

Sun Ridge Arizona Solar Commission Simulation

Scenario Overview:

The community of Sun Ridge, Arizona—a rural, economically diverse area—is facing a crossroads. With extreme heat waves and rising utility costs, local leaders are exploring a large-scale solar energy project that could provide clean, low-cost power to the community. However, while a solar farm seems like a step forward, it comes with significant political, environmental, and logistical hurdles.

Sun Ridge sits in an ecologically sensitive desert area. Concerns include water use for cleaning panels, impacts on native species and tribal lands, and debates over land rights. Meanwhile, economic inequality persists: many low-income residents can't currently afford home solar installations or electric vehicle transitions.

The newly elected State Energy Commissioner has convened a Solar Development Commission to decide how to proceed with public investment. Should the community move forward with a partnership that would get the project up and running on an expedited timeline? Or should the plan shift to one that includes local tribes and tribal land? How should jobs, land use, and power distribution be handled to ensure equity and sustainability?

The Decision at Hand:

The Commissioner has called this five-party commission to decide the path forward for a \$30 million fund and establish a roadmap for building a large-scale solar farm outside Sun Ridge. It was tentatively decided to move forward with the project in partnership with a local real estate developer, Mesa Real Estate, to site the project on land they already own. Concerns were raised about how this project was decided and the lack of community input has been criticized in the local media and by many in the community.

The real estate developer, Mesa Real Estate, has been excluded from this commission due to the concerns about how their role in the project was decided and their potential outsized influence in the community. The Commissioner will act as facilitator but is also a voting stakeholder. The group must come to a consensus or strong majority agreement by the end of the simulation to secure funding from the state legislature.

Options include:

- 1. Real Estate Developer Solar Farm Partnership**
- 2. Tribal-Led Solar Development Zone**

3. **Environmental Mitigation and Land Study**
4. **Local Job Training and Transition Program**
5. **Energy Credit Subsidies for Low-Income Residents**

Stakeholder Teams:

Each team receives private goals and concerns. Stakeholders may include:

- **State Energy Commissioner** (Facilitator and key swing vote)
- **Tribal Land Representative**
- **Renewable Energy Company Executive**
- **Environmental Advocacy Group Director**
- **Local Business and Resident Coalition Leader**

Proposed Initiatives:

1. **Real Estate Developer Solar Farm Partnership (\$18M–\$24M)**
Partner with a local real estate developer, Mesa Real Estate, to develop a 150 MW solar farm. Offers clean power to 30,000 homes, but needs major environmental review. Water-intensive cleaning may be restricted.
2. **Tribal-Led Solar Development Zone (\$15M–\$20M)**
A regional solar initiative led by tribal nations. Empowers local communities and respects sovereign land. Could create lasting local jobs and infrastructure. Legal and political hurdles exist. Water-intensive cleaning may be less restricted as laws on tribal lands are technically less restrictive.
3. **Environmental Study & Mitigation Fund (\$4M–\$8M)**
Addresses habitat preservation for desert tortoises and other endangered species. Studies stormwater runoff, glare impact, and long-term soil degradation. Required for permitting process.

4. Job Training and Energy Sector Transition Program (\$4M–\$6M)

Creates solar technician and maintenance training in partnership with state colleges. Priority given to local residents and coal industry workers transitioning from shuttered plants.

5. Low-Income Energy Subsidy Program (\$2M–\$4M)

Offers monthly credits to low-income households for solar-sourced electricity. Addresses energy equity but limited in scope without widespread infrastructure.

Simulation Logistics:

- Five parties must negotiate how to allocate the \$30 million budget to get this project over the finish line in a way that satisfies all the major community stakeholders who need to sign off on the project.
- Any three-party agreement is binding if it includes the Commissioner.
- Unanimous agreement is preferable.
- Stakeholders may propose hybrid solutions or packages.

Debrief Questions:

1. What were the biggest challenges to consensus?
2. How did economic vs. environmental values show up in negotiation?
3. Were stakeholders able to identify win-win compromises?
4. What role did justice, sovereignty, and equity play in your strategy?
5. Which solutions seemed most scalable or politically feasible?

ROLE C - Environmental Advocacy Group Director – Confidential Instructions

You are the Executive Director of “Protect the Sonoran,” a well-respected environmental nonprofit. You care deeply about climate action and support renewable energy but have seen too many solar farms turn deserts into dust bowls. You want to emphasize that climate change is not the only environmental consideration that needs to be taken into account. Your group is data-driven, vocal, and used to challenging both public and private institutions.

You believe solar can work—but only if it’s smart, ecologically sound, and transparent. You also have a strong relationship with younger activists and older wealthy donors in the community.

You are not from the Sun Ridge area, but accepted this Executive Director position after your successful tenure at a similar environmental nonprofit in Texas. You have felt some pushback from locals who may see you as an outsider trying to impose outsider values on a place you don’t have a history with.

Your Priorities:

1. **Environmental Mitigation Fund** – Non-negotiable. Must include a full biological study, dust mitigation, and land use impact plan. You estimate this will extend the project timeline by about six months whether the group decides to go forward with the real estate developer partnership or the tribal-led zone.
2. **Job Training Program** – Aligns with climate justice values. A workforce trained in sustainable energy builds long-term capacity.
3. **Tribal-Led Zone** – Tribes often do better conservation work than corporations. You support this model, especially if it includes mitigation standards.
4. **Subsidies** – Helps the energy transition. You’re okay with this, especially if rooftop solar is included.
5. **Real Estate Developer Partnership** – Highly skeptical. You need binding environmental protections or you’ll campaign against it.

You Must:

- Ensure environmental standards are included in any development.
- Avoid greenwashing.

- Be prepared to walk unless Option 1 is part of the package.

Confidential Tip: You have media contacts and public support. Leverage public pressure subtly if sidelined. You're open to compromise, but only with mitigation built into any deal.