

Data Centers: A Conversation Douglas County Should Start Now

Prepared for: The Coalition for Collaborative Governance

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This paper is not a position statement. The Coalition for Collaborative Governance has not concluded that data centers are good or bad for Douglas County. What it has concluded is that the conversation needs to start before a specific proposal arrives, because communities that waited until something was already on the table consistently found themselves with less room to shape the outcome.

The artificial intelligence boom is driving one of the largest infrastructure build-outs in modern American history. Data centers, large building or campus filled with computer servers that store, process, and transit large amounts of data, are at the center of it. The Kansas City corridor is an emerging target. Two large proposals are already active within 20 miles of Lawrence, and Kansas enacted a major tax incentive law in 2025 that makes the state actively competitive for exactly this type of development. Douglas County is not currently facing a confirmed proposal, but the conditions that precede one are in place.

What follows is a resource for community members, local leaders, and Coalition members who want to understand what data center development actually involves: what it means for utility bills, water systems, neighborhood noise, and community equity, and what questions to ask if and when Douglas County finds itself evaluating a proposal. The goal is not to stop development. The goal is to make sure this community is informed enough to participate on its own terms.

The communities that fared best didn't oppose data centers. They understood them first, then decided what they required.

SECTION 1

Market Drivers: Why Data Centers Are Coming to This Region

Data centers don't arrive randomly. They follow power lines, water sources, fiber networks, and land. Right now they are also chasing an artificial intelligence boom that is moving faster than most communities can keep up with.

In 2023, data centers used 4.4 percent of all electricity generated in the United States, and that share is on track to double by 2030 (Spencer, 2026). To make that concrete: a single large data center can consume as much electricity as all 40,000 occupied housing units in Lawrence running continuously every day of the year (IAEI Magazine, 2026). The servers inside run nonstop and generate enormous heat. Keeping them cool accounts for nearly 40 percent of a data center's total energy use.

What is a hyperscale data center? The largest category of data center, built by major tech companies like Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and Meta to power cloud computing and AI services. These campuses can

cover hundreds of acres and consume as much electricity as a small city. They are the type of development being proposed near Douglas County.

The biggest data center markets in Northern Virginia, Phoenix, and Dallas are running out of land and power. Developers are moving into secondary markets with room to build. The Kansas City corridor fits that profile. Project Pilot, a \$700 million, four-building campus, was approved in De Soto along K-10 in Johnson County in 2025 (Johnson County Post, 2025). Project Bluestem surfaced in March 2026 in Leavenworth County near Tonganoxie, about 15 miles north of Lawrence, with its developer describing the project as well beyond preliminary stages before any public filings were ever made (KSHB 41 News, 2026). The Kansas City metro now has at least ten large proposals either active, under construction, or operational (KSHB 41 News, 2026).



An aerial view of a data center in Ashburn, Virginia, the most concentrated data center market in the world. The rows of units covering the rooftop are cooling systems running continuously to manage server heat. Note the residential neighborhood directly adjacent to the facility.

Douglas County is not in the path of either proposal, but both sit on the same infrastructure that serves this county: the K-10 corridor, the Kansas River, and the Evergy power grid. Lawrence has approximately 120,300 residents, with 57 percent of occupied housing units renter-occupied (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Renters are more directly exposed to higher utility bills and water rates without the property equity buffer that homeowners have. Nearly a third of Douglas County households already pay over \$1,000 a year in water and sewer costs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Lawrence is served by Evergy, a private utility regulated by the state in Topeka, not by the city or county, meaning residents don't automatically have a

seat at the table when infrastructure cost negotiations happen. Coalition members interviewed for this paper identified water use, noise, and energy costs as the primary concerns based on what comparable communities have already experienced (Coalition for Collaborative Governance, 2026).

SECTION 2

Historical Overview: What Other Communities Have Experienced

Data centers have existed for decades, but the scale of what is being built today is new. Two nearby cases show what the difference between preparation and exclusion looks like in practice.

Peculiar, Missouri: Left Out Until Almost Too Late

In early 2024, Peculiar, Missouri, about 55 miles from Lawrence, quietly added data centers as a permitted use in its zoning code, opening the door to a \$1.5 billion, 504-acre campus proposed under the code name Project Harper.

Why do developers use code names? Developers routinely use code names and create new LLCs to hide who is behind a proposal until they choose to go public. This limits community awareness during site selection. The actual tech company that will use the facility is often never disclosed during local approval processes.

To put that in perspective: 504 acres is roughly the size of 380 football fields. Most residents found out after the process had already started. City staff had described the project to elected officials as similar to software equipment manufacturing. The description was not even close to what data centers actually are. A Facebook group opposing the project grew to nearly 1,000 members, about one-sixth of the town's population. Residents weren't against data centers. They were angry that no one had told them what was being planned in their backyard (Ledonne, 2024). The Board of Aldermen reversed the zoning change unanimously and blocked the project in October 2024. A \$1.5 billion proposal collapsed not because of deep opposition, but because the community was cut out of the process.

New Albany, Ohio: Getting Ahead of It

New Albany, Ohio took the opposite approach. In 2014, years before AI made data centers a mainstream concern, the city incorporated them into its long-range strategic plan and spent 21 months engaging more than 1,300 residents before any company made a specific ask (City of New Albany, 2021). New Albany has since attracted Meta, Amazon, Microsoft, and others, and now collects significant property tax revenue from those facilities. When Microsoft broke ground nearby in 2026, the local mayor noted how cooperatively the company's team worked with city staff from the start (10TV Columbus, 2026). That relationship was built because the community had already decided what it expected before any developer arrived.

What Developers Promise and What Communities Actually Get

Permanent staffing at large data centers is modest. For example, in Virginia, the state with more data centers than anywhere else in the world, recent large facilities created one permanent job for every \$54 million invested (Food & Water Watch, 2026). A typical large facility runs with roughly 25 to 150 permanent employees: on-site technicians, security, and remote network operations staff (World Resources Institute, 2025). One Microsoft facility in Illinois received over \$38 million in tax exemptions and created 20 permanent jobs (CNBC, 2025).

Tax revenue is real but often delayed. Kansas SB 98 provides a 100 percent sales and use tax exemption on construction and equipment for qualifying data centers for 20 years (Kansas Department of Commerce, 2025). Critically, this is a sales tax exemption. Property taxes still apply throughout, and once any negotiated abatement period ends, a large data center becomes a meaningful source of property tax revenue for the county and school districts. The bill was introduced by a representative of NetChoice, a tech industry trade group, and was supported in hearings by Evergy (Kansas Reflector, 2025).

Non-disclosure agreements are a documented industry practice. A review of 31 Virginia municipalities with existing or proposed data centers found 80 percent had signed NDAs with developers, limiting what local officials could share publicly (World Resources Institute, 2025). Any NDA a local government signs is itself a public record available under the Kansas Open Records Act.

What is an NDA? A non-disclosure agreement is a contract that limits what a party can share publicly. When a city official signs one with a data center developer, it may prevent them from telling residents basic facts about the proposal, including water use, energy demand, or who the end user is.

Data centers also require large diesel backup generators tested regularly, often weekly or monthly, to ensure they work when the grid goes down. Those tests produce both noise and exhaust. Douglas County updated its zoning code in 2020 for the first time since 1966, but those regulations include no data center-specific noise standards, water use requirements, or special permit process that would route a large proposal through a public hearing (Douglas County, 2020).

SECTION 3

The Problem: Five Questions Douglas County Can't Yet Answer

The previous sections established what data centers are, why they are heading to this region, and what communities elsewhere have learned. If a proposal arrived in Douglas County tomorrow, here are the five questions that currently have no clear public answer.

1. Who pays for energy infrastructure upgrades?

When a large data center connects to Evergy's grid, the utility may need to upgrade substations or extend transmission lines. Whether that cost falls on the developer or gets spread across existing customers is negotiated privately. The Kansas Corporation Commission holds public rate proceedings that residents can participate in, but that process only happens after a rate increase is already proposed. Douglas County has no mechanism requiring the cost allocation to be public before a development agreement is signed.

2. How much water will be used, and is the commitment binding?

How much water a data center consumes depends entirely on which cooling technology it uses, a design choice that can range from near-zero water use to 500,000 gallons per day (Brookings Institution, 2026). In other markets, water use commitments made during approvals have not always been written into legally enforceable permit conditions or monitored after construction (World Resources Institute, 2025).

3. What is the community actually being asked to approve?

Kansas SB 98 provides major financial incentives without requiring developers to notify communities, disclose water and energy demand, or submit to independent environmental review before approvals are granted (Kansas Department of Commerce, 2025). By the time most residents know a proposal exists, key decisions may already be locked in.

4. Who bears the costs, and are renters at the table?

With 57 percent renter occupancy in Lawrence, most residents have less political leverage in development processes and no property equity buffer against utility rate increases. Any community process around a data center proposal needs to explicitly include renter interests, not just property owner and business perspectives.

5. What noise standards apply?

Data centers run around the clock. Cooling towers produce a constant low-frequency hum that carries farther than higher-pitched sounds and is harder to block with standard insulation. Backup generators, tested regularly, produce louder short-duration noise. Douglas County's zoning code has no noise performance standards for continuous 24-hour industrial operations (Douglas County, 2020).

These five gaps are not unique to Douglas County. They are the same ones that caught Peculiar, Missouri off guard. The difference is that Douglas County still has time to close them before a proposal arrives.

SECTION 4

Solutions: What the Community Can Ask For

Each gap in Section 3 has a documented solution that communities elsewhere have successfully negotiated. The language below gives Coalition members specific, concrete questions to bring to City and County leaders, not as opposition to development, but as informed community participants.

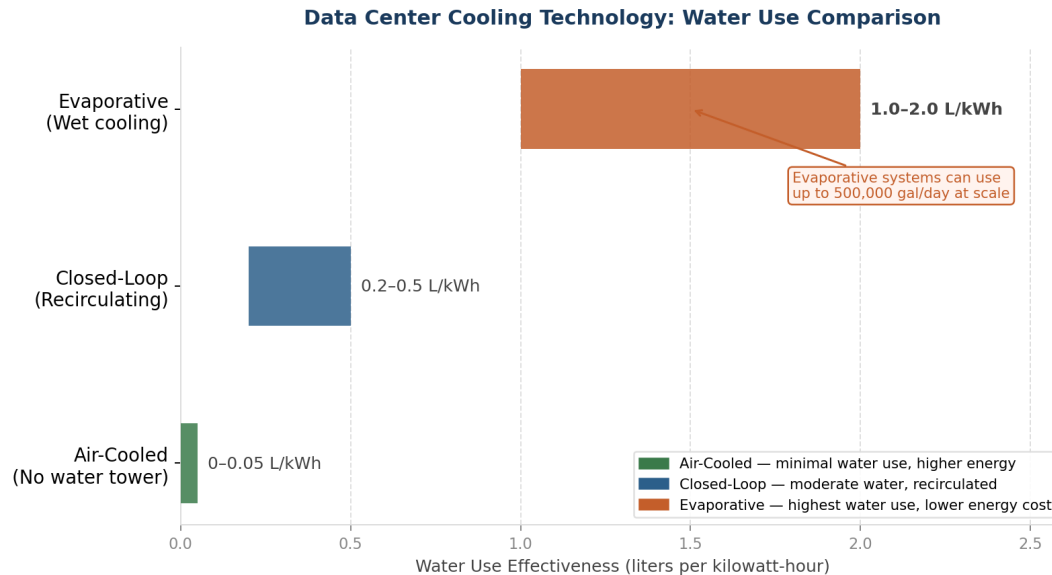
On Energy Costs

Ohio requires data centers to pay for at least 85 percent of their subscribed energy regardless of actual usage, preventing costs from shifting to residential customers (World Resources Institute, 2025). Minnesota created an annual fee on data centers with proceeds directed toward energy upgrades for low-income residents (National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, 2025). The Kansas Corporation Commission has authority over Evergy's rate structures and residents have standing to participate in those proceedings.

Ask leaders: Has Evergy committed in writing that no infrastructure costs for this project will be passed to existing customers? Is that agreement available to the public before any vote is taken?

On Water Use

Cooling technology determines water footprint and can be locked in as a binding permit condition rather than left as a developer preference. The American Planning Association recommends communities require specific cooling technology disclosure and maximum daily water draw commitments before approval is granted (Spencer, 2026).



Source: Spencer, T. PAS QuickNotes No. 117. American Planning Association, 2026; World Resources Institute, 2025.

Figure 1. Cooling technology options and their water use. Source: Spencer, 2026; World Resources Institute, 2025.

Ask leaders: What cooling technology does this facility commit to? Is it written into the permit as a binding condition, not just stated on a website? What is the maximum daily water draw, and who monitors compliance after construction?

On Transparency

Three tools exist right now at no cost. The Kansas Open Records Act allows residents to request public records related to any development agreement, including whether an NDA has been signed. The SB 98 incentive database will list any project receiving the 20-year exemption, creating a public record of commitments (Kansas Legislative Research Department, 2025). Good Jobs First's Subsidy Tracker has helped communities in other states identify the actual companies behind code-named projects (Good Jobs First, 2025).

Ask leaders: Has any NDA been signed related to this project? Can water use, energy demand, and infrastructure cost data be publicly disclosed as a condition of receiving SB 98 tax benefits?

On Environmental Justice

A Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) is a legally binding contract between a developer and the community spelling out what residents receive in exchange for approval. The NAACP provides CBA templates built specifically for data center negotiations (NAACP, 2025). Brookings Institution recommends CBAs include specific, measurable commitments on jobs, environmental standards, and direct community payments, with independent monitoring (Brookings Institution, 2026). Any CBA in Douglas County should include renter representation and be completed before approval, not after.

Ask leaders: Is a Community Benefit Agreement required as part of this approval? Who is at the negotiating table, and does that include renters and residents who live closest to the proposed site?

On Noise

Noise from data centers is a solvable problem. Communities that have addressed it did so through specific permit conditions: acoustic barriers, generator enclosures, setbacks from residential properties, limits on testing hours, advance public notice before tests, and ongoing monitoring. Chandler, Arizona codified all of these in its 2023 zoning ordinance before any specific project arrived (TechPolicy.Press, 2025).

Ask leaders: What are the projected noise levels at the nearest residential property line during normal operations and during generator testing? What mitigation is required as a permit condition, not just promised by the developer?

What Communities Can Negotiate Before a Data Center Is Approved

ENERGY	WATER	NOISE	COMMUNITY
Written commitment that no infrastructure costs shift to residential ratepayers	Cooling technology locked in permit as binding condition (not a website)	Decibel limit at nearest residential property line during all operations	Community Benefit Agreement negotiated before approval, not after
Data center pays 85%+ of subscribed energy regardless of actual usage	Maximum daily water draw from local sources — specific number, not a range	Generator test schedule with advance public notice required	Direct payment or community fund tied to facility operations
Renewable energy sourcing specified as contractual obligation, not a promise	Drought contingency plan required before approval is granted	Acoustic barriers and setbacks specified in permit conditions	Renter representation in the negotiation process
Public disclosure of infrastructure cost agreement before vote is taken	Annual water use reporting publicly available and independently monitored	Ongoing noise monitoring at property line with public reporting	Waste heat recovery commitment if proximity to institutions allows

Source: Brookings Institution, 2026; World Resources Institute, 2025; TechPolicy.Press, 2025; Spencer, 2026.

Figure 2. What communities can negotiate before a data center is approved. Source: Brookings Institution, 2026; World Resources Institute, 2025; TechPolicy.Press, 2025; Spencer, 2026.

Benefits with Examples: What Good Negotiation Produces

Data centers will be built in this region. The question is whether Douglas County is at the table when the terms are set. Communities that entered negotiations informed and organized have consistently secured better outcomes than those that didn't (Connect Humanity, 2026).

Four Communities That Got It in Writing

Cedar Rapids, Iowa: Google and QTS

A tax exemption conditional on maintaining at least 31 full-time jobs above \$26.20 per hour. Google paid the city \$400,000 per year for 15 years; QTS committed \$18 million over 18 years (Brookings Institution, 2026). The benefit didn't exist until the jobs did. That conditionality is the difference between a developer's promise and an enforceable commitment.

West Des Moines, Iowa: Microsoft

A binding 100 percent renewable energy commitment and a projected \$2 billion in tax revenues over 20 years (Brookings Institution, 2026). Binding matters here. A verbal renewable energy pledge doesn't change what actually flows through the power grid.

El Paso, Texas: Meta

Public disclosure of water use averaging 750,000 gallons per day, plus an annual sustainability report on water and electricity use required every year going forward (Brookings Institution, 2026). Annual reporting turns a one-time promise into an ongoing accountability mechanism residents can actually check.

Lancaster, Pennsylvania: Multiple Developers

A water-use cap, noise controls, and air emissions standards as binding permit conditions, plus a \$20 million community fund. Half went toward economic development and half toward sustainability priorities chosen by the community (GovTech, 2026). A community fund doesn't depend on job projections coming true.

One More Possibility: Waste Heat Recovery

Data centers produce enormous heat as a constant byproduct of running servers. Most expel it through cooling towers. That heat can instead be captured and redirected to nearby buildings as a heating source, cutting fossil fuel use and lowering energy costs. Studies show returns of 16 to 43 percent on waste heat recovery investments in the U.S. (Spencer, 2026). Amazon's data center in Tallaght, Ireland now heats municipal buildings, a university, and 131 affordable apartments. The University of Kansas is a significant energy consumer close to the K-10 corridor where development pressure is building. The American Planning Association recommends communities offer streamlined permitting to developers who commit to sharing at least 10 percent of their waste heat with nearby institutions (Spencer, 2026). No new technology is required. The commitment just has to be made before construction, not after.

The Common Thread

Every community that secured a good outcome set its expectations before a specific developer arrived. Cedar Rapids didn't develop its job-quality conditions in response to Google's proposal. It had already established what it required, and Google was evaluated against those existing standards. Requirements built into planning policy carry weight. Conditions raised after a project is announced tend to look like opposition, however reasonable they actually are.

Douglas County still has time. Project Pilot and Project Bluestem are in neighboring counties right now, working through exactly these processes. The Coalition can follow those cases, learn from what is being negotiated just miles away, and bring that knowledge to local leaders. That is what informed civic participation looks like, and it is what the Coalition for Collaborative Governance was built to do.

CONCLUSION

The Questions Are the Point

Douglas County doesn't need a data center policy today. It doesn't need to take a position on whether this type of development is welcome or unwelcome. What it needs right now, while there is still time, is a community that knows what questions to ask.

The five questions in this paper are a starting point. Who pays for infrastructure upgrades? What cooling technology is being used and is that commitment binding? What has been disclosed and what hasn't? Who is at the table and who isn't? What noise standards apply? These are not technical questions. They are things any informed resident should be able to walk into a city council meeting and ask, and expect a real answer to.

The Coalition's role is not to answer those questions. That is the job of developers, utilities, and elected officials. The Coalition's role is to make sure the questions get asked: specifically, early, and loudly enough to matter.

Development pressure in this region is real and moving fast. The communities that shaped it well were prepared. The ones that weren't are still dealing with the consequences.

The next step is simple. Bring this paper into conversations with City and County leadership. Ask whether the planning office has reviewed its zoning code for this category of development. Ask what the process would be for community input if a proposal arrives. Ask what the county would require before signing any development agreement. The answers will tell you how prepared this community actually is.

If a proposal arrives and Douglas County is ready, the outcome can be good. If it arrives and the county isn't, that window closes fast. It is open right now.

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