

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE COCHISE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
WORK SESSION HELD ON
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2026**

A work session of the Cochise County Board of Supervisors was held on Wednesday, February 11, 2026, at 2:00 p.m. in the Board of Supervisors' Hearing Room, 1415 Melody Lane, Building G, Bisbee, Arizona.

Present: Frank Antenori, Chairman; Tom Crosby, Vice-Chairman; Kathleen L. Gomez, Supervisor

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

Attendees: Christine McLachlan, Development Services Director
Daniel Duchon, Emergency Management Director
Kim DePew, Planning and Zoning Commissioner, District 1
Neil Tucker, Planning and Zoning Commission, District 2
Frank Ambriz, Planning and Zoning Commission, District 2
Robert Montgomery, Planning and Zoning Commission, District 1
Randall Limbach, Planning and Zoning Commission, District 1

Chairman Antenori called the meeting to order at 2:00 p.m.

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

Board of Supervisors

1. Discussion and possible direction regarding Solar Energy Power Plants (SEPPs) in Cochise County at 2:00 p.m., followed by discussion and possible direction regarding Data Centers in Cochise County at 3:00 p.m.

Chairman Antenori stated the meeting would focus on solar development and data centers, noting increasing industry interest and emphasizing recent technological improvements that address prior environmental and water-use concerns. He stated Cochise County is facing slow economic growth, an aging population, and declining state shared revenue due in part to the incorporation of San Tan Valley, creating financial pressure on essential services. Chairman Antenori emphasized that while state law prevents banning such projects, the Board must consider responsible zoning safeguards to generate revenue, protect quality of life, and sustain core county services without raising taxes.

Supervisor Gomez stated that while economic development is necessary, the Board is not composed of technical experts on large-scale solar farms or data centers and should seek qualified professionals to present clear, factual pros and cons. Supervisor Gomez emphasized the importance of proceeding carefully in the early stages, keeping an open mind, and grounding decisions in objective information rather than emotion.

Chairman Antenori agreed that expert input and full transparency will guide the process, stating that industry representatives and other knowledgeable individuals will brief the Board publicly before any decisions are made.

Christine McLachlan, Development Services Director, presented this item using a PowerPoint presentation. Ms. McLachlan introduced the work session as an informational review of utility-scale solar development, focusing specifically on the county's land use authority, zoning tools, and regulatory limits rather than technical grid or engineering matters handled by state and federal agencies. She outlined why interest remains strong in Cochise County, citing high solar demand, available land, and sunshine, while also detailing both benefits such as tax revenue, limited service demand, and groundwater compatibility. Ms. McLachlan reviewed current zoning regulations, permitting processes, required studies, and best practices to clarify existing safeguards and identify potential policy direction for the Board moving forward.

The Board discussed whether soil testing is currently required for solar farms in Cochise County and confirmed that it has not been mandated to date. Ms. McLachlan clarified that while soil testing is not presently required, the existing zoning authority allows the county to request and condition future projects to include testing before, during, or after development at specified intervals.

The Board and staff reviewed existing zoning standards for utility-scale solar, including setbacks, height limits, ground cover requirements, wildlife-friendly fencing, and decommissioning plans with updated financial assurances every five years. The Board raised concerns about enforcement of prior conditions, including landscaping commitments on an existing project, and whether compliance is adequately monitored and enforced. Ms. McLachlan acknowledged that while permitting compliance is reviewed, additional safeguards and clearer enforcement mechanisms could be incorporated into future zoning updates.

Ms. McLachlan stated that solar projects are subject to enforceable, site-specific conditions and must align with the county's comprehensive plan, which emphasizes careful siting, resource protection, and potential use of zoning overlays for clearer guidance. She also presented a financial comparison showing that large-scale solar facilities can generate significantly higher long-term tax revenue for the county than undeveloped rangeland, primarily through centrally valued equipment.

The Board discussed how state law grants large property tax reductions on raw land used for solar, while fully taxing infrastructure, creating higher tax density on smaller acreage compared to traditional agricultural uses that generate limited revenue.

Vice-Chairman Crosby delivered remarks outlining how production subsidies reduce costs for producers without guaranteeing lower prices for consumers, arguing that suppliers have little incentive to pass savings on when market demand remains unchanged. He further contended that subsidies and hidden production taxes disproportionately burden middle-income households, asserting that such policies ultimately shift costs onto taxpayers while increasing profits for industrial producers.

Ms. McLachlan explained that the map identifies approved and constructed solar projects, including those with battery storage, and raised concerns about project concentration, cumulative impacts, and equity considerations.

Chairman Antenori emphasized the need to assess the worst-case environmental impact of solar farms and ensure bonds fully cover remediation costs from day one. He also suggested calculating future remediation expenses with a time value of money approach

so the bond grows over time or is supplemented annually by the developer.

The Board and staff discussed that while current solar codes address many concerns, there are gaps in long-term bond adjustments, environmental protections, and fire safety planning that need more robust oversight. The Board emphasized the importance of yearly bond adjustments, proper liners and runoff systems, and detailed fire plans to prevent contamination and manage risks. The Board raised fire safety, equipment spacing, and integrating lessons from other counties, as well as the potential for solar farms to be abandoned if small modular reactors come online, emphasizing the need for mechanisms to protect taxpayers.

Chairman Antenori explained that new natural gas turbines being planned in the county are air-cooled and don't use water, offering clean electricity for certain data centers. He stated some data centers near the pipelines won't need solar, while others in remote areas will rely on solar or future nuclear, so the Board needs to identify suitable "middle of nowhere" sites and continue discussions before the next meeting.

Ms. McLachlan presented item 2 by PowerPoint presentation. Ms. McLachlan explained that the county is proposing a zoning text amendment for data centers to establish clear definitions, location standards, and site development requirements before any applications are submitted, emphasizing that public input will be considered but cannot block proposals. She stated the ordinance aims to ensure compatibility with surrounding land uses, adequate infrastructure, fire protection, environmental safeguards, and long-term site management while requiring special use authorization and detailed operational plans. Ms. McLachlan highlighted key safeguards, including limits on potable water use, fire protection measures, and decommissioning plans, with financial assurance triggered only if a facility is abandoned. She presented two policy options: the first one will allow the planning commission as decision-maker with appeals to the Board. The second will allow the Board to be the final decision-maker, with the commission providing recommendations.

Ms. McLachlan stated the ordinance sets standards for data centers including zoning limits, utility and fire safeguards, water conservation, and decommissioning accountability, with staff seeking policy direction before two scheduled public hearings.

The Board and staff discussed inviting prospective data center companies to present their designs and business plans, so everyone has full information, using lessons from other counties to set reasonable conditions. The Board emphasized that impacts on fire districts, roads, and public services must be calculated in advance, with companies funding necessary infrastructure and training.

In response to the Board, Ms. McLachlan stated, that the work session is an opportunity for the Board and commission to review and provide input on proposed zoning text amendments for solar and data centers, ensuring all concerns are addressed and incorporated before becoming law.

Chairman Antenori commented that large data centers could reduce water use compared to traditional agriculture, offsetting some impacts on small farmers and ranchers affected by Active Management Areas (AMAs), but noted that downstream effects like increased road traffic and infrastructure strain must be carefully considered.

Frank Ambriz, Planning and Zoning Commission, District 2, stated that local farmers feel disadvantaged because their water rights and land were overlooked, and recent elections and expansions undermined longstanding water stewardship and conservation efforts in the community.

The Board and staff discussed balancing economic development with protection of local agriculture, water resources, and community character, acknowledging both benefits and risks of projects like data centers. The Board emphasized the need for clear, reasonable regulations that protect taxpayers while allowing revenue-generating industry to help stabilize county finances.

Chairman Antenori adjourned the meeting at 3:39 p.m.

APPROVED:

Frank Antenori, Chairman

ATTEST:

Lara Loewenheim, Clerk of the Board