

The Data Center Storm

Understanding the Big Tech Buildout
and How to Fight Back

Alli Finn, AI Now Institute

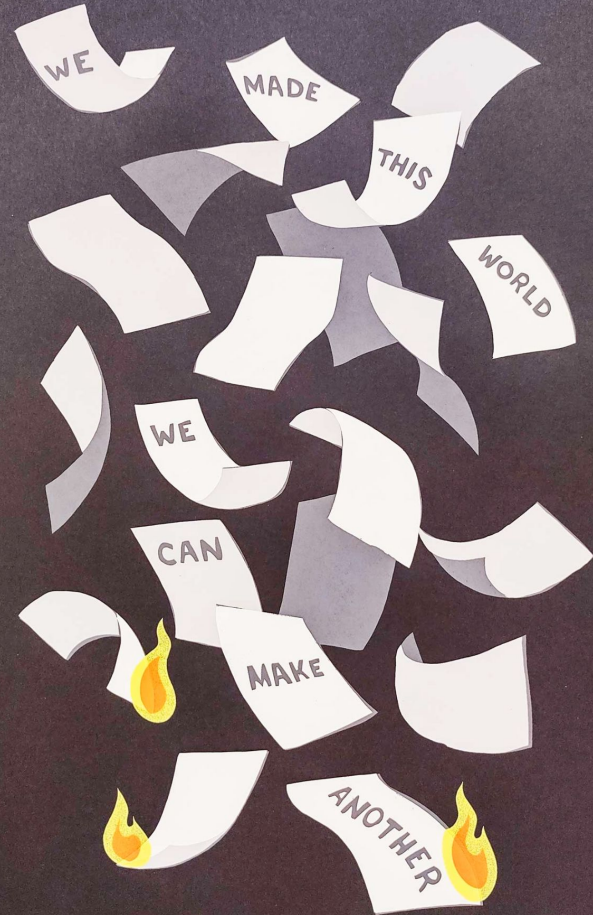
April 2026

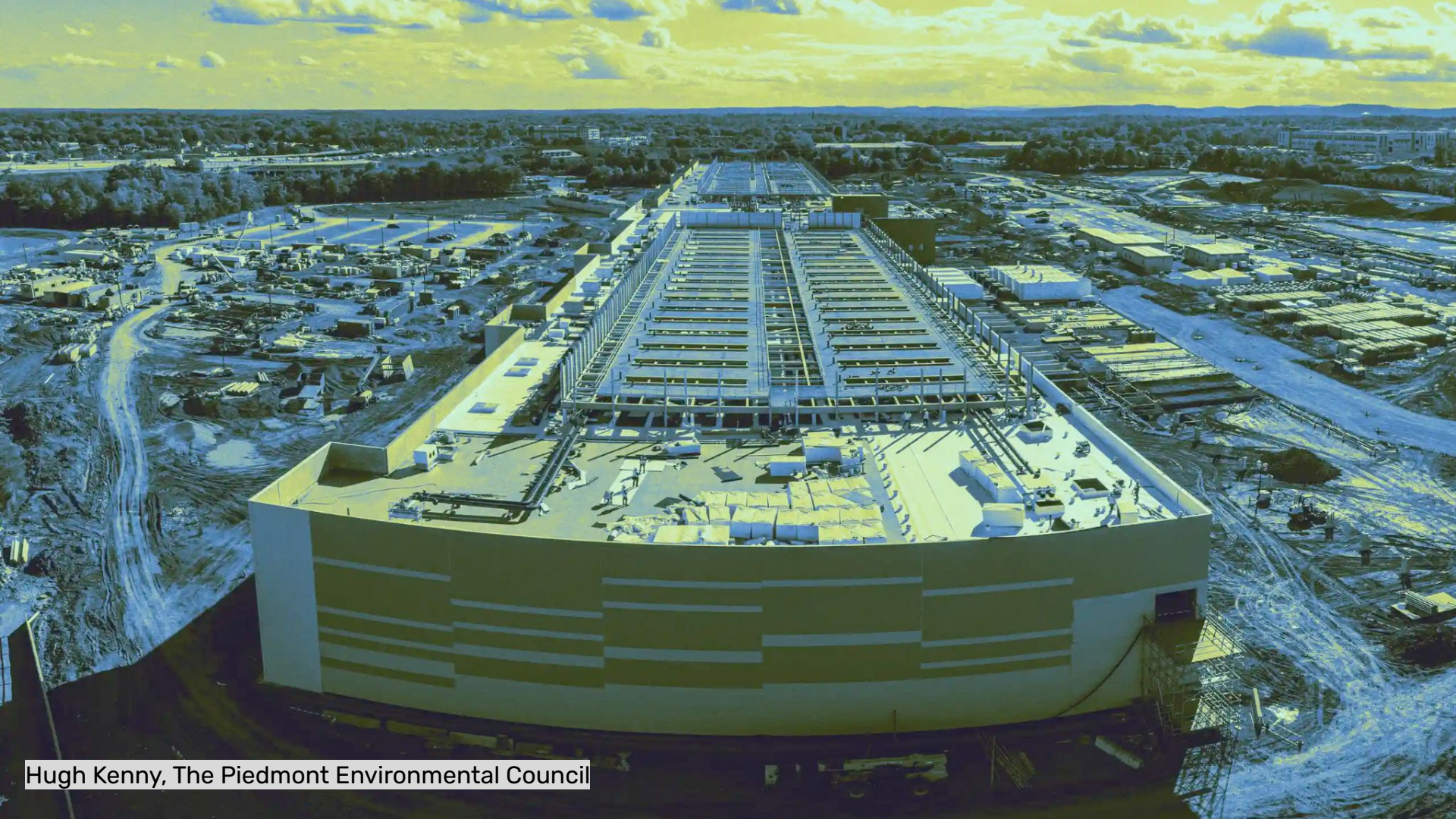
AI Now Institute

- Founded in 2017, we diagnose and produce research on AI
- Fully independent organization (no money from corporate donors)
- Our work
 - Advances research that charts a long-term strategy for the field
 - Identifies and capitalizes on actionable policy windows
 - Supports action on the ground, in partnership with a broad coalition of allies

Agenda

- What's driving the data center buildout
- What are the impacts
- How people are fighting back
 - Organizing approaches
 - Local & state policy recommendations





Hugh Kenny, The Piedmont Environmental Council



The question is not: “Are AI tools like ChatGPT good or bad?” It’s: “Is the AI industry’s consolidation of power good for society?”

**There is no AI
without Big
Tech.**

How Big Tech Has Rigged the AI market

1

INPUTS

(labor, data, chips,
data centers)

2

**PUSH AI
EVERYWHERE**

(default “solution,”
consumer and
vendor lock-in)

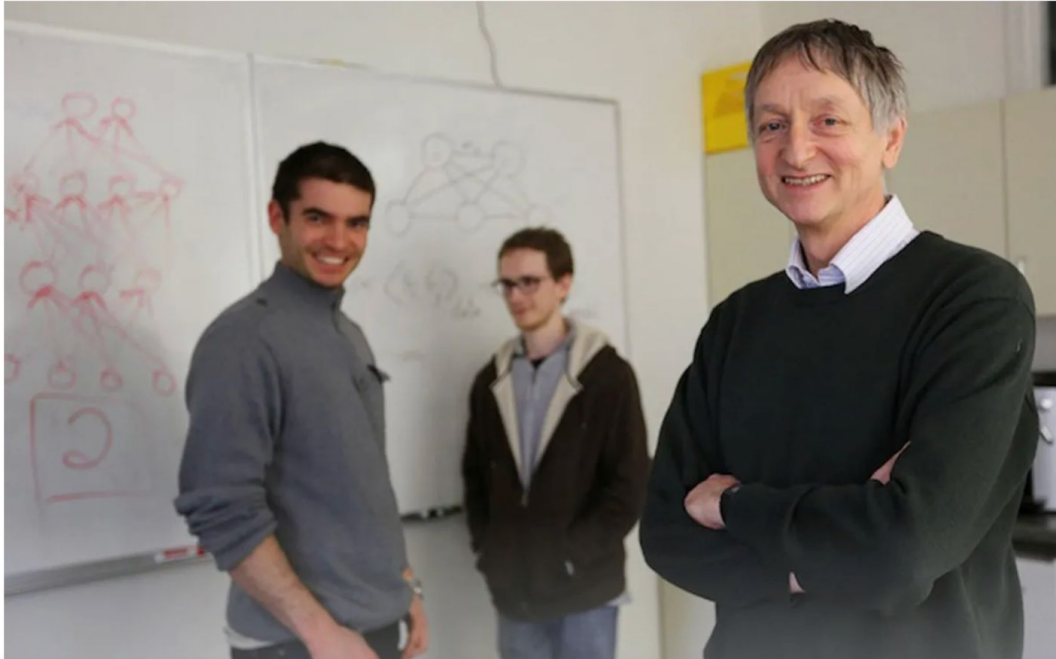
3

BACKDOOR DEALS

(subsidies, energy
rates)

Google Hires Brains that Helped Supercharge Machine Learning

Google has hired the man who showed how to make computers learn much like the human brain.



The
AlexNet
“moment”
(2012)

**The current AI
market is
precarious.**

Technology

An \$800 Billion Revenue Shortfall Threatens AI Future, Bain Says

MIT report: 95% of generative AI pilots at companies are failing

The AI Bubble Might Be About to Burst, Experts Warn

ADVERTISING

Get ready for more ads in Google's AI search answers

By [Lara O'Reilly](#) [+ Follow](#)

Exclusive

OpenAI's Ads Push Starts Taking Shape

**The government
bailout is already
underway.**

The Government Bailout Is Underway Already

Deregulate

Buy

Build

Create Foreign Markets

Trump's AI plan: Pull back restraints on tech

US Department of Defense awards contracts to Google, Musk's xAI

Energy announces first 4 AI data center sites on federal lands

'Like a sales mission:' White House continues its push to embed American AI worldwide

Michael Kratsios, director of the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy, explained the administration's goals and progress in a Tuesday interview with Scripps News.

ANALYSIS

Amidst Boom, Data Center Lobby Expands Its Influence, Spending, and Tactics

JUSTIN HENDRIX / SEP 12, 2025

Lyon Township residents blindsided by AI data center approval near homes

California company's 172-acre Project Flex approved without public input, residents say

Data Centers Devour Electricity. Private Equity Is Buying Utilities to Cash In.

The seizure of public utilities for the sake of profit may lead to a disaster for consumers — and the planet.

By Derek Seidman, TRUTHOUT
November 11, 2025



Hugh Kenny, The Piedmont Environmental Council

This trajectory is NOT inevitable.

Understanding Data Center Impacts



Harms: Public Budgets & Local Economies

Revenue lost in tax breaks

Loss of permanent jobs

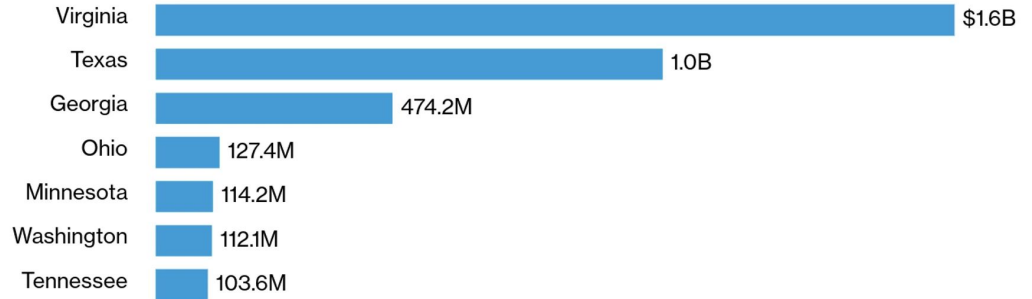
Revenue losses entrench dependence on fossil

concentrated tech market, stock market –

can't pay people

Data Center Boom Leaves States Forfeiting Sales Tax Revenue

■ Sales tax cost of data center incentives in 2025



Source: Good Jobs First report; Bloomberg Tax analysis of state disclosures

Bloomberg Tax

Harms: Our Energy Grid & Futures

- Higher electricity bills exacerbate the affordability crisis
- Destabilized energy grid
- Keeping coal and gas plants online



Harms: Federal Abuses of Power

- Preemption attempts to prevent states from passing common-sense AI protections
- Executive actions to usurp state and local permitting and zoning laws

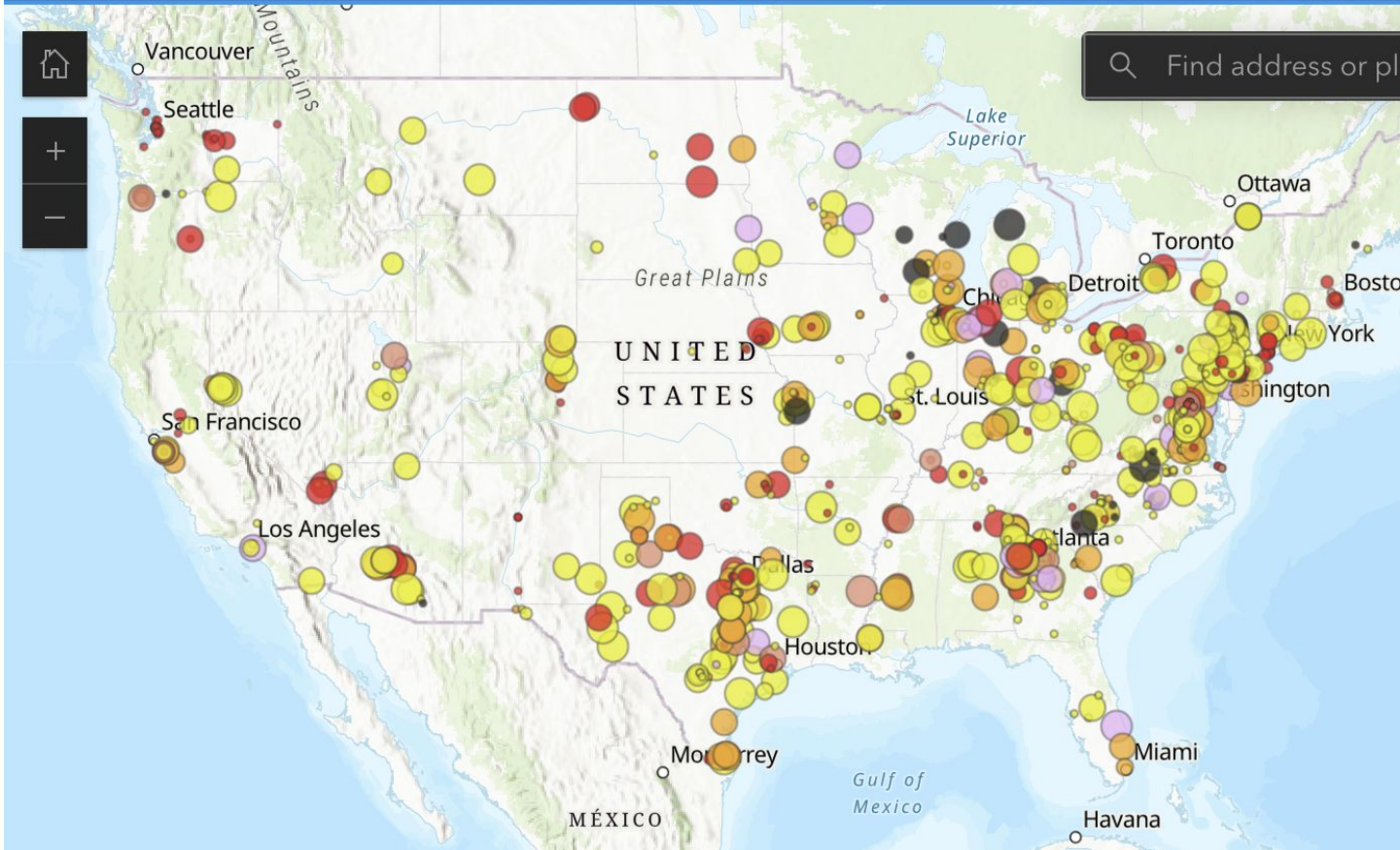
Harms: Our Health, Climate, Resources

- Threaten scarce natural resources (water, air, land) & Tribal sovereignty
- Harm public health (air pollution, water)
- Keeping coal and gas plants online



Data Centers Identified by FracTracker Alliance

Who is impacted?



Landscape of Data Center Resistance



GONE
FEEDY
BLINS

WATER
POSITIVE
MY
ASS

STOP
PROJECT
BLUE

VOTES 4
AMAZON
TECH 4
ICE

NOT
THE
WATK

LAND
BACK
NO
PROJECT
BLUE

DON'T BE
A
CORPORATE
SELLOUT
VOTE NO ON
PROJECT
BLUE.

A VOTE FOR AMAZON
IS A VOTE FOR ICE
UN VOTO PARA AMAZON
ES UN VOTO PARA ICE



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE


The sleeper issue that could play a huge role in Virginia and New Jersey – and the midterms

Data centers are spreading across the country and contributing to rising electricity bills. It's becoming a political issue as lawmakers are still workshopping their response.

POLITICS

Huge AI data centers are turning local elections into fights over the future of energy



▼  Fight Data Centers: ... 101: What is a Data Cen...▼  Starting a Data Center ... How Do I Fight Data ... Key Questions to As... How to Organize You... How to Track Data C... Tips from Organizers Legal Help & Open R... How to: Public Com...▼  Understanding Data Ce...

Data Center Site Fight Guide

A Shared Resource for Stopping Data Centers
from the Data Center Working Group

This live document was created and is maintained by members of the Data Center Working Group, including the Athena Coalition, AI Now Institute, Free Press, Good Jobs First, Kairos Fellowship, and others who wish to be unnamed. Contributions from specific people or organizations are noted throughout. The information in this document is crowdsourced and may not reflect the positions of every member of the Data Center Working Group.

If you have additions or edits, please email the crew: atacenters@athenaforall.org.

To join the Data Center Working Group, please [fill out this interest form](#).

What is this document?

This guide supports community members and organizers to launch a data center site fight, or join ongoing efforts. It breaks down what data centers are, strategies and organizing tips to start a data center fight, a primer on data center impacts and myths, research and policy resources, sample messaging, and real-life examples of campaigns.

Most data center fights have been won by engaged community members getting organized, learning the facts, and growing their numbers. When hundreds or thousands of people show

<https://bit.ly/site-fight-guide>

Site Fight Guide: Common Scenarios

1. A data center has been proposed (but not approved) in your town/city/county

- Investigate the decisionmaking processes to figure out who is in charge
- Educate the public and officials
- Turn people out to hearings/meetings to demonstrate the proposal's unpopularity
- Organize regionally

2. A data center has been approved, but is not constructed.

- Explore legal challenges
- Generate attention and demonstrate public opposition
- Monitor progress for compliance and proper permitting
- Pass local/state legislation or regulation to change the landscape of what is possible

3. We already have data center(s) and they are harming my community.

- Pass local/state legislation or regulation that bans or regulates data centers
 - Zoning, water, air quality, tax breaks, and more...

4. There's no data center, but I'm worried about what could come.

- Pass protections, bans, and/or moratoriums
- Track signs of potential development



Mapping local, state, and federal policy interventions to stop or restrict data center development.

<https://datacenters.ainowinstitute.org/>

How to Use the Policy Toolkit

- **Menu of Options:** Analyze in relation to your local and state conditions
- **Strategy:** Limit impacts *and* restrict development
- **Examples:** Very strong, strong, weak, and cautionary
- **Key considerations**

STRONG EXAMPLE

Marana, Arizona, stipulates that maximum sound levels for data centers cannot exceed 55 dBA in residential and mixed-use properties during both daytime and nighttime.

EXAMPLE

Phoenix, Arizona, and McPherson County, South Dakota, stipulate that noise levels cannot exceed 55 dBA during the day and 45 dBA from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. for data centers abutting residential zones.

WEAK EXAMPLE

Coweta County, Georgia, stipulates that noise levels for data centers cannot exceed 5 dBA above ambient from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m., or 10 dBA above ambient from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Per the ordinance, the county will conduct an ambient noise survey. This strategy creates the risk that minimum thresholds could be set higher than recommended.



Issue Areas +

Prohibit or Restrict Data Center Development

Enact a Temporary Pause on New Data Center Developments (Moratoriums)

Reject Data Centers That Do Not Fit Within Locality's Goals

Establish Conditional Use Permitting for Data Centers

Pass Zoning Ordinances and Municipal Code Amendments

Institute Strong Noise-Mitigation Measures

Protect Water Resources

Regulate and Limit Energy Use

Repeal or Limit Tax Incentives and Subsidies

Implement Air Pollution and Community Health Measures

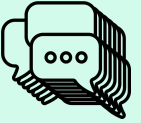
Prohibit or Restrict Data Center Development



[BANS AND MORATORIUMS](#)

[BANS](#)

Towns, cities, and counties can issue ordinances that ban the construction of new data centers, prohibit the expansion of existing data centers, moratorium or restrict data center growth.



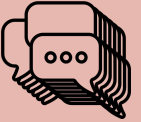
Overview of Policy Recommendations

Local Policy Interventions

- Prohibit or Restrict Data Center Development
- Enact a Temporary Pause on New Data Center Development (Moratoriums)
- Reject Data Centers That Do Not Fit Within Locality's Goals
- Establish Conditional Use Permitting for Data Centers
- Pass Zoning Ordinances and Municipal Code Amendments
- Institute Strong Noise Mitigation Measures
- Protect Water Resources
- Regulate and Limit Energy Use
- Repeal or Limit Tax Incentives and Subsidies
- Implement Air Pollution and Community Health Measures
- Establish Local Fair Labor Requirements
- Considerations for Community Benefits Agreements*
- Protect Constituents from AI Harms

State and Regional Policy Interventions

- Enact a Statewide or Regional Moratorium on Data Center Development
- Establish Statewide Oversight and Transparency Mechanisms
- Repeal or Limit Tax Incentives and Subsidies
- Oppose State “Special Economic Zones”
- Establish Strong Ratepayer Protections
- Promote Grid Stability and Accelerate Renewable Energy Infrastructure
- Limit Corporate Influence over Processes and Institutions Involved in Data Center Development
- Establish State Fair Labor Requirements
- Protect Constituents from AI Harms



Zoning(+) **(Almost all local)**

Prohibit or Restrict Development

Issue ordinances to:

- Ban construction of new data centers
- Prohibit expansion of existing data centers

Local moratoriums:

- Time-bound prohibitions on new data center approvals → could lead to a ban
- Often to give city/county time to update or issue regulations
- **Rec:** At least 180 days

[Statewide/regional moratoriums]

Atlanta [banned](#) data centers in the Beltline Overlay District.

Groton, CT banned data centers larger than 12,500 square feet.

Coweta County, GA issued 180-day [moratorium](#) on data centers.

Groton, CT's ban happened after a yearlong [moratorium](#)

AEP Ohio had a [moratorium on new data center connections for its power grid](#) until July 2025.

If you can't ban data centers outright...

Build mechanisms into approval/zoning processes to:

- Reject data centers that don't meet the locality's goals or standards (water & energy usage, heat mitigation, economic development, environmental, etc)

Possible mechanisms:

- Establish strong city or county goals (passed by local gov)
- Independent review by experts with decision-making authority
- Shift burden to developer (to prove how the project fits within limits/goals)
- Enforcement mechanisms: real penalties, power to reject

[Phoenix, Arizona's 2050 Clean Air Goals](#) exceed all federal air quality standards.

(Weak example) In [Benton County, Arkansas](#), violation of the data center ordinance is punishable by a fine of \$1,000.

Establish Conditional Use Permitting

Create a separate conditional use permit process for data centers (zoning code)

- Set distinct class for data centers (to avoid by-right zoning)
- Define data centers expansively
 - CAUTION: their own use class vs more broadly
- No permit unless approved
- Attach binding conditions to approval process

Establish pre/post-approval transparency mechanisms

- Mandate public notice and community hearings
- Reject proposals without adequate transparency
- Ban NDAs
- Enforcement mechanisms!

Tucson, Arizona, requires all documents related to data center projects to be public 90 days before any public meeting.

Commissioners in **Mooreville, North Carolina,** [refused](#) to support a \$30 billion data center project without knowing which company was behind it.

Resources



North Star Data Center Policy Toolkit (AI Now Institute)

- <https://datacenters.ainowinstitute.org/>

Data Center Policy in Practice Training Series

- <https://datacenters.ainowinstitute.org/trainings/> (April 22-June 24)

Site Fight Guide (Data Center Working Group)

- <https://bit.ly/site-fight-guide>

Get in touch: datacenters@ainowinstitute.org