

# Tioga County



## Testimony On

## Data Centers: Part 1

## Mapping the Landscape Across the State, Local, Industry & Environmental Perspectives

**Presented To Center for Rural Pennsylvania**

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

Good morning. My name is Shane Nickerson, and I serve as a Tioga County Commissioner. I am here to share the steps Tioga County has taken to proactively address data center development, and to emphasize the importance of planning ahead rather than reacting after the fact.

About eight months ago, our planning office was approached by Brian Patten of Next Generation Land Company regarding two potential sites for data center development. As commissioners, we requested a meeting to better understand both the proposal and the locations under consideration. At that time, I will admit, I had very little understanding of what a data center was. As I began researching—ironically using the very infrastructure these facilities support—I encountered a wide range of information, much of it highlighting potential negative impacts on communities.

However, as I continued to learn, I also realized just how integrated data centers and artificial intelligence are in our daily lives. From Google searches and streaming services like Netflix, to online banking, cloud storage, and scheduling appointments, this technology is now a fundamental part of modern society—and its use is growing rapidly.

Following our meeting with Mr. Patten, we gained a clearer understanding of his goals. Of the two proposed sites, one appeared reasonable, while the other involved valuable farmland. That raised immediate concerns. Agriculture, along with tourism, remains one of Tioga County's primary economic drivers, and preserving farmland is critically important to us. To their credit, Next Generation Land Company listened to our concerns and promptly removed the farmland site from consideration.

That discussion made it clear that we needed to establish safeguards to address potential impacts, particularly regarding water usage, strain on the electrical grid, rising utility costs, and overall compatibility with our rural landscape. We directed our planning department to develop an ordinance addressing these concerns—details of which the Tioga County Planning Department will cover more thoroughly.

Key components of our ordinance include provisions for water consumption, on-site power generation, noise limitations, and decommissioning requirements. The latter is especially important. Rural communities like ours are already dotted with abandoned industrial sites. By requiring proper decommissioning, we can help ensure that future facilities do not become long-term liabilities and can instead be repurposed.

Public input was also a critical part of this process. We presented the ordinance to our residents and incorporated their feedback, allowing the community to help shape policies

on setbacks from residential properties, noise levels, building height, visual screening, and even the use of native Pennsylvania plant species for landscaping.

In addition, we have worked to educate our municipal officials on the importance of zoning. While we cannot necessarily prevent development, zoning allows us to guide where it occurs. This is especially important in Tioga County, where there is no countywide zoning—meaning development can occur anywhere in municipalities that lack their own zoning ordinances.

To better understand both the risks and opportunities, we assembled an internal team including our planning department, Scott Zubek from the GIS department, and Josh Zeyn from the assessment office. We emphasized to the developer the importance of preserving farmland and protecting the natural beauty that defines Tioga County. Our GIS team then identified areas—such as previously strip-mined land with access to natural gas—that could be more appropriate for data center development and are located away from residential areas.

There is a saying often shared among county commissioners: “It is better to have a seat at the table than to be on the menu.” That mindset has guided our approach throughout this process.

From a financial perspective, preliminary estimates suggest that a data center campus could carry an assessed value of approximately \$1 billion. At current millage rates, this could generate roughly \$20 million annually for our school districts. This level of investment would be transformational for our communities.

Importantly, this would not simply mean more revenue—it could represent a shift in the tax burden. Currently, much of that burden falls on landowners and homeowners, many of whom are elderly and living on fixed incomes. Expanding the tax base in this way could provide meaningful relief and help stabilize or even reduce local taxes over time.

We also recognize the ongoing need for quality job opportunities. Throughout my time campaigning, I consistently heard concerns about retaining young people in Tioga County. Many of our brightest graduates leave in search of better-paying careers. While the level of job creation associated with data centers is still debated, this development has the potential to contribute to workforce retention.

To help ensure tangible local benefits, we are actively working with municipalities on a Community Benefits Agreement, or CBA. This would establish guaranteed commitments from developers, such as investments in emergency services equipment and training, fees tied to facility size and energy use, support for road maintenance, prioritization of local hiring, and partnerships with local financial institutions.

We view the CBA as a critical piece of this process—one that ensures development translates into real, measurable benefits for our communities.

Finally, through our experience, it has become clear that rural counties would greatly benefit from a standardized framework or “playbook” at the state level. Guidance on establishing ordinances, negotiating Community Benefits Agreements, and managing impacts would help communities navigate these complex projects more effectively.

Tioga County has previously been significantly impacted by the natural gas industry. As new industries like data centers emerge, it is important that any state-level revenues generated from these developments are directed back to the communities most affected—similar to the structure of Act 13 funding.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I appreciate your time and consideration.