

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE COCHISE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
WORK SESSION HELD ON
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 21, 2025**

A work session of the Cochise County Board of Supervisors was held on Tuesday, October 21, 2025, at 1:00 p.m. in the Board of Supervisors' Hearing Room, 1415 Melody Lane, Building G, Bisbee, Arizona.

Present: Frank Antenori, Chairman; Kathleen L. Gomez, Supervisor

Absent: Tom Crosby, Vice-Chairman

Staff Present: Sharon Gilman, County Administrator
Joe Casey, Deputy County Administrator
Dylan Hendel, Civil Deputy County Attorney
Lara Loewenheim, Clerk of the Board

Attendees: Christine McLachlan, Development Services Director
Kim DePew, Chairman Planning and Zoning
Robert Montgomery, Vice-Chairman Planning and Zoning

Chairman Antenori called the meeting to order at 1:05 p.m.

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

Board of Supervisors

1. Discussion and possible direction regarding the Cochise County Comprehensive Plan.

Christine McLachlan, Development Services Director, presented this item using a PowerPoint presentation. Ms. McLachlan presented the Cochise County Comprehensive Plan 2045, outlining goals for sustainable growth that preserve the county's character while promoting economic diversity, infrastructure resilience, and inclusive services. She noted that with a slow annual growth rate of 0.27%, the county can carefully shape its development based on community priorities like housing, water, and rural preservation.

Ms. McLachlan stated the land use strategy promotes smart growth by developing near existing infrastructure, supporting industry and tourism, expanding solar energy, and preserving rural character and natural beauty. Ms. McLachlan stated the circulation element focuses on improving transportation through preserving rail corridors, enhancing airports, supporting bike and pedestrian routes, and ensuring transit access for all residents. She stated the water and energy elements address groundwater dependence, conservation, and a transition toward sustainable, renewable energy to balance growth and environmental protection.

Ms. McLachlan explained that the optional elements cover public services, housing, and economic development to support quality of life and sustainable growth. She stated public services focus on coordinated, efficient, and accessible emergency, health, and community services. She stated housing policies address affordability, energy efficiency, and revitalization through targeted programs. She stated economic development

emphasizes strengthening key industries while expanding opportunities in film, broadband, and cross-border trade.

Ms. McLachlan outlined the next steps for the draft plan review process. She stated the Planning and Zoning Commission will revisit the plan on November 12 to discuss it in detail and may authorize posting it online for a 60-day public and agency review. She stated there would be two public hearings, one with the commission and one with the Board of Supervisors before final adoption.

The Board and staff discussed adding Douglas to the growth overview as the county's second-largest city. Chairman Antenori raised a concern about overreliance on government jobs and the need to diversify the economy into agriculture, energy, and other private sectors. The Board and staff discussed large-scale solar and wind projects for low efficiency, environmental disruption, and local impact, favoring natural gas and nuclear energy instead. Ms. McLachlan stated policy guidance in the draft includes support for small-scale, high-density energy solutions like gas turbines and nuclear power to meet future needs.

The Board expressed concern over large-scale solar and wind, favoring decentralized installations and exploring small modular nuclear reactors and gas turbines as efficient alternatives. The Board discussed engaging energy companies, the Department of Energy, and federal committees to advance these smaller-scale nuclear projects in the western grid.

The Board clarified that small modular nuclear reactors are feasible for Cochise County, using liquid cooling with minimal water and recycled resources. The Board stated natural gas remains attractive due to existing infrastructure, but expressed interest in pursuing a small nuclear plant.

The Board and staff focused on the new commercial port of entry as a major trade opportunity for minerals, semiconductors, and cattle. The Board suggested reopening rail lines with Union Pacific could ease highway traffic and support an inland port in Benson for container transfers, but enhancing trade infrastructure remains a priority.

The Board and staff discussed creating a historic train route around the county to boost tourism and the local economy. The Board stated private funding could support the project, using existing infrastructure and linking to Mexican trade. The Board raised concerns about port authority oversight, transparency, and control of trade flows.

Randal Limbaugh, Planning and Zoning Commissioner, raised concerns about the energy element in the plan. He argued that "sustainable" alone emphasizes renewables while traditional energy sources like natural gas, coal, and nuclear should also be included. He noted that renewable projects bring limited local benefit, can harm the landscape, and lack disaster mitigation plans. He supported greater emphasis on the port of entry for its potential economic impact.

The Board and staff discussed nuclear energy as a potential power source. The Board and staff stated a small nuclear reactor, like those used in submarines, could provide decades of clean energy without harming the local environment. Chairman Antenori noted that such reactors could also desalinate deep saltwater basins, providing an alternative water source.

The Board and staff discussed the efficiency of modern commercial nuclear reactors, including fuel recycling and minimal waste. Chairman Antenori discussed the need for large amounts of electricity that was emphasized to support data centers and other

online infrastructure, with self-contained cooling recommended reducing water use.

In response to the Board, Ms. McLachlan explained that existing area plans were adopted between 1998 and 2006 and are unevenly distributed and outdated. She recommended the shift toward regional community profiles covering the entire county. She stated the profiles would provide historical and cultural context, along with land use, infrastructure, and environmental considerations for each area. She stated the current plans would remain part of the comprehensive plan until the new profiles are developed and added as an appendix.

Supervisor Gomez supported regional profiles covering all areas, noting boundaries should make sense geographically. She raised a concern about city annexation of high-value properties, which affects infrastructure and tax revenue. She stated paving new roads can trigger annexation, shifting responsibility and costs. She stated large unincorporated areas, like Cochise College, remain without clear authority for services such as fire protection.

The Board and staff discussed gaps in fire coverage across the county, noting areas like Cochise College and unincorporated communities lack reliable service. Chairman Antenori suggested a countywide fire department to provide uniform coverage, reduce volunteer burden, and support growth by improving insurance availability. He stated consolidation could lower costs, streamline procurement, and offer strategic placement of stations. He stated challenges include pensions, budget impact, and inter-district coordination, but the initiative was seen as necessary to enable economic development and attract new construction.

The Board and staff discussed the Pollutant 10 (PM10) nonattainment designation in Douglas, which likely originates from historical smelter operations and the lime plant. Jackie Watkins, Engineering and Natural Resources Director, stated the designation remains active under the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality and affects land use planning, including the new commercial port and industrial growth. The Board noted the need to follow up on the timeline and effectiveness of mitigation efforts.

Supervisor Gomez asked about the term “culture” on page 50, which referred to viticulture and the local wine industry. She noted recent liquor license approvals support this sector. She suggested expanding policy language to strengthen cross-border trade and partnerships with Sonora and Chihuahua. She requested to focus on areas including agriculture, cattle, mining, and medical tourism, highlighting opportunities in health services and holistic care.

Chairman Antenori highlighted that only 38% of the county’s population is in primary wage-earning years, with 23% under 20 and the remainder older. He stressed this limits local revenue generation and causes young people to leave for jobs elsewhere. He stated the aging population is less adaptable, making economic growth urgent. He linked population trends to state-shared revenue and warned that without action, the county risks losing economic competitiveness.

Supervisor Gomez clarified that Cochise County owns two airports, Cochise County Airport in Willcox and Bisbee/Douglas International (BDI) and noted it can handle the largest commercial planes, which is a rare advantage for imports from Mexico. Supervisor Gomez raised questions about water boundaries versus aquifers, with Bisbee drawing from the San Pedro rather than the Douglas Basin. She emphasized that Bisbee should make its own growth decisions but not dictate policies for Douglas, McNeal, or Elfrida. She stated regional planning must recognize each community’s distinct direction and economic priorities.

The Board and staff discussed efforts to expand a hospital district to better serve Douglas, noting population size and grant eligibility advantages over Bisbee. Supervisor Gomez stated that establishing a hospital aligns with economic growth goals, supports the community, and could attract residents who previously avoided Douglas due to lack of healthcare. Ms. McLachlan stated the proposal would integrate into the public services and facilities element of the comprehensive plan, alongside fire and other districts.

Supervisor Gomez discussed opportunity zones, noting Douglas is included and receives associated tax incentives. Supervisor Gomez suggested exploring additional zones and updating page 131 to specify industries that could benefit from border trade and port activity. She stated that would make economic development language more actionable and targeted.

Ms. McLachlan explained the process adopting the Comprehensive Plan involves at least two public hearings after a 60-day review, followed by Planning and Zoning Commission recommendation and final Board adoption via resolution. Ms. McLachlan encouraged Board members to review the plan, submit suggestions, and highlighted that changes based on today's comments will be clearly marked in the next presentation.

Chairman Antenori adjourned the meeting at 2:31 p.m.

APPROVED:

Frank Antenori, Chairman

ATTEST:

Lara Loewenheim, Clerk of the Board