COUNTY OF INYO
PLANNING COMMISSION

MINUTES OF SEPTEMBER 23, 2026 MEETING

COMMISSIONERS:

HOWARD LEHWALD	FIRST DISTRICT	Inyo County Planning Commission
CAITLIN (KATE) J. MORLEY	SECOND DISTRICT (CHAIR)	Post Office Drawer L
TODD VOGEL	THIRD DISTRICT	Independence, CA 93526
CALLIE PEEK	FOURTH DISTRICT (VICE)	(760) 878-0263
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STAFF:

CATHREEN RICHARDS	PLANNING DIRECTOR
CHRISTIAN MILOVICH	ASSISTANT COUNTY COUNSEL
RYAN STANDRIDGE	ASSOCIATE PLANNER
DANIELLE VISUANO	SENIOR PLANNER
CYNTHIA DRAPER	ASSISTANT PLANNER
SALLY FAIRCLOTH	PROJECT COORDINATOR
DAVID FRASER	INTERIM COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR
MIKE ERRANTE	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.

ITEM 4: APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM THE JANUARY 28, 2026 PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING

The Commission considered the January 28, 2026 Planning Commission meeting minutes, which had previously been continued from the July 22, 2026 meeting. Commissioner Peek moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Cassell seconded the motion. The motion carried 4-0, with one Commissioners absent.

ITEM 5: APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM THE JULY 22, 2026, PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING

The Commission considered the July 22, 2026 Planning Commission meeting minutes. Commissioner Vogel moved to approve the minutes, and Commissioner Peek seconded the motion. The motion carried 4-0, with one Commissioner absent.

ITEM 6: BONANZA PEAK SOLAR PROJECT - Renewable Energy Development Agreements (REDAs) 2026-01 and 2026-02 - Informational Presentation and Public Comment

Planning Director Cathreen Richards introduced the proposed Renewable Energy Development Agreements (REDAs) associated with the Bonanza Peak Solar Project. Ms. Richards explained that the Planning Commission was not being asked to approve the REDAs because, under the Inyo County Code, the Board of Supervisors is the approval authority. She stated that the Planning Commission hearing was informational and intended to receive public comment. Comments received at the meeting, as well as written comments received prior to the Board hearing, would be provided to the Board of Supervisors for consideration.

Ms. Richards introduced Stacey Simon, County Counsel, who had assisted with the negotiation and preparation of the proposed REDAs.

Ms. Simon explained that development agreements are not frequently used in Inyo County because the County does not typically process development projects of this scale. She explained that a development agreement provides a developer with certainty regarding the local development regulations that will apply to a project during the term of the agreement. In exchange, the County may negotiate community benefits beyond those otherwise required as project mitigation.

Ms. Simon explained that two REDAs are proposed for the Bonanza Peak Solar Project, corresponding to two project regions.

For Region 1, the developer agreed to provide $2 million through the County to the Southern Inyo Fire Protection District for the planning, assessment, approval, and construction of a firehouse in Charleston View. Ms. Simon explained that the proposed 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 Charleston View area. Additional public presentations and discussions occurred in October and December 2024, with additional outreach continuing in 2025 and 2026.

Ms. Richards explained that issues raised through community outreach resulted in changes to the proposed project.

The applicant had initially proposed a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) that would allow electricity generated during daylight hours to be stored and transmitted later. Community members and the Southern Inyo Fire Protection District expressed concerns regarding lithium battery fire hazards. In response to those concerns, the applicant removed the BESS component from the proposed project.

Ms. Richards also discussed groundwater concerns raised during community outreach. She stated that the project is anticipated to use approximately 1,085 acre-feet of water during the approximately eight-month construction period. Following construction, anticipated operational water use would decline to approximately 0.5 acre-foot annually for the remainder of the project life.

In response to groundwater concerns, the applicant proposed a Voluntary Groundwater Monitoring Program during construction. Ms. Richards explained that owners of wells within approximately one-half mile of the project could request that their wells be monitored during construction. If monitoring identifies an effect on a participating well, a contingency process would be available to address the issue.

Ms. Richards discussed the environmental review for the project and explained that the County previously certified a Program Environmental Impact Report as part of the Renewable Energy General Plan Amendment (REGPA). A project-specific Addendum to the Program EIR was prepared for the Bonanza Peak Solar Project, together with applicable technical surveys and studies. She stated that the Addendum evaluates the project against the impacts, mitigation measures, and site-specific review requirements established through the REGPA Program EIR.

Ms. Richards stated that the REDAs were tentatively scheduled for consideration by the Board of Supervisors on October 27, 2026, in Tecopa, and that comments received by the Planning Commission would be included with the materials provided to the Board.

Commission Discussion

Commissioners asked how electricity generated by the project would be transmitted and whether Charleston View would directly receive electricity generated by the facility.

Staff explained that electricity generated by the facility would enter the larger electrical grid and could not simply be designated for delivery directly to Charleston View.

Commissioners discussed the relationship between the project's 500-megawatt capacity and the development allowance established for Charleston View and Sandy Valley. Staff clarified that the areas share the 500-megawatt allocation and that development of the Bonanza Peak project at its proposed capacity would use the available allocation.

Commissioners also asked questions regarding the proposed Charleston View fire station, including whether funding would provide for equipment in addition to construction of the facility. Staff and County Counsel discussed the allocation of REDA funds and the ability

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 Cunninghan 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. Emmerich discussed transmission infrastructure in the Pahrump Valley and stated that an existing transmission line was being upgraded from 230 kV to 500 kV. He stated that approximately eight solar projects were active or proposed in the Pahrump Valley in connection with increased transmission capacity.

Mr. Emmerich discussed cumulative groundwater use associated with the proposed solar projects. He stated that when the construction water requirements of the various projects are considered together, the total could approach approximately 6,500 acre-feet. He stated that the basin is already over drafted and asked the County to consider cumulative groundwater impacts rather than evaluating the Bonanza Peak project in isolation.

Mr. Emmerich also discussed cumulative impacts to desert tortoise habitat. He stated that approximately 20,000 acres of solar development are proposed on the Nevada side of the Pahrump Valley and referenced Bureau of Land Management analysis concerning fragmentation of desert tortoise habitat. He expressed concern that development of all of the proposed projects could substantially fragment habitat and affect the continued presence of desert tortoise in the area.

Mr. Emmerich stated that impacts from utility-scale solar projects are not temporary and that projects of this size permanently alter the landscape despite mitigation measures.

He also expressed concern regarding the project's proximity to the Old Spanish National Historic Trail, potential visual impacts to the historic trail, and impacts to Charleston View residents whose properties could be surrounded by solar development.

Bill Helmer discussed the adequacy of the environmental review and requested preparation of an Environmental Impact Report rather than reliance on an Addendum.

Mr. Helmer stated that his concern regarding preparation of an EIR was separate from the proposed development agreement and community benefits, including the proposed fire station. He emphasized that the CEQA process provides the public an opportunity to understand a project's environmental effects, provide information, and comment on potential impacts and mitigation.

Mr. Helmer specifically discussed the Old Spanish National Historic Trail. He stated that he was a member of an organization associated with the trail, had previously worked for the National Park Service, participated in the trail feasibility study beginning in approximately 1998, and had personally hiked approximately 350 miles of the trail, including through the Charleston View area.

Mr. Helmer expressed concern that the Addendum and supporting cultural resource analysis did not adequately address site-specific impacts to the Old Spanish Trail. He stated that the trail should not be evaluated solely as a narrow line on a map but as a broader historic **corridor**. He referenced previous National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and California Energy Commission studies that he stated recognized the broader historic landscape associated with the trail.

Mr. Helmer stated that the Bonanza Peak Solar Project is located within that historic corridor and expressed concern that the cultural resource analysis relied in part on the physical distance between the project and the mapped trail alignment in determining impacts. He stated that the trail should be evaluated as a historic resource and cultural landscape rather than solely as an archaeological resource.

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 over drafted, 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 rather than a new EIR and under what circumstances additional environmental review would be required.

Robert Eckerton of HELIX Environmental Planning, the County's environmental consultant for the Bonanza Peak Solar Project, addressed the Commission.

Mr. Eckerton explained that the Charleston View Solar Energy Development Area was specifically evaluated as part of the Program Environmental Impact Report prepared for the Renewable Energy General Plan Amendment. He explained that CEQA provides for tiering and streamlining from a program-level environmental document when a subsequent project is consistent with the program previously evaluated.

Mr. Eckerton explained that the project-specific Addendum compares the Bonanza Peak Solar Project with the impacts and mitigation measures analyzed in the REGPA Program EIR. He stated that the analysis examines whether the project would result in a new impact, substantially increase a previously identified impact, or require mitigation not contemplated by the Program EIR.

Mr. Eckerton stated that if the site-specific analysis identified an impact outside the environmental envelope evaluated by the REGPA Program EIR, the County could not continue processing the project through an Addendum and a higher level of environmental review, such as a subsequent or focused EIR, would be required.

Mr. Eckerton stated that site-specific technical analysis had been conducted for the environmental topic areas addressed by the REGPA Program EIR and that the Addendum was supported by numerous technical studies. He stated that the County's preliminary determination was that the Bonanza Peak Solar Project fits within the environmental impact envelope previously evaluated by the REGPA Program EIR and that further CEQA analysis was therefore not required.

Staff stated that the Addendum and supporting technical studies were available on the County's website.

Chair Morley asked whether the explanation addressed the questions raised concerning the CEQA process.

Following the discussion, Chair Morley asked whether any additional members of the public wished to comment. No additional comments were received.

Chair Morley closed the public hearing.

Chair Morley stated that the Planning Commission would not take action on the REDAs because the hearing was informational. She stated that the Commission had received the public testimony and written comments and that the comments would be forwarded to the Board of Supervisors.

Staff reiterated that the Board of Supervisors hearing was tentatively scheduled for October 27, 2026, in Tecopa and encouraged members of the public to submit comments in writing and participate in the Board hearing.

A member of the public asked whether another hearing would occur before the October 27 Board hearing. Staff explained that the Planning Commission hearing was the 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.

ITEM 8. COMMISSIONERS' REPORT/COMMENTS

Commissioners discussed opportunities for Planning Commissioner training and attendance at planning-related conferences.
Discussion included prior training experiences and whether future County budgets could include funding specifically for Commissioner training or conference attendance. Commissioners noted that training could be particularly beneficial to newly appointed Commissioners in understanding their roles and responsibilities.

No action was taken.

ITEM 9. DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Planning Director Cathreen Richards discussed scheduling the next Planning Commission meeting in consideration of the October 27, 2026 Board of Supervisors meeting in Tecopa and County Counsel availability.

Ms. Richards and the Commission discussed retaining the regularly scheduled October 28, 2026 meeting date but changing the meeting time from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.
The next Planning Commission meeting was scheduled for October 28, 2026, at 2:00 p.m., subject to confirmation of County Counsel availability.

ADJOURNMENT

Commissioner Peek moved to adjourn the meeting. Commissioner Vogel seconded the motion. The motion carried 4-0, with One Commissioner absent.

Chair Morley adjourned the meeting at 11:45 a.m.

Prepared by:
Ryan Standridge
Planning Department