

# Opinion: Bay Area's fast train to Wasco

By Joe Mathews

Dear Bay Area,

Welcome to Wasco.



Joe Mathews

You may never have heard of this city of 25,000 in the San Joaquin Valley. You probably can't pronounce it (it's WAW-skoh).

But you and Wasco share a future.

You could be connected—at least temporarily—by the most expensive infrastructure project in state history.

Your Wasco connection is a byproduct of problems with high-speed rail's first phase from San Francisco to Los Angeles. The financial and engineering challenges of tunneling the Tehachapi Mountains have delayed construction to L.A. And the project is short by \$2 billion to build it to Bakersfield, the hometown of U.S. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a fierce opponent of funding high-speed rail.

Unless the money materializes, high-speed rail will start by connecting the Silicon Valley to the Central Valley—from San Jose to a temporary station in Wasco, a little northwest of

Bakersfield.

Wasco might seem too small to play such a big transportation role. But when you visit, I hope you'll agree with me that a fast train from America's wealthiest metropolitan area to the best darn town in northern Kern County is kismet.

Wasco will be ready for Bay Area arrivals. The town is expert at processing heavy volumes of visitors; the Wasco State Prison, which accounts for about 5,000 of the town's population, is a "reception center" for people entering the state prison system. You can start preparing for your visit by listening to country songs, from Merle Haggard's "Radiator Man from Wasco" to Jaime Wyatt's "Wasco," about picking up her boyfriend from prison.

This time of year, you'll be greeted in Wasco by spectacular views of coastal mountains to the west, Sierra to the east, and blossoming almond trees. If you arrive hungry, you'll find stick-to-your-ribs options you might not see in San Francisco. Head first to Hoyett's Sandwich Shop, a centerpiece of Wasco life since 1948, with terrific char burgers and chili. If Hoyett's is closed, it's a short stroll to Teresa's for chile verde or to La Canasta for shrimp cocktail.

Bring your bike, Bay Area types: the city is adding lanes. Or walk: Wasco's new meandering sidewalks make the city more pedestrian-friendly. While Uber and Lyft won't work here, the city's Dial-A-Ride service will take you anywhere within Wasco's 9.4-square-mile city limits for \$1.75, and outside town—paved roads only, please—for \$2.

No stop in Wasco is complete without a visit to the Wasco Union High School auditorium. No joke. The 1928 Renaissance Revival auditorium, one of California's most beautiful buildings, is on the National Register of Historic Places. And Wasco is great at putting on special events, like the spectacular Festival of Roses in September. But for Bay Area

types, the best thing about Wasco may be the slower pace. The local parks are large and leafy. During hot valley summers, you can pay \$1 and swim all day in the public pool. And you can take your pets to Wasco without worry. The local vet is trusted by animal owners all over the southern San Joaquin Valley.

If you need a hotel, the best bet is the new Best Western on Highway 46. Or maybe you could rent a place from well-to-do locals who spend weekends in cabins in the Greenhorn Mountains.

If you decide to settle in, for just \$189,000, you can buy a terrific four-bedroom, two-bath home with a two-car garage and, according to the listing, a driveway large enough for an RV.

Wasco's central location also makes it a great starting point for trips around the region. In the Wasco vicinity, you can watch drag strip racing in Famoso, raft the Kern River, or rent a houseboat on Lake Success. You can even hire a limo to take you to Paso Robles wine country.

Wasco has a very different economy from San Francisco's, but you'll see lots of solar panels and a start-up, Sweetwater Technology Resources, that develops ways to clean water from the oil industry. And if you're one of those stalwarts of Bay Area politics, drop by the Wasco City Hall, where the City Council boasts a higher percentage of ethnic minorities than the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

At the council, you'll discover one irony about the potential Bay-to-Wasco connection: The city officially opposes high-speed rail because of concerns that businesses in its path, like the almond processor SunnyGem, will be forced to relocate.

But perhaps things will work out, and you Bay Area folks will soon be dancing at Mr. and Mrs. Nightclub. When you step

outside for some air, you'll see how the lights on Wasco's beautiful water tower change color with the seasons. The tower bears the city logo, featuring a rose and Wasco's welcoming motto, one big enough for all California:

"Grow With Us."

All aboard,

Joe Mathews

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