

Planning for High-Speed Rail in an Exurban City:
A Comparative Analysis of Community and City
Perspectives in Palmdale, California

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Introduction

California’s High-Speed Rail (CAHSR) program is the largest transportation infrastructure investment in the state’s history and is expected to reshape mobility, land use, and economic development. As the system expands beyond major metropolitan hubs, it enters exurban communities characterized by low-density, auto-oriented development, constrained transit, and limited planning capacity. Palmdale, a planned CAHSR station city in northern Los Angeles County, represents this context and serves as the study area for this project.

Exurban communities are less prepared to capture the economic and social benefits of high-speed rail compared to larger metropolitan cities. Existing state planning guidelines are broad and may not fully address the unique conditions of these communities, creating gaps between statewide objectives and local implementation capacity. While prior research has focused on major metropolitan regions, less attention has been given to how high-speed rail impacts exurban cities.

This project compares City and community perspectives to examine how CAHSR is understood and planned in an exurban context using Palmdale as a case study. Using semi-structured interviews with community members and City staff, the study explores perceptions of project awareness, development potential, transportation access, and equity within the future station area. A comparative analysis identifies key gaps between participants and informs recommendations for more context-sensitive implementation strategies.

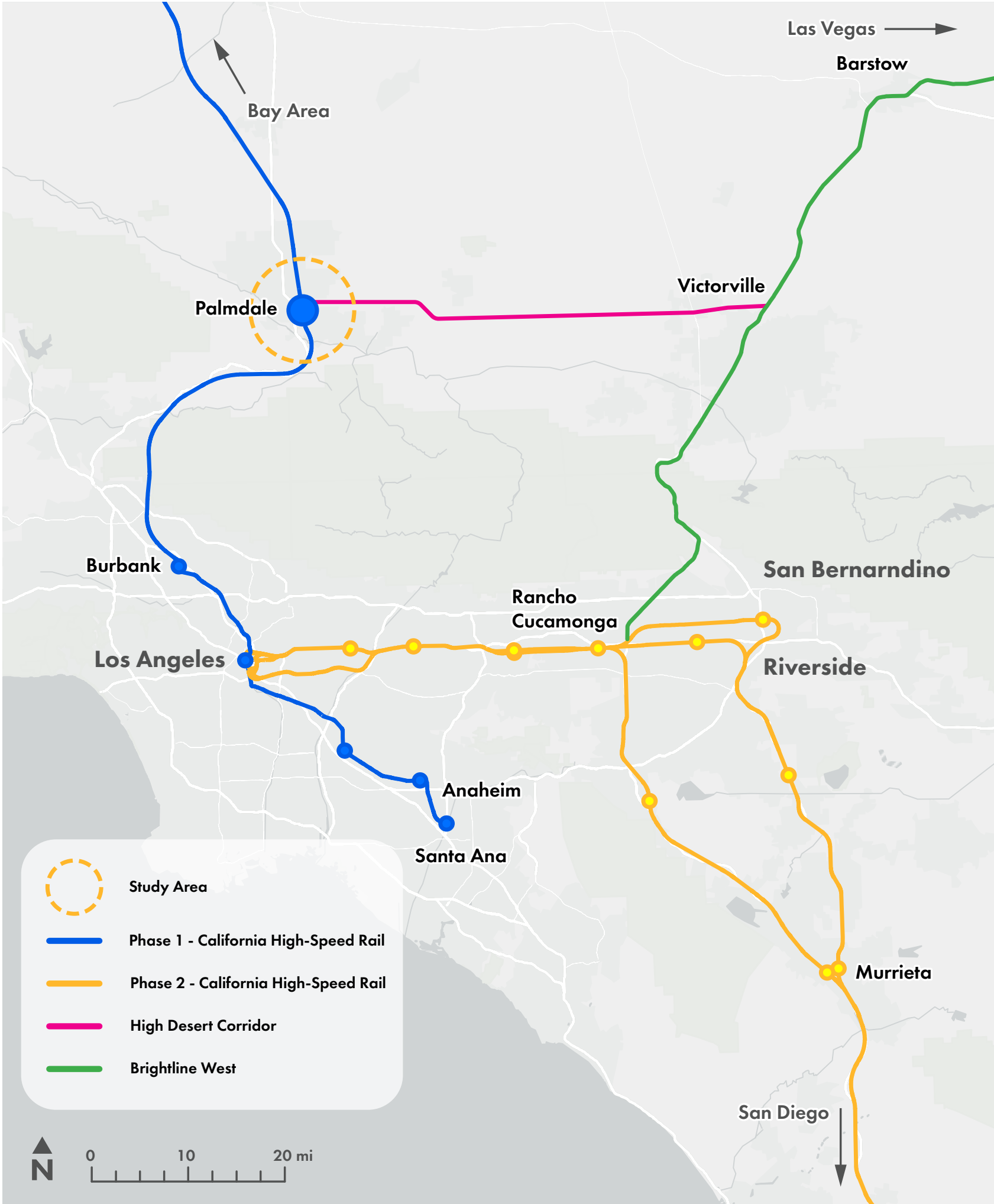
Study Area

- Palmdale, CA
- Exurban city in northern Los Angeles County
 - Low-density, auto-oriented development
 - Planned CAHSR station expected to serve as a major regional node
 - Phase 1 segment projected to connect Palmdale and Burbank in approximately 13 minutes
 - 35% of residents commute more than 2 hours round trip daily

Demographics

- Total Population: 167,987
- Hispanic Population: 61%
- Median Household Income: \$70,858
- Bachelor’s Degree or Higher: 16%

US Census Bureau (2021), American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates



Palmdale Transit Station Area Plan

- Palmdale Station Area Plan Boundary

High-Speed Rail Station 1/2 mile Buffer

Proposed Palmdale HSR Station

Metrolink Stations

City Halls

Libraries

Public Schools

Fire Station

Police Station
- Business Mix

General Urban

Open Space

Public Facilities

Regional Commercial

Traditional Neighborhood

Urban Center

Urban Core

Methodology

- Approach: Qualitative, semi-structured interviews
- Participants: City of Palmdale staff and community members
- Interview Topics: Awareness, Development, Transportation, and Equity
- Additional City Topic: Implementation
- Format: 15–30 minute interviews conducted in-person, by Zoom, or by phone
- Analysis: Responses were organized into a comparative matrix to identify shared themes and gaps

Comparative Framework

Responses were organized into a comparative matrix to identify similarities and gaps in how the CAHSR project is understood, experienced, and planned by City and community participants.

Domain		Local Politician	Non-Profit Organization	Community Health Worker	Resident	City Planner
Awareness	Familiarity	High	Low	Low	Medium	Mixed public awareness; residents referred to CHSRA for project information
	Suggestions	Outreach at community meetings and direct community engagement	Information sharing between non-profits and the City	Highway signage, social media, and e-blasts	City magazine, social media, and AV Scanner outreach	
Development	Expectations	Development and tourism growth	Development opportunities	Jobs, businesses and stronger connection to Los Angeles	Jobs, improved mobility and station as local destination	More mixed-use development, jobs, and regional connections
	Concerns	Rural communities may be overlooked	Homelessness	Construction traffic and congestion	Homelessness and displacement	Uncertainty and timing make planning difficult
Transportation	Priorities	Improve AVTA service	More AVTA stops and service	Reliable and frequent public transit	Improvements to Metrolink service	Regional transit coordination (AVTA, Metrolink, Metro) and park-and-ride access
Equity	Benefits	Benefits concentrated in Palmdale and Lancaster	Increased access to resources outside of the Antelope Valley	Economic opportunities for low-income residents without a vehicle	Diverse job opportunities and economic activity	Economic benefits for entire Antelope Valley
	Concerns	Rural communities may be overlooked	Noise, housing pressures, and displacement of nearby residents	Traffic, congestion, and ticket affordability	Homelessness, safety, displacement, and wildlife impacts.	Displacement impacts on nearby residents and businesses.
Implementation	Challenges	–	–	–	–	Palmdale Transit Area Specific Plan guides preparation efforts amid timing and planning uncertainty.
Recommendations to Decision Makers		Consult communities before decisions	Prioritize directly affected residents	Expand community involvement	Increase outreach and public awareness	–

Findings

- Public awareness of the HSR project is uneven across the community, with awareness largely dependent on direct contact with the City or individual efforts to seek out information. As a result, less-engaged residents are more likely to have limited awareness of the project.
- Both City and community participants identified job creation and improved mobility as key potential benefits of the project for the Antelope Valley region.
- Participants emphasized that the success of the CAHSR station is closely tied to strong local and regional transit connections, particularly improved AVTA and Metrolink service integration.
- City and community participants expressed concerns about potential urban impacts associated with the project, including displacement and homelessness.
- City representatives identified timing and coordination with regional agencies as key implementation challenges, while community members from rural and peripheral areas expressed feeling excluded from planning efforts.

Recommendations

- Expand Community-Centered Outreach

 - Conduct recurring in-person engagement
 - Partner with community-based organizations
 - Provide updates in multiple formats (bilingual, digital, in-person)
- Leverage Economic Benefits to Build Public Support

 - Highlight jobs and mobility in outreach
 - Prioritize local hiring and workforce development
 - Support small businesses in station planning
- Improve Transit Connectivity & Access

 - Increase AVTA and Metrolink service frequency and coverage
 - Improve safety on key corridors (Ave Q, Palmdale Blvd)
- Plan for Equity & Displacement Risks

 - Conduct displacement risk assessment
 - Integrate affordable housing strategies
 - Explore tenant protections
 - Provide transparent impact information
- Strengthen Local Advocacy & Coordination

 - Advocate for CAHSR technical support
 - Push for place-specific engagement
 - Expand outreach to rural communities