

COUNTY OF INYO PLANNING COMMISSION

MINUTES OF SEPTEMBER 23, 2026 MEETING

COMMISSIONERS:

HOWARD LEHWALD
CAITLIN (KATE) J. MORLEY
TODD VOGEL
CALLIE PEEK
AARON CASSELL

FIRST DISTRICT
SECOND DISTRICT (CHAIR)
THIRD DISTRICT
FOURTH DISTRICT (VICE)
FIFTH DISTRICT

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MIKE ERRANTE

PLANNING DIRECTOR
ASSISTANT COUNTY COUNSEL
ASSOCIATE PLANNER
SENIOR PLANNER
ASSISTANT PLANNER
PROJECT COORDINATOR
INTERIM COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR
PUBLIC WORKS DIRECTOR

The Inyo County Planning Commission met in regular session on Wednesday, September 23, 2026. Commissioner Morley opened the meeting at 10:00 a.m. These minutes are to be considered for approval by the Planning Commission at their next scheduled meeting.

ITEM 1: **PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE** – All recited the Pledge of Allegiance at 10:01 a.m.

ITEM 2: **ROLL CALL** - Commissioners Todd Vogel, Callie Peek, Aaron Cassell, and Kate Morley, were present.

Staff present: Cathreen Richards, Planning Director, Ryan Standridge, Associate Planner, and Christian Milovich, Assistant County Counsel.

Staff absent: Denelle Carrington, Interim County Administrator; Michael Errante, Public Works Director.

ITEM 3: **PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD** – This item provides the opportunity for the public to address the Planning Commission on any planning subject that is not scheduled on the agenda.

Chair Morley opened Public Comment Period at 10:03 a.m. and explained that members of the public could address the Commission regarding matters not otherwise scheduled on the agenda. Chair Morley requested that comments concerning Items 6 and 7 be held until those items were heard.

Chair Morley asked if there was anyone in the audience wishing to make a public comment.

No comments were made.

Chair Morley closed Public Comment Period at 10:03 a.m.

firehouse resulted from outreach conducted with the Charleston View community regarding benefits residents believed would be appropriate for the area.

For Region 2, the developer agreed to provide \$500,000, prior to issuance of a building or grading permit, toward completing the environmental review required to implement the existing Charleston View Community Plan. Ms. Simon explained that a community planning process had previously been completed for Charleston View, but the plan had not been implemented because the necessary environmental review had not been completed. Any portion of the \$500,000 remaining after completion of the environmental review would not be returned to the developer and could instead be used for road signage and firefighting supplies and equipment.

Ms. Simon also discussed changes to the agreements made after publication of the Planning Commission packet. She explained that State law currently provides a property tax exclusion applicable to solar energy systems and that the exclusion is scheduled to sunset January 1, 2027. The REDAs include provisions addressing the possibility that the exclusion could be extended or reenacted. If an applicable exclusion prevents collection of property tax otherwise attributable to the project, the developer agreed to make an in-lieu payment intended to make the County and other affected taxing jurisdictions whole.

Ms. Simon further explained that the developer agreed to take all necessary steps to allocate sales and use taxes paid in connection with project construction to Inyo County to the maximum extent permitted by law and to require its contractors and subcontractors to do the same.

Ms. Richards then provided an overview of the Bonanza Peak Solar Project. The proposed project consists of an approximately 500-megawatt photovoltaic solar energy facility on approximately 2,400 acres within the Charleston View Solar Energy Development Area.

Ms. Richards explained that the project would include photovoltaic panels, power conversion systems consisting of inverters and medium-voltage transformers, an underground electrical collection system, a high-voltage substation, operations and maintenance facilities, a power plant control and monitoring system, communications infrastructure, security fencing, and perimeter and interior access roads.

The project also includes an approximately nine-mile-long, 230-kV generation tie line. Approximately one-half mile of the generation tie line would be located on the project site in Inyo County, with the remainder crossing BLM-administered land in Nevada and connecting to the Trout Canyon Substation.

Ms. Richards explained that the County's Renewable Energy General Plan Amendment establishes development limits for the County's Solar Energy Development Areas. If the Bonanza Peak project is approved as proposed, it would utilize the full 500-megawatt development allowance shared by the Charleston View and Sandy Valley Solar Energy Development Areas, and no additional utility- or commercial-scale solar development would be available under that allocation.

Ms. Richards reviewed public outreach associated with the project. The applicant began outreach in April 2024 by sending information to residents and property owners in the

to use remaining Region 2 funds for firefighting equipment and supplies after completion of the Charleston View Community Plan environmental review.

A Commissioner asked about the project's proposed water source and whether existing wells were located on the project site.

The applicant stated that approximately six wells exist on the property, several of which have not been used for an extended period. The applicant stated that it may be more practical to drill a new well rather than rehabilitate some of the older wells and that the applicant was also exploring contracts with industrial-scale water suppliers as another potential source of construction water.

Following Commission questions, Chair Morley opened the public hearing. Chair Morley explained that comments received would be recorded and forwarded to the Board of Supervisors.

Public Comment

An applicant representative responded to earlier questions concerning where electricity generated by the project would go. The representative explained that electricity flows through the interconnected electrical grid based upon system conditions and that the project would connect to the Trout Canyon Substation, which, although located in Nevada, is interconnected with the California Independent System Operator (CAISO) system.

Laura identified herself as the California Director for Western Watersheds Project and stated that she had previously commented on the County's Renewable Energy General Plan Amendment.

She stated that she would have preferred greater reliance on distributed and rooftop solar rather than utility-scale solar development and expressed concern that utility-scale renewable energy development was being concentrated in remote areas of Inyo County.

She stated that she was involved in commenting on and opposing several large utility-scale solar projects proposed across the Nevada border in the southern Pahrump Valley and described those areas as federally threatened desert tortoise habitat.

Laura Cunningham expressed concern regarding cumulative groundwater impacts. She stated that groundwater issues in the Pahrump Valley are significant and expressed concern about the Bonanza Peak project's anticipated use of more than 1,000 acre-feet of construction water in an already overdrafted basin. She stated that residents in Pahrump have had to deepen wells and questioned how the project's groundwater contingency measures would address those conditions.

She also expressed concern regarding fossil resources, rare plants, desert tortoise habitat, and the overall landscape of the southern Pahrump Valley. She described the area as environmentally and visually significant and stated that people outside Charleston View also have an interest in protecting the area.

Kevin Emmerich identified himself as representing Basin and Range Watch and stated that his organization had followed renewable energy projects in the area for several years.

Mr. Helmer expressed concern that previous studies and analyses of the Old Spanish Trail corridor were not adequately considered in the project's cultural resource analysis.

Mr. Helmer requested preparation of an EIR so that site-specific impacts could be more fully evaluated, the public could participate in the environmental review process, and potential mitigation measures could be considered.

Lynn Bolton identified herself as a resident of Lee Vining and Conservation Chair for the Range of Light Group of the Sierra Club, which covers Inyo and Mono Counties.

Ms. Bolton stated that she had been following and commenting on solar projects in the Pahrump Valley as well as other environmental issues throughout the region. She acknowledged that public meetings had been conducted in Tecopa, Shoshone, and Charleston View but stated that those communities do not represent everyone who has an interest in the Charleston View area.

Ms. Bolton stated that she had visited and photographed Charleston View and described the area as a creosote ecosystem with views of the surrounding mountains. She stated that people who do not live immediately within Charleston View may nevertheless care about the area and its environmental resources.

Ms. Bolton expressed concern regarding public access to project information. She stated that she had heard about earlier meetings concerning the project and proposed fire station but did not have documents available to review at that time. She stated that she received project materials in connection with notice of the Planning Commission meeting and had begun reviewing them.

Ms. Bolton requested that project maps identify Tecopa Road and the Old Spanish Trail so that members of the public could better understand the relationship and distance between the proposed solar facilities, the roadway, and the historic trail.

Ms. Bolton also requested that any well used to provide project water be monitored and metered and that pumping data be reported to the Inyo County Water Department and made available to the public.

She expressed concern regarding groundwater conditions in Pahrump Valley Basin 162, stated that the basin is overdrafted, and expressed concern that without metering and reporting, the public would not know the actual amount of groundwater used during construction.

Ms. Bolton also requested additional information concerning desert tortoise populations and habitat. She expressed concern that the project area functions as a wildlife corridor and that additional solar development could further restrict desert tortoise movement in conjunction with other solar projects in the Pahrump Valley.

Ms. Bolton requested more complete environmental information and stated that a fuller CEQA review would provide the public with additional information concerning the project's environmental impacts.

Following public testimony, Chair Morley requested clarification regarding the County's CEQA process, including why the project was being reviewed through an Addendum

Commission-level informational hearing and that the next scheduled public hearing would be before the Board of Supervisors. Staff clarified that written comments could continue to be submitted prior to the Board hearing.

No action was taken by the Planning Commission on Item 6.

ITEM 7: ZONE TEXT AMENDMENT 2026-02

Planning Director Cathreen Richards introduced the item and clarified for the record that the Zone Text Amendment had incorrectly been identified as 2026-01 and should be identified as Zone Text Amendment 2026-02.

Ms. Richards explained that during review of the Bonanza Peak Solar Project, Planning identified ambiguity in Inyo County Code Section 21.20.020 regarding the types of development standards that may be modified for renewable energy projects.

Ms. Richards stated that the existing section contains a list of standards that may be modified but does not clearly identify setbacks. Staff explained that the ambiguity became relevant to the Bonanza Peak project because the project encompasses numerous individual parcels. Application of a 50-foot setback to each side of every internal parcel boundary could result in approximately 100 feet of separation between solar facilities located on adjoining parcels.

Ms. Richards explained that the proposed amendment would remove the existing itemized list and clarify that the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors may establish project-specific development standards and mitigation measures determined appropriate for a renewable energy project. Standards not specifically modified would continue to be governed by Title 18.

Commissioners discussed maintaining setbacks around the exterior project perimeter while allowing flexibility along internal parcel boundaries. Staff stated that the Bonanza Peak project would retain the applicable exterior setback and that the issue primarily involved internal parcel boundaries.

Ms. Richards explained that the amendment was intended to clarify existing authority and provide greater flexibility to address renewable energy projects on a case-by-case basis.

Chair Morley opened the public hearing.

No public comments were received.

Chair Morley closed the public hearing and returned the item to the Commission.

Commissioner Vogel moved to recommend that the Board of Supervisors approve Zone Text Amendment 2026-02 and adopt the associated ordinance based upon the findings contained in the staff report. Commissioner Peek seconded the motion.

Chair Morley called for a roll-call vote. The motion carried 4-0, with one Commissioner absent.