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MEMORANDUM

TO: Cochise County Planning and Zoning Commission
FROM: Matthew Taylor, AICP, Planning Manager
FOR: Christine McLachlan, AICP, Director
SUBJECT: SU26-04 (Winchester III Solar)
DATE: April 8, 2026

Docket SU26-04 (Winchester III Solar)

A Special Use Authorization request to allow a 200 MW Solar Energy Power Plant with 800 MWh Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) west of Willcox. Project components include ground-mounted arrays of solar PV modules on single-axis tracking systems; BESS (enclosed integrated battery container systems); electrical collection systems, including switchgear, inverters, transformers, and collection lines; infrastructure such as perimeter fencing, internal access roads, and access driveways and gates; and, remotely operated meteorological stations. The project will use a phased development approach with construction timelines estimated at 12-18 months. The final product is wholesale electric energy with the integrated BESS storing and dispatching power to enhance grid reliability and optimize energy delivery.

I. DESCRIPTION OF SUBJECT PARCEL AND SURROUNDING USES

Applicant: Winchester Solar III, LLC
Location: Airport/Permenter Roads (Willcox)
APN: 209-86-010B, 016E, 016F, 016G, and 016H
Property Size: ~1250 acres
Zoning: RU-4
Plan Designation: Rural
Growth Area: D - Rural
Existing Use: Undeveloped with miscellaneous vacated structures
Proposed Use: SEPP w/BESS

Surrounding Zoning and Uses

North	RU-4	Undeveloped
South	RU-4	Undeveloped, Residential
East	RU-4	Undeveloped, Residential
West	RU-4	Undeveloped, Residential

II. SITE HISTORY

- Undeveloped and assessed as vacant and/or agriculture

III. SPECIAL USE AUTHORIZATION REQUEST

The applicant requests a Special Use Authorization request to allow a utility-scale solar facility with battery storage system. The proposed site is adjacent to the previously approved Winchester I/II solar project currently under construction near Interstate 10 and U.S. 191 west of Willcox (SU23-11, approved May 10, 2023).

IV. ANALYSIS OF IMPACTS – COMPLIANCE WITH SPECIAL USE FACTORS

Section 2.48.160 of the Zoning Regulations identifies ten (10) factors to evaluate Special Use applications. These factors determine the suitability of a special use request, whether to recommend approval, and to determine if conditions and/or modifications are needed to mitigate potentially negative impacts on surrounding properties. With the information provided, all ten (10) factors apply to this special use request with all applicable factors complying or partially complying with conditions:

1. Compliance with Duly Adopted Plans: Complies

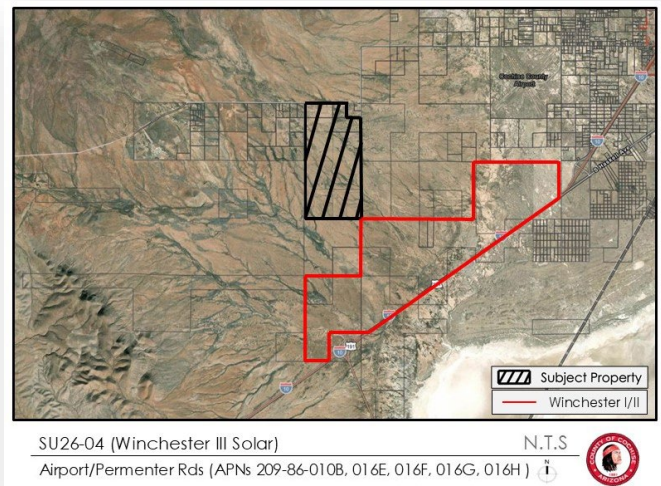
All five parcels within the proposed project site total about 1,250 acres and are designated “Rural” by the Comprehensive Plan, falling within Growth Area D (Rural Areas). Existing RU-4 zoning is consistent with rural Plan designations, and renewable energy projects, including utility-scale solar, continue to be encouraged (Chapter 5, Energy Element).

The Energy Element of the newly adopted Comprehensive Plan (CP 2045) promotes energy system resilience that supports economic growth, protects the environment, and enhances the well-being of County residents. Cochise County continues to have strong renewable energy development potential, and the Plan identifies strategies for efficient energy use, encouraging renewable and reliable energy services throughout the County.

2. Compliance with the Zoning District Purpose: Complies

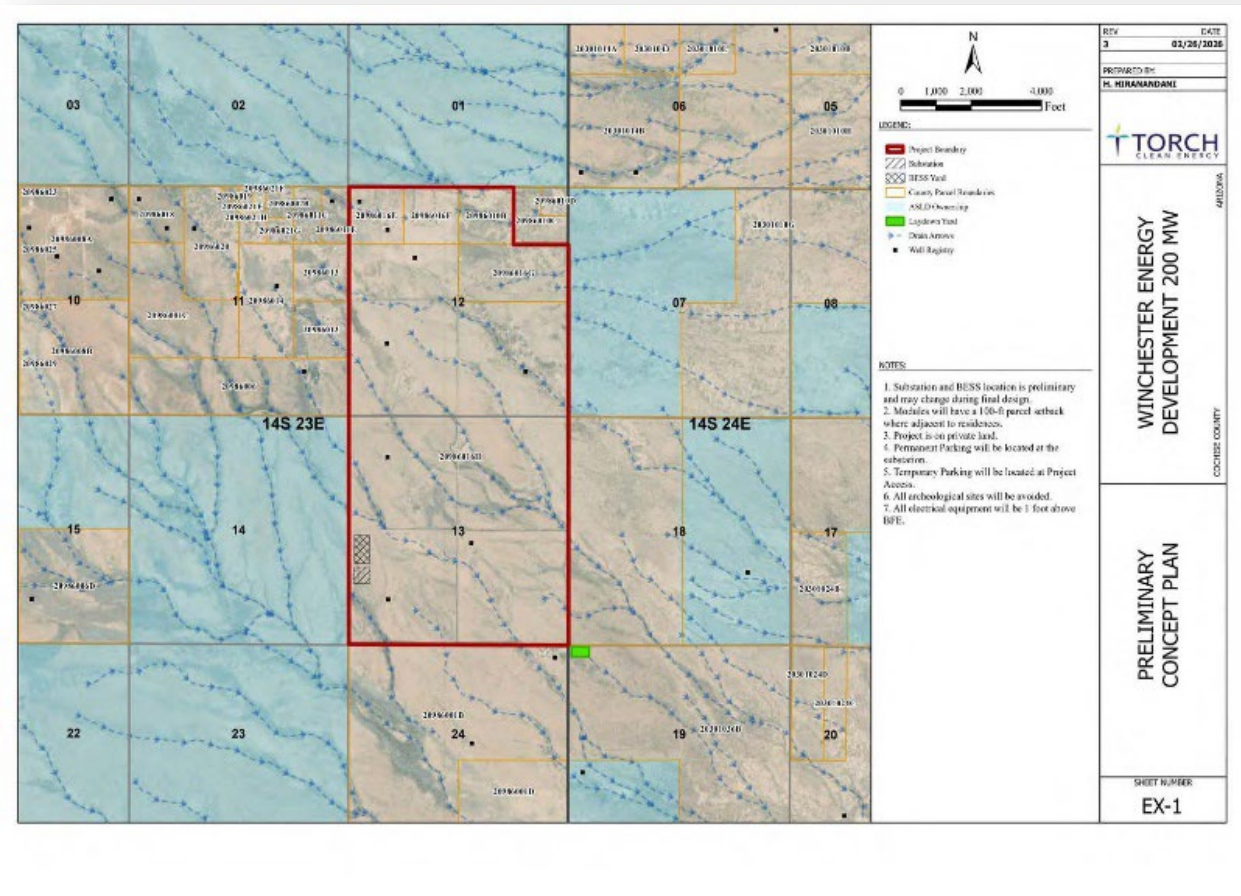
Rural districts, which range in site area from 2 acres to 36 acres, allow residential and non-residential uses compatible with an area’s rural character. Section 2.15 (*Rural Zoning Districts*) of the zoning regulations identifies zoning district purpose and permitted use within the rural zoning classification and identifies uses that would otherwise be inappropriate in more populated areas but can be viable in rural areas with enhanced development standards or use restrictions to mitigate potential off-site impacts.

Solar energy power plants are permitted by right in industrial districts and approved planned developments but require special use approval in general business and rural districts. Additional standards applicable to solar projects are found in Section 2.51 (*Site Development Standards – Solar Energy Power Plants*) which or supplement or supersede base zoning district standards. Section 2.51 standards include design standards, project transfer or sale, use cessation, and decommissioning and site restoration.



3. Development Along Major Streets: Complies w/Conditions

A County right-of-way (ROW) permit is on file for a hard surface apron along Airport Road, a Minor Collector road maintained by the County, for access to the Winchester I/II utility-scale project to the south (approved, SU23-11). Construction and delivery traffic exits Airport Road to Parcel 016E which is part of the project area for the proposed Winchester III project. Traffic turns east and enter Permenter Drive about ¼ mile south of Airport Road. Direct connectivity from Airport Road will not be authorized by the County due to south to west turn at Permenter Road.



4. Traffic Circulation: Complies w/Conditions

This Special Use Authorization factor stipulates:

1. The request is consistent with the preservation of the functions of surrounding streets as defined in the County Comprehensive Plan.
2. The request does not result in the use of any residential street for non-residential traffic.
3. Consideration of future circulation needs in the surrounding area has been considered through right-of-way dedication and off-site improvements if warranted.

The Winchester I/II project is currently under construction and access to the site is from Airport Road. The construction road runs south through Parcel 016E then east along the south property line of Parcel 016F to an easement along the south edges of Parcels 010B and 209-86-010C to Permenter Road, approximately ¼ mile south of Airport Road. Direct access to Permenter from Airport Road is not

permitted by the County and there is an existing residence at the southwest corner of these two roads. A County right-of-way permit is on file for a hard surface apron along Airport Road.

5. Adequate Services and Infrastructure: Complies

The project area has multiple wells and is within the Sulphur Springs Valley Electric Cooperative (SSVEC) service area. The Winchester I/II solar facility project is under construction immediately to the south and neither the approved nor proposed Winchester projects are within a fire district. The nearest fire station is located within the City of Willcox about 9 miles from the project area (290 W. Rex Allen Drive). The nearest fire district is Sunsites-Pearce (nearest district station is 29 miles to the south at 6 Havasu Way).

6. Significant Site Development Standards: Complies

Development standards contained in Section 2.15 of the Zoning Regulations applies to RU-4 zoned parcels regardless of use. The subject property totals about 20 acres and is developed with a residence and accessory structures, and the applicant also owns adjacent properties to the north, and west. The RU-4 zoning district has numerous development standards such as building size and height, lot coverage, and setbacks (*Section 2.15 of the Zoning Regulations*) and the property’s growth area category includes additional development standards related to improved parking and driveways, screening, and landscaping (*Section 2.51*).

<u>STANDARD</u>	<u>REQUIREMENT</u>	<u>PROPOSED</u>	<u>COMPLIES</u>
Parcel Size	4 acres (Section 2.15)	1,250 (Five tax parcels)	Yes
Setbacks	40’ (Section 2.51, requires twice that of zoning district)	Proposed 100’. BESS and substation location is adjacent to State Trust Land and may change at final design.	Yes
Height	30’ (Section 2.15), 20’ panel height at maximum tilt (Section 2.51)	10’-12’	Yes
Lot Coverage	25% (Section 2.15), 0% (Section 2.51)	Not identified	Yes
Distance Between Structures	15’ (Section 2.15), 0’ (Section 2.51)	See conditions	Yes
Groundcover	Planted, established, and maintained for life of project with vegetated perennial ground cover	See conditions	Yes
Power and Transmission Lines	On-site utility, transmission, and communication lines shall be buried where feasible; interconnection with transmission system may be overhead	Required	Yes
Fencing	Wildlife friendly fencing standards to the greatest extent possible. AZGFD recommends a 6”-8” gap between the bottom of site fencing and ground surface for small ground animal permeability.	Required	Yes

7. Public Input: Complies

Section 2.48.160 of the Zoning Regulations states, “If public concerns have been raised, it is fair to ask if the applicant has made a reasonable effort to address these concerns through the Citizen Review Process.” The applicant mailed notices to property owners within ½ mile on February 27, 2026, and has made direct contact with property owners within the vicinity.

8. Hazardous Materials: Complies

The applicant states that hazardous materials are not proposed; however, solar panels contain potentially toxic materials such as lead and cadmium. While PV panels themselves are not necessarily harmful, damage due to natural events can damage panels and result in release of chemicals. Routine monitoring, maintenance, and potential replacement is required to ensure damaged panels are quickly replaced.

9. Off-Site Impacts: Complies w/Conditions

This factor is intended to ensure adequate measures are taken to mitigate off-site impacts such as noise, outdoor lighting, odors, smoke, traffic, and dust. As an energy collection site with limited activity after operation, many typical off-site impacts resulting from human activity will occur during construction and not after the site becomes operational:

- Noise: Once the facility becomes operational, significant noise or vibration is unlikely. Noise, vibration, and other offsite impacts such as dust and traffic will occur.
- Lighting: Solar energy projects are not typically light intensive beyond safety and security lighting, which is subject to brightness and shielding standards for all properties within the county per Section 2.45 of the Zoning Regulations. Portable lighting will be used in cases of required maintenance performed at night
- Odors and Smoke: Odors are unlikely once the facility becomes operational. During construction, a significant number of vehicles will travel to and from the site, potentially generating odors and smoke and other possible off-site impacts (noise, dust).
- Parking: Permanent parking areas are not required as there are no habitable building proposed but is provided at the substation location near the southwest corner of the project site. Temporary parking will be located at the access point. Water and/or compounds will be used to reduce construction dust and manage post-operational dust along with vegetative groundcover.
- Landscaping: Landscaping is not required in Growth Area D and is not required by the applicant; however, staff recommends vegetative groundcover and soil compaction to reduce dust and erosion.
- Traffic: Construction and delivery traffic to the Winchester I/II project south of the proposed Winchester III site uses direct access from Airport Road through project properties that connect with Permenter Road about ¼ mile south of Airport Road. The County issued a ROW permit for this access point and will consider additional access if requested, including a direct route from Airport to Permenter.

A Biological Evaluation and Avian Impact Study have been prepared and included with the application. The applicant has contacted both the Fish and Wildlife Service and Arizona Game and Fish (AZGFD) incorporating recommendations into project design, timing, and implementation of mitigation measures. Additionally, visual simulations are being prepared to illustrate potential impacts on viewsheds.

10. Water Conservation: Complies

County water conservation requirements apply to non-residential uses and properties. Section 2.51.170 of the zoning regulations requires water saving strategies such as low-flow fixtures, and applicable water conservation regulations and policies identified in the zoning regulations and comprehensive plan are typically identified at permitting. Water will be used for dust control during construction and additional use is probable for dust control and maintenance after the facility is operational.

V. PUBLIC COMMENT

Staff mailed notices to property owners within ½ mile, published legal notice, and posted the property March 18-20, 2026.

VI. WAIVERS

The is not requesting waiver from applicable development standards.



VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The applicant requests special use authorization for a utility-scale solar energy power plant with battery energy storage system. As submitted, the special use request complies or partially complies with applicable factors identified in the Zoning Regulations.

Factors in Favor of Approval

1. Complies with applicable factors.
2. Renewable energy projects are encouraged by the Comprehensive Plan.
3. Low water land use within the Willcox Active Management Area (AMA).
4. Utility-scale solar energy plants place limited demand on local services and infrastructure, generating minimal traffic and water use when operational.
5. Utility-scale solar energy plants enhance grid reliability and supports future load growth.
6. Winchester III is in the immediate vicinity of Winchester I/II projects.

Factors Against Approval

1. Fugitive dust generated during construction.
2. Natural view obstruction for nearby residents.
3. Biological and wildlife concerns.

4. Opposition from a nearby property owner.

VIII. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the factors in favor of approval, staff recommends approval of Docket SU26-04 to allow a Solar Energy Power Plant with Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) with the following conditions:

1. An Emergency Management Plan is required at permitting. The Plan shall include documentation confirming subscription service agreement(s) with responding Fire Departments/Districts that provide annual site visit access for grounds review and facility relevant training activities and resources. Plans shall be updated a minimum of every five (5) years.
2. Update existing Traffic Management Plan for the Winchester I/II project to incorporate the Winchester III solar project, including site access, roadway improvements and restrictions, and dust control measures.
3. All project components including photovoltaic (PV) arrays shall be set back a minimum of 100 feet from all perimeter property lines. Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) shall maintain a minimum setback of 1,000 feet from existing residential dwellings and residentially zoned property, and a minimum setback of 100 feet from adjacent properties held by Winchester Solar LLC.
4. The project owner shall maintain the project site with perennial vegetative groundcover and noncompacted soils. Where grading is not required during project construction, any existing vegetation will be mowed rather than removed completely.
5. The project owner shall exclusively use PV panels with an anti-reflectivity coating that is integral to the panel.
6. All panels shall be regularly inspected and continuously maintained by the project owner. Any broken or damaged panels shall be properly and safely removed in a timely manner from the site.
7. To reduce the optical illusion of water that closely spaced panels can create, the project shall be designed with no less than a 12' distance between all tracker rows.
8. The project owner shall submit a completed wetland delineation, confirmed by USACE prior to commercial permit issuance, if applicable. Wetland features shall be avoided except where crossings are needed for roads and cables.
9. Project owner shall conduct baseline soil testing prior to issuance of building permits to document existing site conditions. Post-construction, soil testing shall be conducted at year one (1) and every five (5) years thereafter for the life of the project to evaluate potential leaching impacts to soils and groundwater. Results shall be submitted to the County within 60 days of each sampling event.
10. To the extent feasible, non-fenced, wildlife corridors within project boundaries shall be reserved near washes or in areas determined by the AZGFD to be appropriate for a wildlife highway crossing.
11. Incorporate Arizona Game and Fish best management practices including:
 - a. Utilize bird diverters and near-ultraviolet light Avian Collision Avoidance Systems (ACAS) for new above ground power lines;
 - b. Implement post-construction monitoring to assess avian injuries and fatalities resulting from "lake effect" conditions caused by PV arrays;
 - c. Conduct western burrowing owl occupancy surveys prior to final project design using an AZGFD certified surveyor;
 - d. Conduct nesting bird surveys prior to vegetation removal and construction activities that occur during breeding season;
 - e. Coordinate with AZGFD to incorporate open corridors across the project area to facilitate wildlife movement;
 - f. Maintain 200' setbacks from ephemeral washes and ¼ mile setbacks from perennial waters, if applicable;
 - g. Reserve a 6"–8" gap between the ground surface and the bottom of perimeter fencing;
 - h. Conduct minimal grading to retain habitat features underneath PV arrays;

- i. Relocate wildlife encountered during project activities no more than ¼ mile out of harm's way;
 - j. Ensure crew coordination to minimize the number of open holes or trenches at any given time;
 - k. Use minimum amount of light needed for safety, including motion sensing lighting and warm, narrow spectrum lighting (amber, orange, red);
 - l. Comply with Arizona Native Plant Law and wash and/or decontaminate equipment to minimize the introduction or spread of invasive species;
 - m. Revegetate disturbed areas with native, drought-tolerant species representative of the natural surrounding landscape.
12. Within 30 days of approval of the Special Use, the applicant shall provide the County a signed Acceptance of Conditions form and a Waiver of Claims form arising from ARS Section 12-1134. Prior to operation of the Special Use, the applicant shall apply for a building/use permit for the project within 12 months of approval. The building/use permit shall include a site plan in substantial conformance with the approved special use concept plan, the completed Special Use permit questionnaire and application, and appropriate fees. A permit must be issued within 18 months of approval or within time limits specified by the Planning and Zoning Commission.
 13. It is the applicant's responsibility to obtain any additional permits, or meet any additional Conditions, that may apply to the proposed use pursuant to other federal, state, or local laws or regulations.
 14. Any changes to the approved Special Use will be considered a Modification to this Special Use and may require re-hearing before the Planning and Zoning Commission.

Sample Motion

I move to approve Docket SU26-04 with conditions recommended by staff, the factors in favor of approval constituting the findings of fact.