

The data center rebellion is here, and it's reshaping the political landscape

As the buildout of AI infrastructure alarms communities, it is fast emerging as a potent electoral issue across the political divide

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By [Evan Halper](#)

SAND SPRINGS, Oklahoma – One float stood out among the tinsel and holiday cheer at the annual Christmas parade here: an unsightly data center with blinding industrial lights and smoke pouring out of its roof, towering menacingly over a helpless gingerbread house.

This city bordering Tulsa is a battleground, one of many across the country where companies seeking to build massive data centers to win the AI race with China are coming up against the reality of local politics.

Sand Springs leaders were besieged with community anger after annexing an 827-acre agricultural property miles outside of town and launching into secret talks with a tech giant looking to use it for a sprawling data center. Hundreds of aggrieved voters showed up at community meetings. Swarms of protest signs are taking route along the rural roads.

“It feels like these data center companies have just put a big target on our backs,” said Kyle Schmidt, leader of the newly formed Protect Sand Springs Alliance. “We are all asking: Where are the people we elected who promised to protect us from these big corporations trying to steamroll us? The people who are supposed to be standing up and protecting us are standing down and caving.”

From [Archibald, Pennsylvania](#), to [Page, Arizona](#), tech firms are seeking to plunk down data centers in locations that sometimes are not zoned for such heavy industrial uses, within communities that had not planned for them. These [supersized data centers](#) can usurp more energy than entire cities and drain local water supplies.

Anger over the perceived trampling of communities by Silicon Valley has entered the national political conversation and could affect voters of all political persuasions in this year's midterm elections.

Many of the neighbors fighting the project in Sand Springs voted for Trump three times and also backed Republican Gov. J. Kevin Stitt, who implores tech firms to build in his state.

"We know Trump wants data centers and Kevin Stitt wants data centers, but these things don't affect these people," said Brian Ingram, a Trump voter living in the shadow of the planned project. "You know, this affects us."

Ingram was standing before a homemade sign he planted on his front lawn that said "Jesus Was Born on Ag Land."

The grassroots blowback comes from deep red states as much as from left-wing groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America, which have helped draw hundreds of residents to hearings in Arizona, Indiana and Maryland.

Even Energy Secretary Chris Wright warned data center developers that they are losing control of the narrative. “In rural America right now, where data centers are being built, everyone’s already angry because their electricity prices have risen a lot,” he told energy executives assembled in Washington for the North American Gas Forum last month. “‘I don’t want them in my state’ is a common viewpoint.”

Some industry groups argue that residents’ concerns are misplaced.

“Fueled by misinformation, driven by radical environmental policies, communities are missing out on the jobs, security and opportunities this technology is delivering,” said an email from Brian O. Walsh, executive director of the AI Infrastructure Coalition. The group says the projects lower electricity prices, a claim that is hotly disputed.

The White House frames the data center boom as beneficial, saying in a statement that it will lead to big investments in infrastructure and boost manufacturing. But the administration is also aware some communities oppose them.

“Communities know what’s best for them, and the Administration is clear that local infrastructure decisions remain with states and localities,” the statement said.

Many local politicians are yielding to community pressure and rejecting data centers. Between April and June, more projects were blocked or delayed than the previous two years combined, according to Data Center Watch, a tracking project by the nonpartisan research firm 10a Labs. Some \$98 billion in planned development was derailed in a single quarter.

Earlier this month, a group of Senate Democrats launched an investigation into the role data centers are playing in increasing electricity prices.

Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont) last month called for a moratorium on data center construction, warning the tech firms are draining scarce energy and water reserves and pushing the cost onto everyday Americans in pursuit of AI technologies that threaten to displace millions from the workforce.

White House AI czar David Sacks replied on X: “He would block new data centers even if states want them & they generate their own power.”

But advocates say residents’ concerns are legitimate.

“This data center expansion affects so many issues,” said Mitch Jones, managing director of policy and litigation at Food and Water Watch. The group this month organized a letter signed by several large, national advocacy groups demanding a moratorium.

“It takes up farmland in rural communities. It takes up dwindling water sources in communities that need cleaner drinking water. And it is driving up electricity prices for everyone,” he said. “It is drawing together people from disparate backgrounds who might not agree on other political issues. They are saying this is taking place without any forethought to communities and we must stop it.”

The NAACP this month convened a two-day “Stop Dirty Data” conference in Washington that focused on the impacts of the AI buildout on minority and low-income communities. It included a bus tour of “Data Center Alley” in Northern Virginia, the world’s largest collection data centers.

Even Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) is championing an AI “bill of rights” to enshrine local governments’ power to stop data center construction and prohibit utilities from pushing AI infrastructure costs onto residents. The break between Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Georgia) and President Donald Trump was driven in part by her vocal criticism of his AI buildout push.

The industry has struggled to quell the concerns. In Chandler, Arizona, former senator Kyrsten Sinema (I), co-founder of the AI Infrastructure Coalition, implored city officials to get onboard with a large proposed project or risk the federal government pushing it through without city input.

The city council rejected the project unanimously.

The vote followed the Tucson city council’s unanimous rejection of a plan which would have required annexing land in the Sonoran Desert that until June had been zoned “rural homestead.” Some voters were outraged that local officials had signed a five-year nondisclosure agreement with Amazon, which did not come to light for two years. Frustration with the power company that would have provided the power has fueled a movement to drive it out in favor of a community-led nonprofit.

Amazon did not respond to questions about the controversy, saying only, “We do not have any commitments or agreements in place to develop this project.” Amazon founder Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.

“People are understandably asking how they will benefit,” said Chris Lehane, chief global affairs officer at OpenAI, which has won initial local approval for some of the country’s largest data center projects. He said companies need to listen to communities and make sure they are sharing in the economic gains. “You need to be on the ground, having these conversations. It is a journey.”

In some places, large tech companies have signed contracts committing to pay for new power grid infrastructure required to bring a data center online, even when the companies are not the only ones that would benefit from it.

It’s a journey that some local officials are willing to go on because the projects generate construction jobs and boost revenue for schools.

“We’re trying to work through this,” said Mike Carter, the city manager in Sand Springs. “This would probably be one of our major employers. It would almost certainly become the dominant part of our tax base. ... When you can surpass Wal-Mart, which is right now the biggest taxpayer in our community, there is a big incentive to look at this.”

He has tried to assure residents that they will have all their questions answered – including the name of the tech firm – before the city hearing this month, where officials will consider rezoning the sprawling property from agricultural to industrial. He said the city has signed other nondisclosure agreements during negotiations with large corporations, such as Olive Garden.

The project developer, White Rose Partners, said none of the costs involved with providing electricity to the Sand Springs data center would fall on residential ratepayers. The firm says the data center would generate millions of dollars in revenue for local schools and services.

It is cold comfort to many residents of the rural community where the data center would industrialize a landscape now defined by the ranches that drew them there.

“I don’t care how much chocolate icing you put on a dog turd, it don’t make it chocolate cake,” said Rick Plummer, who raises elite team-roping horses next to the proposed data center. “They are trying to fluff this data center thing up and say, ‘Man, eat this birthday cake.’ But it isn’t birthday cake.”

On the other side of Tulsa, a steady stream of pickups pulled off the busy local road to sign petitions fighting a different data center proposed for the rural community of Coweta. One sign takes aim at the nondisclosure agreements, stating “NDAs BETRAY.” The petitions demand the firing of a city official who signed one.

“We want to see this damn data center go away and go someplace else,” said Allen Prather, who was leading the petition drive dressed as Santa. “This town deserves a better centerpiece than a data center. They keep coming to smaller and smaller towns. Leave mine alone.”

Sherri Crumpacker, a retired law enforcement officer who pulled over to sign, concurred. “I moved here from California to get away from b.s. like this,” she said.
