1000 FRIENDS of FLORIDA

Special Report

DATA CENTERS

Practical Tools for Local Governments and the Residents They Serve:

Best Practices Guide

By 1000 Friends of Florida

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Data Centers:
Best Practices for Local Governments

Across Florida, proposed data centers — facilities that house large groups of computer servers to store, process and distribute data — are drawing intense public scrutiny and concern. Communities are scrambling to understand the potential impact of large data centers, whose electricity and water demands can equal or exceed those of cities, so that development standards are in place if an application is submitted. Many have imposed moratoria on any new data centers until those standards can be adopted.



A data center in an industrial district of Melbourne, Australia. Rooftop solar arrays and screened backup generators along the building edge are the kinds of features local standards can require.

1000 Friends of Florida approaches decisions on data centers the way we approach all complex growth and development decisions: as a question of how and where Florida grows, and who gets to decide. This guide is not a case for or against data centers, and it does not advocate a one-size-fits-all mandate. Instead, we propose best practices for local planners, decision-makers, and residents to help replace uncertainty with clear standards and an open process, so decisions on data centers can be weighed on their own merits. The recommendations that follow are meant to equip local officials and the people they serve to ask the right questions, insist on transparency, and shape outcomes in their own communities.

Data centers can range from those that are small enough to be housed in a single room within a building, to stand-alone facilities covering millions of square feet with onsite power generation. This paper's best practices are intended to address stand-alone facilities, which are often described in terms of how much power they draw. Florida has defined any data center that draws 50 MW or more as a "hyper-scale" facility, but local governments have the authority to govern data centers of all sizes. Larger, stand-alone data centers generally pose greater planning and environmental challenges.

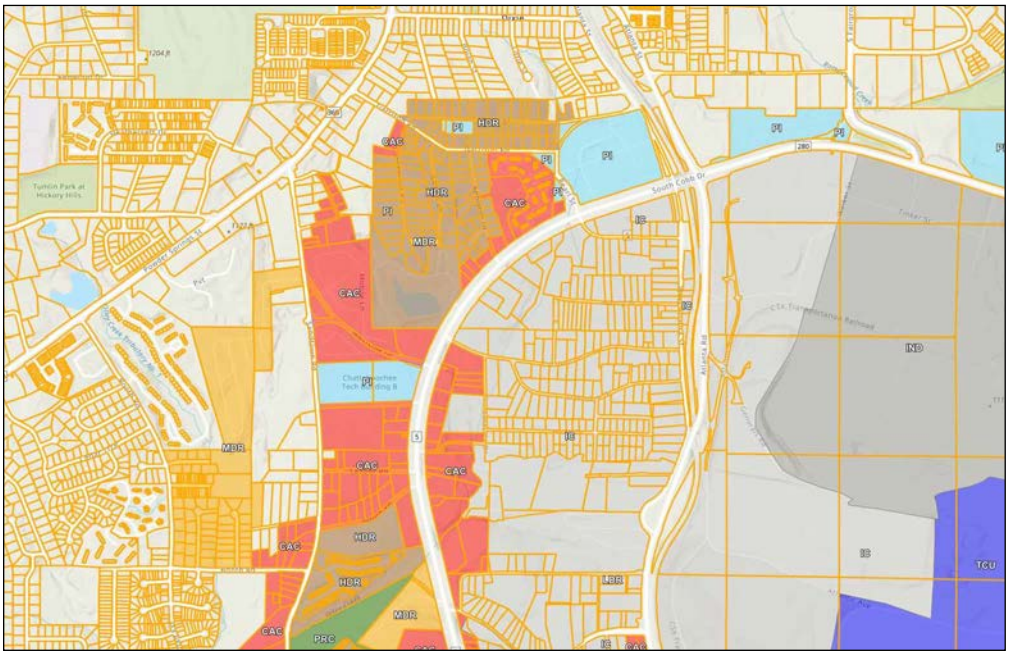
When considering whether a data center is right for a community, two of the most important things a local government can do are to 1) ensure that the application provides a complete description of the development and potential impacts to the surrounding area and 2) require routine check-ins or monitoring as a condition for approval and continued operation to ensure that agreed-upon standards continue to be met. The burden for meeting these conditions generally increases with the size of the data center.

Although local governments may permit data centers by right in certain districts, their rapid spread and uncertain future impacts make by-right permitting inadvisable. While we recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to siting and regulating data centers, 1000 Friends of Florida has compiled the following list of considerations to assist local governments when establishing data center development standards.

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Consider the Existing Policy Landscape

- Communities should review existing zoning codes and use geospatial analysis to identify where large-scale data centers could be located under current and proposed regulations.
- Communities should review their current economic incentives for developers to ensure they do not attract large-load or high-impact users that could create offsite community impacts without adequate policies in place.
- Tax incentives should not be offered if they would radically reduce or eliminate the tax revenue generated by data centers.
- Communities should identify areas with limited or sensitive environmental resources, such as surface or ground water, that may be at risk or stressed by data centers, and rule out data centers in those areas.
- Administrative waivers from established standards should be prohibited; these decisions should be made by elected officials with community input throughout the lifecycle of the data center development.
- Non-disclosure agreements, while permitted for terms up to one year under state law, should be avoided. Withholding information on data center development proposals up to 12 months could close the window of opportunity for community residents to have meaningful input on the outcome.



Sample future land use map (Cobb County, Georgia). Data centers should be directed to areas with existing industrial future land use designations and avoided in environmentally sensitive lands.

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Land Use and Siting Considerations for Applications

Project Location

- Data centers should be limited to areas already designated for urban uses, preferably future land-use categories that allow heavy industrial zoning, and should be ruled out from converting land designated as rural or agricultural on the Future Land Use Map.
- Another option is to offer development credits that shift existing future land-use entitlements to a more suitable area identified by the local government or data center developer.

Size of project vs. size of parcel(s)

- To ensure adequate separation from adjacent uses, local ordinances should require setbacks from property lines of at least 100 feet, with larger setbacks for larger data centers. Noise-dampening walls, berms and natural vegetative buffers should also be incorporated in addition to standard landscape buffers in local land development codes, with higher requirements for larger centers.
- Local ordinances should establish maximum building sizes or impervious coverage percentages.

Protecting environmentally sensitive areas

- Data centers and their infrastructure should be prohibited in areas that have been identified for special protection by the State of Florida such as the Greater Everglades Area, Florida Wildlife Corridor, Wekiva Protection Area and Areas of Critical State Concern, and avoided in other local environmentally sensitive areas.
- Where location in a local environmentally sensitive area is unavoidable, special protections should be required. This might include land swaps, special management plans, conservation easements, and siting considerations to maintain connectivity or avoid habitat destruction, etc.
- Local governments should avoid a proposed site that contains significant wetlands in order to limit potential flood and other hazards to the community in the event of a catastrophic storm and to avoid habitat loss.

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Land Use and Siting Considerations for Applications *Continued*

Site Design

- The appearance of large data centers can significantly impact the surrounding community. Local governments should adopt ordinances with measures to protect viewsheds near facilities. Examples from recent local ordinances include:
  - Require generators to face inward or be located away from non-industrial parcels.
  - Require full enclosure of all facility components, except parking areas.
  - Require secure fencing and additional buffers around electrical equipment and substations, including offsite substations needed to serve the facility.
  - Require façade changes such as windows and impose building massing limits to control appearance from neighboring properties.
- Height standards are typically established for industrial uses. Local governments should enforce any current policies, and limit exceptions to established standards.
- Because data centers have relatively low personnel compared to the gross floor area they take up, it is important for local governments to accurately evaluate the realistic needs of the anticipated and potential end user of the site and calculate parking needs accordingly to limit facility footprints and unnecessary impervious surfaces.



A data center in Ashburn, Virginia, set within an established business park. Vegetative buffers help shield the use from neighboring properties and could lessen the heat-island effects of large-scale data centers.

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Operational Considerations

Energy Consumption

A major concern over data centers for local decision-makers to consider is their potentially enormous energy needs. Citizens are concerned about rising energy costs due to increased demand. While those costs are generally regulated at the state level, data centers can result in increased air and water pollution generated by power plant expansion and even decreased reliability of their energy grids. The race to build has resulted in some cases in a heavy reliance on less-efficient, non-renewable energy sources, an outcome communities should avoid.

- Applicants should be required to provide detailed energy plans, including source, phasing plans and back-up energy proposals.
- For data centers proposing to generate their power onsite, local governments need to understand and implement development standards not just for the computer warehouses, but for power plants as well. These regulations would address the transmission lines that have to be built, the eminent domain used to get the land for transmission and gas pipelines, the energy infrastructure, and heat and air pollution associated with the operation.

Alternative Energy Sources

- Alternative energy goals should be set to limit carbon footprint from facilities. (e.g., 75% non-coal energy within 20 years of operation). While Florida repealed its alternative energy goals in 2025, Florida Power and Light has maintained a Real Zero goal of zero carbon emissions from its plant fleet by 2045.
- All energy sources, including solar arrays, should be screened.
- Hyperscale data centers, if located in large warehouse-style buildings with flat roofs, should routinely be required to install solar panels to offset energy requirements from other sources.

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Operational Considerations *Continued*

Noise and Vibrations

- A limit of 55-65 dB(A) at the property line or a noise limit consistent with pre-development volume should be imposed where data centers are adjacent to non-industrial areas. This should also require pre- and post-development monitoring and verification for both noise and vibration, even those that are above or below perceptible frequencies. Limits can also be set at a certain amount above the pre-development condition, or depending on the time of day. Acoustic studies should be required before, during and after development to ensure that the facilities are staying within the prescribed guidelines.

Security, powerlines and electric utilities

- Distances from public roads of at least 300 ft should be required, with screening and fencing for security.
- Given Florida's susceptibility to hurricanes and other strong storms, decision-makers should follow the lead of states like Arizona and Indiana, and require underground distribution lines.

Lighting

- Lighting standards should be set for facilities to limit visual impact on community and wildlife. Dark Sky or similar practices should be considered where feasible.

Water Use

- Formal water-use analysis, including impacts on adjacent wells and water bodies, should be required for all applications. This analysis should include indirect water use, such as that required for power generation. Large-scale data centers should not be sited in areas designated as water-resource caution areas or where additional uses would violate the minimum flows and levels of waterbodies.
- Though Florida's water management districts are responsible for issuing water-use permits and a local government cannot make a development permit contingent upon another agency's permit, local governments are responsible for being good stewards of the resources that benefit their constituents and must have a full understanding of the impact additional water use could have on their long-term water needs.

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Decommissioning

- Plans and funding mechanisms for decommissioning data centers should be required, including financial remittances to local governments when sites are abandoned. Data centers should be deemed abandoned after being out of use for 120-180 days and require decommissioning within 1 year of abandonment.
- Annual reports of proper operation, and decommissioning and reclamation plans should be required that address removal of structures, cables, hazardous materials, soil testing, and revegetation, as well as periodic third-party financial analysis and assurances for reclamation over the life of the project.
- If utilities have been extended outside the designated urban area (not advisable), policies should prohibit using that extension to justify increased densities or intensities in the surrounding area.



Community Benefit Agreements

CBAs can be powerful tools to mitigate the impacts of data centers on the local community or ensure that the development enhances rather than detracts from community resources overall. Such agreements should be developed by a coalition of community-based organizations with ample opportunity for diverse input. They should require an essential nexus with, and should be proportional to, the impact of the development. Further the CBA should contain specific terms, identify the responsibilities of all stakeholders, and establish a detailed plan and system for implementation, milestones and monitoring.

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Conclusion



A hyperscale data center campus under construction in Indiana, with its own electrical substation and stormwater ponds. Facilities at this scale can require power and water infrastructure comparable to that of a small city.

Because data centers in their current form are so resource-intensive and carry significant offsite impacts, holding them to a higher standard for development and monitoring than typical land uses is both reasonable and prudent. Communities often relax their standards to attract development that will directly enhance their economies or add housing options people can afford. Large-scale data centers bring relatively few of those direct benefits, though they may generate significant property tax revenue unless they have been granted exemptions. Regardless, without appropriate safeguards, their presence may threaten a community's quality of life, at least as they are currently being designed, while the companies behind them are among the wealthiest in the world. Given these factors, decision-makers must account for all possible scenarios and not be afraid to require transparency and financial investment by the applicants to minimize or mitigate their impacts.

Recent community opposition to data centers has caused developers to recognize that they must do more to offset their impacts and address the concerns of residents, who are also their customers. For example, Microsoft has launched a Community First AI Infrastructure initiative. Many large AI companies have also pledged to reduce waste and water use, offset energy costs for residents and seek cleaner energy as it becomes available. Communities that secure such pledges in return for approval should enforce them as a condition of continued operation.

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Data Centers:
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Resources and Further Reading

The following resources informed this guide and provide additional material to help local governments and residents dig deeper and develop policies that make the most sense for their communities.

Florida law and policy

- SB 484 (2026), Florida's data center law. A plain-language overview of the state's framework, which preserves local zoning and comprehensive planning authority. *https://flsenate.gov/Committees/BillSummaries/2026/html/484*
- Florida sales tax exemption for data centers (s. 212.08, F.S.). The state incentive communities should weigh against local costs. *https://www.leg.state.fl.us/statutes/index.cfm?App_mode=Display_Statute&URL=0200-0299/0212/Sections/0212.08.html*

Model ordinances and toolkits

- Georgia Tech, Data Center Ordinance Hub. Searchable database of local data center ordinances and template language. *https://epicenter.energy.gatech.edu/data-center/*
- Georgetown Climate Center, Local Ordinances for Data Centers. Model local approaches aligning data centers with climate and resource goals. *https://www.georgetownclimate.org/adaptation/toolkits/local-ordinances-for-climate-action/local-ordinances-to-help-bring-data-centers-into-alignment-with-climate-goals.html*
- Smart Growth America, Our Zoning Is Not Ready. Why conventional zoning is unprepared for hyperscale facilities. *https://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/knowledge-hub/news/data-centers-are-here-and-more-are-coming-our-zoning-is-not-ready/*
- MultiState, State Data Center Policy 101. Primer on how states are regulating data centers. *https://s3.amazonaws.com/multistate.us/production/resources/r5icxD60PGfum2Xbt/attachment/State%20Data%20Center%20Policy%20101%20--%20MultiState%20Resource%20(12.4.25).pdf*
- American Planning Association, Zoning for Data Centers and Cryptocurrency Mining. Planning guidance on zoning these uses. *https://www.planning.org/publications/document/9249180/*
- National League of Cities, Community Strategies for Data Center Development. City-level strategies and fact sheet. *https://www.nlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Data-Centers-Fact-Sheet-3.pdf*
- Urban Land Institute, Data Center Whitepaper (2024). Industry perspective; strong on market context, lighter on community impacts. *https://knowledge.uli.org/-/media/files/research-reports/2024/uli-data-center-whitepaper_hm_2024-11-12_final-final-round.pdf*
- Wall Street Journal, How to Build Data Centers People Won't Hate (2026). How AI developers are rethinking siting, design and community deals to win back public trust. *https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/data-center-deals-community-cf92390f*

Research, data, and local impact case studies

- Piedmont Environmental Council, Data Centers and Energy Demand. Lessons from Virginia, the country's largest data center market. *https://www.pecva.org/our-work/energy-matters/data-centers-energy-demand/*
- MultiState, Large-Load Policy and State Pushback. The trend of states making developers fund their own infrastructure. *https://www.multistate.us/insider/2026/4/14/federal-ai-data-center-policy-meets-resistance-from-state-lawmakers*
- Sierra Club, Policies for Data Centers (2026). National recommendations on energy, water, and ratepayer protection. *https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/default/files/2026-01/policies-for-data-centers-2026.pdf*
- Union of Concerned Scientists, Data Center Power Play. On data centers and the electric grid. *https://www.ucs.org/resources/data-center-power-play*
- Union of Concerned Scientists, Costs of the AI Boom. Series on the resource costs of AI growth. *https://blog.ucs.org/series/costs-of-the-ai-boom/*
- Brookings, Employment Effects of Data Centers. Evidence on the jobs data centers actually create. *https://www.brookings.edu/articles/new-evidence-on-data-center-employment-effects/*
- Brookings, Local Implications of Data Centers for Rural Communities. How data centers land in rural areas. *https://www.brookings.edu/articles/local-implications-data-centers-rural-communities-us/*
- Headwaters Economics, Ensuring Development Delivers Local Benefits. Practical guidance for rural communities. *https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/how-rural-communities-can-ensure-development-projects-deliver-local-benefits/*
- Forbes, Tax Breaks for Data Centers Bring Few Jobs (2024). On the weak jobs return of data center incentives. *https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewleahey/2024/08/13/tax-breaks-for-data-centers-bring-few-jobs/*
- Stetson Advocacy Journal, Water Scarcity and Florida Water Policy. Florida-specific water policy context. *https://www2.stetson.edu/advocacy-journal/water-scarcity-and-bottled-water-a-recommendation-for-floridas-water-policy/*
- Better Data Center Project, Diesel Generators at Data Centers (2026). Backup-power emissions and battery alternatives. *https://betterdatacenterproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Diesel-Generators-at-Data-Centers-Status-Impacts-and-Protective-Practices.pdf*
- Research Radar: 10 Things Public Officials Should Know About AI Data Centers. Quick primer for decision-makers. *https://rebootdemocracy.ai/blog/10-things-about-ai-data-centers*
- Data Center Watch. Ongoing briefings on data center developments. *https://datacenterwatch.substack.com/*
- U.S. Data Center Map. Interactive map of existing facilities. *https://www.datacentermap.com/usa/*
- Wall Street Journal: Big Tech Can Build Data Centers People Won't Hate (2026) *https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/data-center-deals-community-cf92390f?st=goMaWN&reflink=article_email_share*

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