community pride. The State’s gateway monument will have the California grizzly bear, the California poppy, and various stone and concrete features.

The project will also have several safety enhancements designed to “deter unsafe dwelling use and enhance the visual character”, low-maintenance landscaping, decorative gravel and boulders, and a rock blanket.

In a recent press release, “The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) continues work on a \$241 million pavement, beautification, and safety enhancements project on Interstate 10 (I-10), in and near Blythe”.⁵⁷



VISION: A brighter future for all through a world-class transportation network.

OTHER CITY INITIATIVES

To further illustrate other ways in which the City is working to enhance its image and continue with progress towards economic resiliency, the following are some examples:

Urban County Community Development Block Grant Program (2024-2025): The City has used Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to support the Harmony Kitchen, the Emergency Food Pantry and to improve City parks.⁵⁸

A portion of the 2023-2024 funds were used to start a Home Enhancement Program. Funds are allocated for improvements to homes owned by low-income persons. After work is completed, the owner must remain in the home for 5 years.

The program is coordinated with Riverside County which hires local contractors to perform the work. Five homes have been identified for funding with a total of thirteen homes to be rehabilitated.

The City’s Development Services staff has identified 104 homes in need of rehabilitation or replacement. They want to continue the work under the program, which will not only beautify neighborhoods, but allow low-income persons to stay in their homes.

The County of Riverside’s Five-Year Consolidated Plan provides funding for community, economic and social development activities. It assists the County, and the “cooperating cities”, in assessing their community’s needs. Blythe is a “cooperating city”.

The City is to provide a summary of its 2024-2029 community needs, outreach efforts and the City's five-year funding priorities. In preparation for its report, the City conducted a resident survey to help identify community priorities. The residents were most concerned with the following:

1. City streets and sidewalks
2. Community cleanliness
3. Safety and security
4. Water and sewer infrastructure
5. Parks and landscaped areas

Based on the results of the survey, the City Council identified its priorities for the 2024-2029 Five Year Consolidated Plan, as follows:

1. Housing Rehabilitation through the Home Enhancement Program
2. Park Improvements
3. Street and Sidewalk Improvements
4. Water and Sewer System Improvements

The CDBG allocation for fiscal year 2024-2025 is \$97,808 to support the City's Home Enhancement Program in partnership with Riverside County. The City’s leadership also set the Community Development priorities for CDBG funding for the 2024-2029 Five Year Consolidated Plan.

Chuckwalla National Monument: The **Protect the California Desert** organization is working with its congressional representative to call on President Biden to use the Antiquities Act to designate the Chuckwalla National Monument in Riverside and Imperial Counties and to protect lands adjacent to Joshua Tree National Park.⁵⁹

The proposed monument, as currently drafted, will designate 660,000 acres of desert land streaming from the Salton Sea to the Colorado River. Its purpose is to “ensure equitable access to nature, honor cultural landscapes, protect the desert's unique biodiversity, wildlife habitat and landscape connectivity, and history”.



Los Angeles Times, "California's Majestic Desert Must Be Preserved," by Mark Butler, November 25, 2023

City officials are concerned about how the monument will impact the City and its residents. Because there have been no discussions with the City about the monument, the City Council has directed the Mayor to forward a Letter of Opposition, outlining the City's concerns. They would also like to meet with the congressional representative to request modifications, specifically to exclude the area east of Desert Center, California.⁶⁰

As proposed, the monument designation will restrict public access to lands surrounding Blythe and the Palo Verde Valley. Hunting, camping, rock-hounding, and off-roading, which bring tourism and economic benefits to the City, will be impacted.

Solar development in Blythe will also be restricted. Solar projects have provided economic benefits to the business community and to the City. For example, the City's hotels and restaurants benefited greatly with the number of solar construction projects during 2020-2021. The tax revenues from those projects helped the City through the ensuing years.

City officials believe that restricting solar development contradicts state and national priorities for "sustainable and renewable energy". With the California mandate to have only zero-emission vehicles by 2035, solar projects are essential to power the grid. Blythe believes it is "well-positioned to capture economic benefits" from renewable energy projects, and to secure its future after the closure of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison.

According to a recent article in the Los Angeles Times, proponents of the Chuckwalla National Monument maintain that the goals for "conserving nature and meeting renewable energy" will be accomplished. It will support the goals of the Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan that identifies areas suitable for renewable energy development. "The proposed monument avoids lands suitable for energy projects and protects areas important to conserve for their biological, cultural and historic values."⁶¹

CAN THE CITY OF BLYTHE BECOME A GATEWAY CITY?

*“Gateway Cities are midsize urban centers that anchor regional economies around the State. For generations, these communities were home to industry that offered residents good jobs and a “gateway” to the American Dream. While Gateway Cities face stubborn social and economic challenges, they retain many assets including historic architecture, strong connections to transportation networks, museums, hospitals, universities, and perhaps above all, authentic urban fabric.”*⁶²

Although this definition would seem to preclude it from meeting the criteria as a Gateway City in the foreseeable future, Blythe’s ongoing work to enhance its financial status, improve its image aesthetically, and to attract new business enterprises, should improve its station as just an isolated, distant town near the Arizona border.



*Downtown Blythe California at Dusk in the Imperial Valley,” Image Credit Jacob Boomsma*⁶³

Living in Blythe:⁶⁴ A local resident and owner of cannabis dispensaries commented, “...the fighting spirit to survive... is a natural characteristic of people who live in a remote desert town like Blythe”. The City leadership’s work to address “...the financial hardships are just the latest in a string of challenges residents will rise to overcome....When the chips are down, Blythe survives.” He added: “Welcoming new industries, like cannabis, is one way the city has to continue to adapt to remain vital...the next step could be music and the arts, marketing Blythe as a town where people can live cheaply and have the freedom to explore new ventures and ideas.”

Several other residents interviewed for the article expressed similar feelings about their lives in the City. The Chamber of Commerce describes the community spirit as...

“SMALL TOWN, BIG HEART” - “SMALL TOWN, BIG FUN”

Grand Jury members, who had an opportunity to talk with residents, heard some of their concerns about the future. They expressed some concern that the City Council is not listening to them, although no complaints have been submitted. A consistent comment was that they want Blythe to maintain a small town character.

This is a good story in the making. The Grand Jury commends the City of Blythe’s leadership for its continuing drive toward economic resiliency and for refusing to give up on the City’s future.

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FINDINGS

F1: A formal long-term strategic plan is needed to “guide the City’s budgetary decision-making and address long-term needs to achieve financial stability”. Blythe, in its Corrective Action Plan submitted to the State Auditor, acknowledged and agreed to develop the plan by the end of June 2023. This has not been completed.

F2: A five-year strategic plan, as recommended by the State Auditor, can be a separate plan, or a part of the ‘long term strategic plan’, referenced in F1. The plan is to define the City’s priorities, goals, and expected outcomes. It has not been developed.

F3: The position of City Manager has remained unfilled. The City’s administration is currently headed by an Interim City Manager, who is also the City Clerk. .

F4: According to the Independent Auditor’s Report (2023), there were no findings or issues with the City’s internal control and financial compliance. The City’s General Fund has improved “dramatically” (\$2.6 million improvement). An in-depth analysis of the General Fund since 2008 shows significant progress, specifically over the last 3-4 years. *“You are to be commended for that. You still have work to do, but have made significant progress”*.⁶⁵ However, two significant liabilities related to government pension obligations and Other Post-Employment Benefits were noted. These are impacted by factors not within the City’s control (i.e., interest rates). The auditors expressed continued doubt about the City as a ‘going concern’, which has existed since 2008, and believe it will probably continue for “some time”.

F5: Currently, according to Blythe airport staff, there is plenty of capacity for the storage of private planes, but no availability of plane rentals for pilots who cannot afford their own.

F6: In their report, the professor and students of Brown University did not include specific data on how much the prison closure will cost the economy, except to emphasize that it will be significant. Determining the financial impact on the economy will require more research and resources. The studies are conducted at no cost to the City; funding is through the University, the Urban Institute and the Justice Labs of America.

F7: There will need to be further conversations with legislators on how the City will be able to recover after the prison closure. Those conversations will require the services provided by the lobbying firm, Joe A. Gonsalves & Son.

F8: Blythe’s city government believes that the County needs to make more of a commitment to Blythe. The County has, however, been an active participant in the campaign to keep Chuckawalla Valley State Prison open.

F9: Blythe’s leadership has been responsive to new economic possibilities, notably cannabis cultivation, manufacturing & distribution, and electric vehicle charging stations.



RECOMMENDATIONS

R1: Develop a long-term strategic plan, as recommended by the State Auditor. The plan is to guide the City's budgetary decision-making, to address the long-term needs to achieve financial stability following the closing of Chuckawalla Valley State Prison, and to chart a path for improving its status as a 'going concern'. Plan is to be completed and included in the City's response to this report by end of September 2024.

Based on Findings 1, 2 & 4

Financial Impact: No incremental costs

R2: Develop a five-year strategic plan, as recommended by the State Auditor, to define the City's priorities, goals, and expected outcomes, based on the findings of the Retail Strategies project and the Blythe Economic Resiliency study. Plan is to be completed and included in the City's response to this report by end of September 2024.

Based on Findings 1, 2 & 4

Financial Impact: No incremental costs

R3: The City of Blythe should be clear as to its intention to hire a fulltime City Manager. If it is to hire, the Grand Jury recommends that a deadline be established no later than year-end 2024, following the adoption of a long-term strategic plan. The new city manager will be accountable for implementation of the City's long-term and strategic objectives, as defined in R1 & R2.

Based on Finding 3

Financial Impact: \$200k - \$250k (annual total compensation)

R4: The Riverside County Office of Economic Development should develop a plan and present it to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors by year end 2024, in conjunction with the Blythe Airport management team, to attract businesses engaged in the storage and rental of small aircraft.

Based on Finding 5

Financial Impact: No incremental costs

R5: Blythe should accept that Chuckawalla Valley State Prison will close, as currently scheduled, and change its focus to developing a strategy by year end 2024 for what Blythe can do to negotiate financial support from the State. The City should continue to work with the professor from Brown University, the Urban Institute, and the Justice Labs of America to conduct further research to make clear the socio-economic impact on the City.

Based on Finding 6

Financial Impact: No incremental costs

R6: The agreement with Joe A. Gonsalves and Son lobbying firm has a term of one year with a total compensation of \$50,000. The City should amend the agreement for an additional year.

Based on Finding 7

Financial Impact: \$100,000

R7: Riverside County should negotiate with the State for assistance in mitigating the negative economic impacts anticipated by the closure of CVSP, by developing implementation plans to work

directly with community leaders to support workers affected by loss of jobs, and to create an economic resilience plan for the community. Implementation plans to be presented to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors no later than year-end 2024.

Based on Finding 8

Financial Impact: No incremental costs

R8: The City and the County’s Office of Economic Development should continue to seek out new economic opportunities, like renewal energy projects, that are consistent with the preservation of Blythe’s small-town appeal. A General Plan describing their vision for those efforts should be presented to the Blythe City Council and the Riverside County Board of Supervisors by year end 2024.

Based on Finding 9

Financial Impact: No incremental costs

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REQUIRED RESPONSES

The following responses are required pursuant to Penal Codes §933 and §933.05:

- City Council, City of Blythe: R1, R2, R3, R5, R6, R8
- Board of Supervisors: R4, R5, R7, R8

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INVITED RESPONSES

- Interim City Manager: R1, R2, R3, R5, R6, R8
- Director, Office of Economic Development: R4, R8
- Director, Riverside County Aviation Division: R4



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