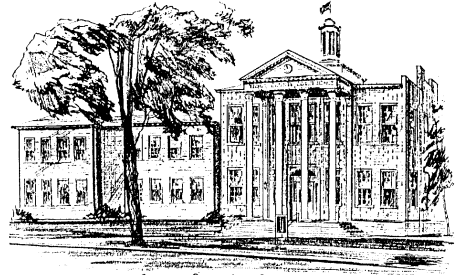


Tioga County



*Tioga County Court House
Wellboto, Pa.*

Testimony On Data Centers: Part 1 Mapping the Landscape Across the State, Local, Industry & Environmental Perspectives

Presented To Center for Rural Pennsylvania

By Rachel Courtney, Planning Director, Tioga County Planning

April 17, 2026

Thank you, Chairman, Senator Gene Yaw, and members of the committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony on the impacts of data center development in rural communities.

My name is Rachel Courtney, and I serve as Tioga County Planning Director. Over the past eight months, the Planning Department, Assessment Office, GIS Department, and County Commissioners have worked to develop a responsible approach to this emerging industry—balancing economic opportunity with the preservation of our county’s character.

Data center development is new to our region and advancing rapidly. Careful planning and due diligence are essential.

Tioga County does not have countywide zoning; only 16 of 39 municipalities have adopted zoning ordinances. Without zoning, municipalities have limited control over where development occurs. At the same time, zoning remains controversial, as many residents view it as an infringement on property rights.

Initially, the county’s primary regulatory tools were the Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance (SALDO) and a limited number of stand-alone ordinances.

In response to this gap, the Planning Commission drafted a stand-alone data center ordinance that addresses standard issues such as noise, setbacks, height, and decommissioning, as well as key concerns specific to data centers, including on-site power generation, impact analysis, and cooling systems. The ordinance was designed to apply where municipal regulations do not exist, while recognizing that municipal ordinances supersede county authority.

The Board of Commissioners adopted the Data Center Ordinance in December 2025 to ensure baseline safeguards were in place across all municipalities. This was intended to provide guidance in the event development proposals were submitted before municipalities could adopt their own regulations for this high-impact industry. The ordinance also included a 30-day public comment period, allowing for revisions based on feedback received.

Through the process of developing the ordinance, it became clear there is a general lack of understanding about how zoning and ordinances differ, and what municipal and county governments can and cannot control. The county has received consistent concerns regarding water consumption, electrical grid strain, and rising costs to consumers—and we share these concerns. However, these issues are beyond the county’s control and are regulated by state and federal agencies.

A key issue for Tioga County municipalities is limited capacity and understanding of zoning. Training is often costly and difficult to access for rural communities. In many cases, municipalities already struggle to fill supervisor and council positions, making it difficult to maintain basic governance functions. Adding zoning introduces additional requirements under the Municipalities Planning Code, including the need to staff a zoning hearing board and designate a zoning enforcement officer—further stretching already limited local resources.

The Planning Department presented these challenges to the County Commissioners, along with a strategy to address these issues through a Municipal Zoning and Comprehensive Plan Workshop. The Commissioners recognized the value of investing in our municipalities and supported this effort by continuing technical

assistance, covering the cost of the workshop, and offering local matching funds for municipalities that pursue multi-municipal planning through the DCED Municipal Assistance Program.

Through planning for the workshop, it was identified that no municipal comprehensive plans in the county are current. DCED recommends multi-municipal planning as a practical solution to limited local capacity. This approach allows municipalities to share costs, administrative responsibilities, and plan for high-impact development more effectively. However, implementation requires updated comprehensive plans and typically takes two to three years.

Pennsylvania's planning framework places land use authority at the municipal level, ensuring local control but highlighting the need for greater support in rural areas. Municipalities are on the front lines of managing high impact development yet often lack the resources and capacity to do so effectively.

In addition to planning and zoning, the county would like to highlight physical safety and emergency response considerations. Rural fire departments and EMS providers, most of which are volunteers, already face capacity challenges, financial constraints, and limited access to specialized equipment and training. Preparing for the demands of data center development is a high priority. This is an ongoing issue our County Commissioners are actively working to address, and this type of development further underscores the urgency.

Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) between municipalities and developers have been identified as a potential solution to ensure equitable investment in impacted communities. CBAs allow communities to clearly communicate their needs and priorities and establish binding agreements that address both short- and long-term impacts.

Clear, coordinated guidance from the state would greatly assist rural communities. This includes training, outlining regulatory roles across all levels of government, providing access to model ordinances and community benefit agreements, identifying available resources, and offering practical strategies to help municipalities mitigate impacts and secure local benefits from high-impact development.

On behalf of Tioga County, I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman, Senator Gene Yaw, and members of the committee, for your time and consideration in supporting Tioga County and its municipalities as we navigate the rapidly emerging data center industry.

Sources:

[Chapter 3. - Title 16 - COUNTIES](https://www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/LI/CT/HTM/16/00.003..HTM)

<https://www.legis.state.pa.us/WU01/LI/LI/CT/HTM/16/00.003..HTM>

[PA Municipalities Planning Code \(MPC\) 2022](https://dced.pa.gov/download/pennsylvania-municipalities-planning-code-act-247-of-1968/?ind=1652213074925&filename=MPC_2022.pdf&wpdmdl=56205&refresh=6917197ea034e1763121534)

https://dced.pa.gov/download/pennsylvania-municipalities-planning-code-act-247-of-1968/?ind=1652213074925&filename=MPC_2022.pdf&wpdmdl=56205&refresh=6917197ea034e1763121534