

Testimony for the Center for Rural Pennsylvania

Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to share a few thoughts today.

My name is Jim Ladlee, and I serve as the State Program Leader for Emerging and Advanced Technology with Penn State Extension. My work focuses on helping communities, businesses, nonprofits, and agencies evaluate emerging technologies in ways that support informed, practical decision-making. Through Extension programming and publications, we are hearing an increased interest from across Pennsylvania on how communities might gather quality information about data center development.

Penn State Extension strives to remain neutral on data center development. Our work is rooted in the land-grant mission to provide practical, research-based information that helps communities and businesses navigate complex decisions and evaluate proposals based on clear information and local priorities. The reality is that some data center projects may offer real local benefits, while others may present significant challenges.

As interest in artificial intelligence and data center services has accelerated, we have expanded our educational programming through webinars, in-person programs, and publications. These programs have attracted thousands over the last few months alone. One of our newest resources is the [Data Centers: A Guide to Common Questions](#), intended to help communities engage in informed, transparent, and respectful conversations by organizing the major questions they may want to consider when evaluating a proposal.

Today, I will briefly share what the framework highlights, what we are hearing across Pennsylvania, and where gaps may exist.

A Question-Based Framework

Through our work, we have found that communities appear to benefit from organizing data center discussions around a consistent set of questions rather than reacting to individual claims. These questions generally fall into five areas:

- **Power and energy:** What is the total electricity demand? How will it be generated, delivered, and paid for? What are the implications for grid reliability and local rates?
- **Water:** How much water is required? Where will it come from? How will it be treated and discharged? Any residual contaminants?
- **Land use and siting:** How does the facility fit within local zoning, agricultural priorities, and long-term land use goals?

- **Infrastructure:** What upgrades are needed for energy transmission, water, roads, broadband, and emergency services, and who is responsible for those costs?
- **Economics and community impact:** What are the realistic expectations for jobs, tax revenue, community benefits agreements, waste heat business opportunities, and long-term fiscal impact?

The structure is designed to help communities move from general concern and rumor to a fact-based, specific evaluation.

What We Are Hearing Across Pennsylvania

Across the Commonwealth, communities are encountering proposals that are extremely large in scale, technically complex, and often moving faster than local systems are reasonably comfortable managing.

There is clear interest in potential benefits such as tax revenue, community benefits agreements, jobs, co-location or industrial clustering, such as the potential for waste heat recovery and reuse, and infrastructure investment. At the same time, those benefits are highly project-specific and should be evaluated based on documented facts.

At the same time, communities are raising reasonable and practical questions tied to cost, land use, and long-term sustainability:

- Whether large-scale energy demand could affect electricity rates or grid stability
- How water will be sourced, used, and discharged, and what that means for local systems
- How facilities will affect land use, residential quality of life, property values, environment, and may impact other industries and agriculture
- What infrastructure upgrades are required and who bears the cost? Both installation and ongoing maintenance?
- Whether projected economic benefits align with long-term local priorities

Where Gaps Likely Exist

What we are seeing is not a lack of engagement. There is an information gap between the scale and speed of development and local communities' ability to access the expertise, time, and information needed to thoroughly evaluate complex proposals. That gap might appear in several ways:

- **Knowledge:** Limited in-house expertise on large-scale energy systems, water use, and data center operations.

- **Technical support:** Even when the right questions are asked, communities may have difficulty accessing neutral technical support to interpret project claims
- **Capacity:** Local governments are being asked to evaluate complex proposals while managing massive public interest and feedback. In some communities, hearings and review processes have become lengthy, technically demanding, and difficult for local officials and residents to navigate.
- **Transparency:** Communities are navigating varying levels of project transparency; evolving project details and designs; separating incomplete, inconsistent, or conflicting information from facts; and an incredibly high volume of public interest and scrutiny.

Practical Considerations Moving Forward

Based on this work and lessons learned from other forms of infrastructure and energy development across the Commonwealth, a few potential practical considerations stand out:

- **Start with questions, not conclusions.** A structured framework that helps individuals, communities, and businesses understand and evaluate proposals.
- **Encourage independent, third-party analysis.** Communities would likely benefit from objective studies from trusted sources on economic impact, electricity demand and rate implications, water sourcing and discharge, workforce needs and training, noise (low-frequency and decibel level), property value impacts, etc.
- **Community data center education and planning.** Communities are better positioned when they understand the issues and are prepared before proposals are introduced.
- **Provide practical tools.** Model questions and ordinances, planning frameworks, sample community benefits agreements, and plain-language guidance that can support local decision-making.
- **Support local capacity.** Many communities will likely need access to shared expertise or regional support.

Closing

Our role is to support informed, fact-based decisions grounded in local priorities. Across Pennsylvania, people are consistently asking for clear information, transparent processes, and practical, consistent criteria to ensure fair proposal reviews.

Thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts. I welcome any questions.