

DRAWDOWN GEORGIA

DATA CENTERS IN GEORGIA

WHAT SHOULD COMMUNITIES KNOW AND ASK?

Georgia is experiencing a significant infrastructure transformation. This toolkit explains the basics in plain language and offers questions communities can ask of developers, utilities, and public officials.



DATA CENTERS IN GEORGIA: WHAT SHOULD COMMUNITIES KNOW AND ASK?

Executive Summary | A free educational toolkit from Drawdown Georgia

THE PROBLEM

Data center development is moving faster than most Georgia communities can keep up with. Georgia Power has reported 12,400 megawatts of committed demand through the mid-2030s, and data centers are now operating, under construction, or proposed in at least 51 of Georgia's 159 counties. Local governments are already responding: more than 80 Georgia cities and counties have adopted new ordinances addressing data center construction and operation; others have passed moratoriums.

That scale of activity means local officials and residents are being asked to make high-stakes decisions, often with limited time, technical expertise, or trusted information. Existing resources tend to serve one narrow slice of that audience: county officials, or advocacy groups organizing opposition. Few speak plainly to the resident trying to understand what's actually happening in their own community.

THE RESPONSE

Drawdown Georgia created a free toolkit to fill that gap: a resource that takes no position for or against any specific project, but equips any Georgian to understand data centers and participate in the decisions being made about them.

WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT

- ➡ Designed to educate. The toolkit doesn't advocate for or against development, a deliberate departure from most existing Georgia resources on this topic, which tend to be explicitly pro- or anti-development.
- ➡ Built for a general audience, not just officials or organizers. Plain language, mobile-friendly, no technical background assumed.
- ➡ Video-forward. A six-part series hosted by Melissa Nord, an Emmy-winning meteorologist and Georgia climate educator, makes the material accessible to residents who prefer not to read a long report.
- ➡ Connects to Drawdown Georgia's core mission. It's the only resource in this space that frames data center energy demand as potential leverage for clean energy investment, not just a risk to manage.

REACH AND FORMAT

- A six-episode **video series** with Melissa Nord
- Access to an interactive, regularly updated **map of data** center activity statewide
(developed by Science for Georgia)
- **A full web guide**, organized around the real questions Georgians are searching for online
- **Four downloadable resources**: a one-page quick brief, a printable community meeting checklist, a directory of Georgia organizations and agencies that can help, and a two-page Community Benefits Agreement overview developed with Georgia WAND

CONTENT AND DATA PARTNERS

Southern Environmental Law Center, Science for Georgia, and Sustainable Newton

A COMPLICATED TOPIC, EXPLAINED PLAINLY

Georgia is experiencing a significant infrastructure transformation. Data centers already operate across the state, and more are being proposed. These facilities support services Georgians use every day, from online banking and video calls to cloud storage and artificial intelligence. They also require substantial amounts of electricity, water, land, and public infrastructure.

The topic of data centers is complicated; none can be labeled as simply good or bad. It's important to understand the complexities: whether a particular project is a good fit for a particular place, and whether residents and local leaders have enough information to understand its likely benefits, costs, and tradeoffs.

Drawdown Georgia created this toolkit to help Georgians participate in that conversation. It explains the basics in plain language, identifies information that should be available before major decisions are made, and offers questions communities can ask of developers, utilities, and public officials.

OUR APPROACH

Drawdown Georgia does not take a position for or against any specific data center project. We support climate solutions rooted in equity, public health, environmental well-being and economic stability. This toolkit is designed to help communities understand proposals and engage in local decision-making on their own terms.

SIX THINGS EVERY GEORGIAN SHOULD KNOW ABOUT DATA CENTERS

On the Drawdown Georgia website, you'll find a six-part video series where Georgia atmospheric scientist and award-winning communicator Melissa Nord breaks down the data center questions that matter most with the help of Georgia experts.



WATCH THE VIDEOS HERE: [DRAWDOWNGA.ORG/DATA-CENTERS](https://drawdownga.org/data-centers)



WHAT IS A DATA CENTER?

The physical place where digital information is stored, processed and moved.



HOW DOES A COMMUNITY HAVE A VOICE?

Local zoning, land-use, permitting and public-meeting processes provide important opportunities to ask questions.



HOW MUCH ELECTRICITY DOES IT USE?

The answer varies widely, but the largest campuses can use as much electricity as a city.



CAN DATA CENTERS SUPPORT MORE CLEAN ENERGY?

Data centers can help bring new solar and battery storage online when those commitments are built into the energy plan.



WHICH QUESTIONS MATTER MOST?

Start with the project's full buildout, electricity and water needs, public costs, permanent jobs, environmental effects and enforceable commitments.



WHY DOES IT USE WATER?

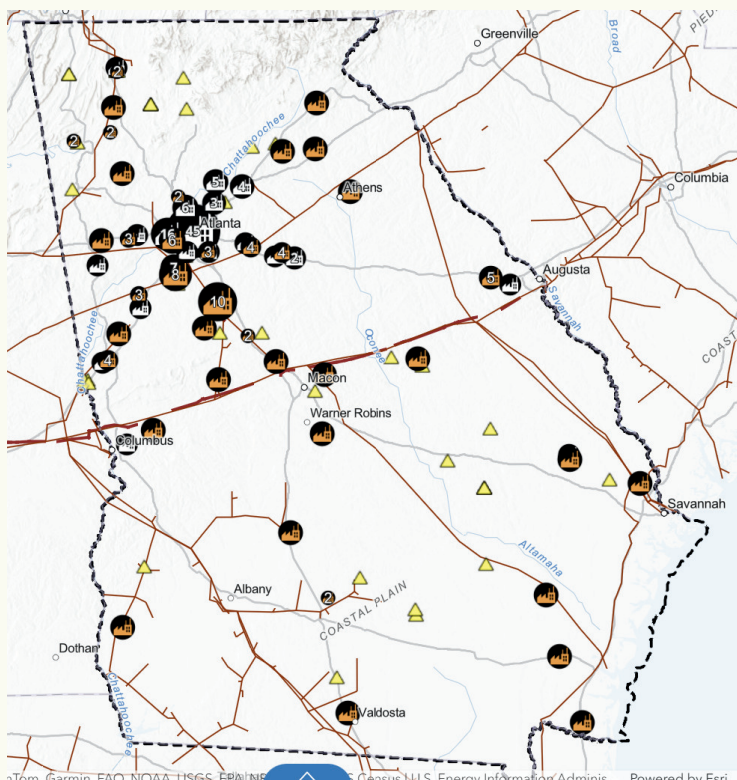
Many facilities use water to remove heat, although cooling technologies differ substantially.



WHERE ARE DATA CENTERS BEING BUILT IN GEORGIA?

Data centers are already operating in multiple parts of Georgia, with many more on the way, including significant activity in metro Atlanta and growing interest in other regions. Because announcements, ownership structures and project timelines change quickly, a map is more useful than a static list.

Science for Georgia's map shows where data centers are operating, under construction or proposed across the state. Developed and maintained by Science for Georgia, a nonprofit that connects science and evidence with public policy and civic life, the web-based version of the map is regularly updated as new projects and information emerge.



SCIENCE FOR
GEORGIA MAP →



When looking at the map online, open the project record and look for the date, source and exact approval being described.

IS THE MAP CURRENT?

Science for Georgia updates the web-based map monthly and displays the date of its most recent update. For the most up-to-date information, check the Georgia Department of Community Affairs Developments of Regional Impact (DRI) portal, local planning and zoning agendas, and county or city commission records.





WHAT DOES “PROPOSED,” “FILED,” “UNDER REVIEW” OR “APPROVED” MEAN ON THE MAP?

PROPOSED

A project has been publicly announced or appears in a public filing, but its required reviews may not have begun.

FILED

A public application or notice has been submitted, such as a rezoning request or Development of Regional Impact filing.

UNDER REVIEW

A government body or agency is actively evaluating an application.

APPROVED

A specified action has been approved by the local government. It does not always mean every local, state, federal, utility or construction requirement is complete.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Site work or building construction is underway.

OPERATING

At least part of the facility is in service.

WITHDRAWN, DENIED OR PAUSED

The identified application is no longer moving forward in its previous form. A revised proposal could still return.

MORATORIUM

A local government has temporarily paused some or all data center applications while it reviews its rules. The scope and duration vary by jurisdiction.





WHAT IS A DATA CENTER, AND WHAT DOES IT ACTUALLY DO?

A data center is a building or campus filled with computer servers and the equipment needed to keep them connected, powered, secure, and cool. It stores and processes digital information and delivers it through high-speed networks.

When you stream a movie, save a photo to the cloud, join a video call, use online banking, search the internet, or use an artificial intelligence tool, some of that activity takes place in a data center. The visible building is only one part of the facility. A large project may also include substations, transmission lines, cooling equipment, water and sewer connections, backup generators, fuel storage, security infrastructure, and fiber-optic lines.

FIVE TYPES OF DATA CENTERS

- **Enterprise** — built for one company's own needs.
- **Colocation** — space, power and cooling leased to multiple customers.
- **Cloud** — supports cloud-computing services for businesses and individuals.
- **Hyperscale** — a very large campus designed to add capacity rapidly.
- **Edge** — a smaller facility located closer to users for less delay.

Some facilities are designed for artificial intelligence or other high-performance computing. These are not always a separate ownership category, but their densely packed equipment may require much more power and cooling per square foot than a conventional facility.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT DATA CENTERS



- Ask what kind of computing the project is designed to support and whether its expected energy or water demand could change as equipment is added.

WHO OWNS AND OPERATES DATA CENTERS?

The landowner, developer, building owner, operator, utility customer, and technology company using the computers may all be different entities. Some projects are built to serve the computing needs of the owner or operator. Other projects are designed to serve third parties, who may rent all or some of the computing power from the facility. A project may also be developed in phases or built before every future tenant is known, and that distinction matters. The company appearing on a rezoning application may not be the company that will ultimately operate the facility or make commitments about energy, water, jobs or community benefits.





WHY IS GEORGIA SEEING SO MUCH DATA CENTER GROWTH?

Georgia has emerged as one of the nation's fastest-growing data center markets, driven by metro Atlanta's extensive fiber network, available land, and energy infrastructure. As demand for artificial intelligence and cloud computing accelerates, data center development is expanding across the state, bringing significant decisions about energy, water, land use, and economic growth to more Georgia communities.

31

large-load customers
committed (May 2026 filing)

12,400 MW

total committed capacity
through the mid-2030s

21 / 10

had broken ground / were
online as of March 2026

The scale of a proposed data center is important. In a May 2026 public filing, Georgia Power reported commitments from 31 large-load customers totaling 12,400 megawatts through the mid-2030s. For context, according to Science for Georgia, these proposed data centers will demand enough electricity to power every single home in the state of Georgia, with enough energy left over to power another million homes out of state.

As of March 31, 2026, 21 of these had broken ground, and 10 were online. "Large-load" includes, but is not limited to, data centers, and a broader project pipeline is not the same as a list of projects certain to be built. Still, it shows why Georgia's energy planning is changing quickly.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT DATA CENTER GROWTH



- What is the project's current status?
- Is the announced tenant committed?
- Will it be developed in phases?
- What would the full buildout (not just the first building) require?

Sources: Georgia PSC public filing, Q1 2026; Georgia Department of Revenue data center exemption.





WHY DO DATA CENTERS USE WATER?

Computer equipment produces heat. Data centers rely on water-based cooling systems to remove that heat so servers can operate reliably. Some systems evaporate water through cooling towers; some use outside air, closed-loop liquid systems, or mechanical chillers; and some combine methods depending on temperature and humidity.

Water can also be used indirectly. Electricity generation may consume water even when the data center itself uses little on-site. For that reason, a complete assessment considers both on-site water and water associated with the power supply.

HOW MUCH WATER DOES A DATA CENTER USE?

There is no single answer. Water use can range from relatively limited to millions of gallons per day depending on the facility's size, computing load, cooling technology, local weather, operating schedule, and water source.

The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences reports that a medium-sized facility can use up to about 300,000 gallons per day for cooling; similar to the amount of water used daily by 1,000 average American homes. Some very large facilities can use up to 5 million gallons per day. Those figures are useful for understanding possible scale, not for predicting a specific Georgia project. A developer should provide project-specific estimates for average use, peak summer use, and full buildout.

It is important to understand what type of cooling systems will be used at a data center, as that impacts how efficiently water is used and potentially re-used. Importantly, unlike the average American home, data centers may not return used water back to the local water table, but instead, the water may largely evaporate. This can be problematic, particularly during periods of drought, if no contingency plans are in place or if alternative cooling methods are not available. Reporting and transparency are key to understanding data center water use over time.

Water impacts are local. Even if data centers account for a small share of water use nationally, a large withdrawal can matter in a community with limited treatment capacity, private wells, agricultural demand, sensitive streams, saltwater intrusion, or drought risk.

Sources: UGA CAES: Understanding How Data Centers Impact Surface and Ground Waters; Georgia EPD water-withdrawal permitting.





WHICH COOLING METHODS USE LESS WATER?

Air-cooled or “dry” systems generally use less on-site water than evaporative systems, but they may use more electricity during hot weather. Closed-loop systems recirculate coolant and can reduce ongoing water demand. Hybrid systems switch among methods. Some facilities use reclaimed wastewater instead of drinking water.

No single technology is best for every location. It depends on how the design performs in Georgia’s heat and humidity, during drought, and at the project’s expected computing density.

COULD A DATA CENTER AFFECT DRINKING WATER OR PRIVATE WELLS DURING A DROUGHT?

It could, depending on the water source, withdrawal volume, available supply, system capacity, and drought plan. A facility served by an existing public water system presents different questions from one drawing directly from groundwater or surface water. The same is true for a facility using potable water versus reclaimed water.

Georgia generally requires a permit from the Environmental Protection Division (EPD) for surface-water or groundwater withdrawals exceeding 100,000 gallons per day on a monthly-average basis. A project supplied by a local utility may rely on that utility’s existing withdrawal permit rather than hold its own. That makes it important to ask the water provider directly how the new demand fits within permitted capacity and long-range plans.

Sources: UGA CAES: Understanding How Data Centers Impact Surface and Ground Waters; Georgia EPD water-withdrawal permitting.





COULD A DATA CENTER AFFECT DRINKING WATER OR PRIVATE WELLS DURING A DROUGHT?

It could, depending on the water source, withdrawal volume, available supply, system capacity, and drought plan. A facility served by an existing public water system presents different questions from one drawing directly from groundwater or surface water. The same is true for a facility using potable water versus reclaimed water.

Georgia generally requires a permit from the Environmental Protection Division (EPD) for surface-water or groundwater withdrawals exceeding 100,000 gallons per day on a monthly-average basis. A project supplied by a local utility may rely on that utility's existing withdrawal permit rather than hold its own. That makes it important to ask the water provider directly how the new demand fits within permitted capacity and long-range plans.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT DATA CENTER AND WATER



- What are average, peak-day, and annual water demands for each project phase and full buildout?
- What cooling technology will be used, and what assumptions support the estimate?
- Will the facility use drinking water, groundwater, surface water, or reclaimed water?
- Does existing capacity cover the demand or will new facilities be needed?
- What analysis supports the water-demand and supply-capacity estimates? Who prepared or reviewed the analysis, and is it public?
- Where will discharge go, and could it affect nearby areas?





HOW MUCH ELECTRICITY DO DATA CENTERS NEED — AND CAN THE GRID HANDLE IT?

Electricity demand varies enormously. A small edge facility may use only a fraction of a megawatt while a hyperscale or artificial-intelligence campus can seek hundreds of megawatts or more as it is built out.

One megawatt is one million watts of electrical capacity. Comparisons to “the number of homes” can help communicate scale, but they should be labeled carefully: a data center can operate around the clock, while a home’s demand rises and falls. Ask for both megawatts, which describe peak capacity, and megawatt-hours, which describe energy used over time.

Nationally, data centers used an estimated 4.4% of U.S. electricity in 2023. A U.S. Department of Energy-supported analysis projected that share could reach roughly 6.7% to 12% by 2028. Georgia’s actual outcome will depend on which proposed projects materialize, when they connect, and how utilities add or manage supply.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT DATA CENTER ELECTRICITY NEEDS



- Requested capacity at opening and full buildout?
- Who pays if infrastructure is built but demand doesn't materialize?
- How many backup generators, and what fuel?
- Does the project need a Georgia EPD air permit? If so, what is the application number and comment period?
- Will actual annual electricity use be publicly reported?





WHERE WILL THE ELECTRICITY COME FROM?

The answer depends on the electric utility serving the site and the resources supplying its system. Georgia's electricity comes from a diverse mix led by natural gas and nuclear power, with coal continuing to play a role. Solar is the state's fastest-growing renewable resource, supplemented by hydropower and smaller amounts of biomass and wind energy.

A data center may be served by Georgia Power, an electric membership corporation or a municipal utility. Electricity delivered through the grid comes from the utility's overall portfolio unless a specific program or contract links the customer to additional resources or renewable-energy attributes.

In December 2025, the Georgia Public Service Commission (PSC) approved a Georgia Power resource agreement totaling 9,885 megawatts, much of it intended to serve new large customers such as data centers. The portfolio includes different resource types. Communities should look beyond a company's broad sustainability goal and ask which resources, contracts and timelines are tied to the Georgia facility.

WHAT NEW INFRASTRUCTURE WILL BE REQUIRED TO SERVE THE DATA CENTER?

Some data centers can be served by existing energy and utility infrastructure. However, most new data centers require specific infrastructure projects to meet their energy needs. These projects may include new substations, which may be built on the data center property or nearby. These projects may also include new transmission lines. If new electricity infrastructure may be required to accommodate the data center project, the utility serving that project may have the right to exercise eminent domain. Eminent domain allows a utility to take land from private landowners (and pay them the fair value of that land) in order to build necessary utility infrastructure.

WHO PAYS FOR POWER PLANTS, TRANSMISSION LINES AND SUBSTATIONS?

The answer is set through utility rules, customer contracts, and regulatory decisions. Georgia Power states that new users of 100 megawatts or more may be subject to requirements that can include paying for necessary infrastructure, 15- to 25-year contracts, minimum monthly bills, collateral, and early-termination payments. The Georgia PSC reviews Georgia Power rules and long-range resource plans.

Those protections are important, but residents can still ask how costs and risks are allocated if demand arrives later than expected, a facility uses less power than projected, or utility assets remain after a customer leaves. Customers served by an EMC or municipal utility may operate under different arrangements.





WILL BACKUP DIESEL GENERATORS OPERATE NEAR HOMES?

Most large data centers install generators to maintain operations during a grid outage. Generators also run for testing and maintenance and, depending on permits and operating plans, may run at other times. They can create short-term noise and emissions, including nitrogen oxides and fine-particle pollution.

The number and size of those generators matter: Georgia EPD has issued or reviewed data center permits ranging from dozens to more than 100 large standby generators. Air-permit requirements depend on the equipment, fuel, potential emissions and operating limits. Permit documents can show generator counts, testing limits, and pollution controls.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT DATA CENTER ELECTRICITY NEEDS



- What is the requested capacity at opening and full buildout?
- Which utility will serve the site, and what pipeline, generation, transmission, and substation additions are expected? Will any of those projects be built outside the data center property?
- What assurances can be offered about how infrastructure projects in the broader community may impact private land?
- Who pays if infrastructure is built but the projected demand does not materialize?
- What contract protections apply to existing customers?
- How could the project affect electric reliability for existing customers?
- How many backup generators are planned, what fuel will they use?
- Will the project use batteries or other lower-emission backup and grid-support technologies?
- Does the project require a Georgia EPD air permit? Has an application or draft permit been published, what is its application or permit number, and when does the public comment period close?
- Will actual annual electricity use and generator operating hours be publicly reported?

Sources: DOE/Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory: 2024 United States Data Center Energy Usage Report; Georgia PSC 2025 Annual Report; Georgia Power customer-protection description; EPA Clean Air Act resources for data centers.





CAN DATA CENTERS HELP BRING MORE SOLAR ENERGY AND BATTERY STORAGE TO GEORGIA?

Yes, data centers could bring more renewable energy to Georgia if new clean-energy resources and measurable commitments are part of the project's energy plan. Georgia has emerged as a national leader in solar deployment and is now making significant investments in battery storage, building on more than 3,000 megawatts of solar capacity with major storage projects underway across the state.

A large, long-term electricity customer can create demand and provide financial support for new solar, battery storage, energy efficiency and grid upgrades. But a corporate renewable-energy goal does not automatically mean the Georgia facility will be powered by new Georgia resources at the hours it operates.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT DATA CENTER ELECTRICITY NEEDS



- Is the resource new?
- Is it located in Georgia or connected to the same grid?
- Does the commitment add clean power or only transfer renewable-energy credits from an existing resource?
- Does it match annual consumption, hourly consumption or only part of the load?
- Who receives the renewable-energy credits?

WHAT IS A CUSTOMER-IDENTIFIED RESOURCE AGREEMENT?

Georgia Power's Clean and Renewable Energy Subscription-Customer Identified Resource program, known as CARES CIR, allows an eligible commercial or industrial customer to identify a proposed renewable-energy project and subscribe to it through Georgia Power, subject to program and economic requirements.

Under the current program, eligible customers may subscribe for up to 100% of annual energy use. The minimum customer agreement is 10 years, and Georgia Power retires the associated renewable-energy credits for participating customers. The program includes utility-scale resources and a distributed-generation option. It creates a pathway for a large customer to help bring forward an additional renewable project, but does not function as a direct physical wire from a solar farm to a data center.





WHAT IS DEMAND RESPONSE, AND COULD A DATA CENTER PARTICIPATE?

Demand response means reducing or shifting electricity use during periods when the grid is especially constrained or expensive. Some computing tasks can be moved to another hour or location. Batteries and on-site energy systems can also reduce grid demand for limited periods.

Data centers have strict reliability requirements, so flexibility will vary by workload and design. Communities and regulators can ask the developer and utility to quantify what portion of demand can be shifted, for how long, under what conditions and with what verification.

WHAT WOULD A STRONG CLEAN ENERGY COMMITMENT LOOK LIKE?

A strong clean energy commitment is specific, measurable, and enforceable. It might identify the amount and location of new solar or other carbon-free generation; include battery storage; establish a completion date; address hourly energy use; assign renewable-energy credits clearly; and require public progress reporting.

It should also consider land, habitat, farmland and community effects associated with the energy resources themselves. Clean energy is not impact-free, and thoughtful siting remains important.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT DATA CENTER ELECTRICITY NEEDS



- Who owns and retires the renewable-energy credits?
- Can the facility reduce load during peak demand or grid emergencies?
- Will the customer use CARES CIR or another approved utility program?
- How much of the project's annual and hourly use will be matched by new clean energy?
- Are solar and storage projects new, in Georgia, and connected on a schedule that matches the data center?
- Are energy-efficiency, power-usage effectiveness and carbon reporting commitments public?

Sources: Georgia Power CARES CIR program; U.S. Department of Energy: Clean Energy Resources to Meet Data Center Electricity Demand.





HOW CAN A DATA CENTER AFFECT THE ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC HEALTH?

Potential effects depend heavily on location, design and operation. Common concerns include land clearing, streams and wetlands, stormwater, habitat fragmentation, energy-related emissions, heat island effect, backup-generator pollution, round-the-clock mechanical noise, lighting, water demand, and construction traffic.

The existence of a potential impact does not tell a community how large it will be. Site plans, technical studies, permits, enforceable limits and ongoing monitoring are what turn a general concern into a project-specific answer.

WILL A DATA CENTER INCREASE NOISE NEARBY?

Cooling equipment, fans, transformers, and other mechanical systems can operate continuously. Backup generators add intermittent noise during testing or outages. Sound can behave differently at night and can include low-frequency components that ordinary descriptions such as “a hum” do not fully capture. A community may want to request that measurable property-line or receptor limits be set, confirm how sound will be monitored after opening, and require corrective action if limits are exceeded.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT NOISE



- Does the project scope include an independent sound study that models the full buildout, nighttime conditions, simultaneous equipment operation, generator testing, and nearby homes, schools and other sensitive locations?

WILL A DATA CENTER AFFECT AIR QUALITY?

The computers themselves do not burn fuel, but backup generators and any on-site combustion equipment produce emissions. The facility's electricity supply also has broader air-quality and climate effects depending on the generating resources used.

Georgia EPD administers state air permits under federal and state law. Public notices and draft permits may provide an opportunity to review proposed equipment, emissions limits, testing hours, and controls.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT AIR QUALITY



- Have cumulative effects been considered if several facilities or other pollution sources are located nearby?





WHAT HAPPENS TO LAND, STREAMS, WETLANDS, AND WILDLIFE HABITAT?

Large campuses can clear and grade hundreds of acres, add extensive roofs and pavement, and alter drainage. Effects depend on the site's previous use, natural resources and stormwater design. Development affecting federally regulated waters or wetlands may require authorization from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. Georgia and local requirements may also address stream buffers, erosion, sediment and stormwater.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT LAND & HABITAT



- Does the project plan include maps showing streams, wetlands, floodplains, groundwater-recharge areas, tree canopy, habitat, and nearby protected land and identify how much land will be disturbed across every phase, not just the first building?

ARE COMMUNITIES WITH EXISTING ENVIRONMENTAL BURDENS BEING CONSIDERED?

Equity begins with understanding who already lives with pollution, infrastructure gaps, high utility burdens, flood risk, or limited access to decision-makers. An equity review can compare the project's potential effects and benefits across neighborhoods, including those from associated transmission lines, substations, generators, water infrastructure, and power generation.

Meaningful engagement should begin early, and include all impacted communities. Information should use accessible language, provide translation and disability access, and make technical materials available with enough time for public review.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT COMMUNITY EQUITY



- Where are the nearest homes, schools, healthcare facilities, and environmentally overburdened communities?
- Has the full buildout been evaluated for noise, air, water, stormwater, habitat, traffic and light?
- Will independent baseline measurements be taken before construction?
- What limits, monitoring, public reporting, and complaint-response process will apply after opening?
- Who is responsible for correcting problems, and how will that obligation survive a sale or operator change?
- Are members of all impacted communities included in conversations, early and often?

Sources: Georgia EPD air permits; Georgia EPD water-quality standards; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Section 404 overview.





WHAT MIGHT CHANGE IF A DATA CENTER IS BUILT NEAR ME?

Construction may bring noticeable short-term changes: clearing, blasting or grading, heavy truck traffic, road work, dust and noise. Once operating, a data center usually creates less daily traffic than an office complex or warehouse of similar size, but neighbors may notice cooling noise, warmer temperatures, security lighting, electrical equipment, periodic generator tests, and new transmission or substation infrastructure.

The experience can vary significantly and depends on distance, topography, vegetation, facility design, and local conditions. A campus screened by setbacks and landforms can affect neighbors differently from one placed close to homes.

DO DATA CENTERS AFFECT NEARBY PROPERTY VALUES?

There is not enough consistent, Georgia-specific evidence that a data center will raise or lower the value of a particular property. Effects may depend on rezoning, proximity, visibility, noise, transmission infrastructure, local tax outcomes, and the surrounding real-estate market. Be cautious with anyone offering a definitive, speculative property valuation.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT LAND USE & COMPATIBILITY



- Can the developer provide a project-specific land-use compatibility analysis, including screening and setbacks, and an explanation of how noise, lighting, and infrastructure will be managed?
- Does the proposed use comply with current zoning and align with the community's adopted comprehensive plan and future land-use map?





HOW FAR AWAY IS “SAFE” TO LIVE FROM A DATA CENTER?

There is no universally accepted distance rule for data centers. Distance alone does not answer the question because facilities, equipment, terrain, and neighboring land uses differ. Compliance with a generic setback also does not guarantee that sound will be inaudible or that every impact has been addressed.

Communities can focus on measurable outcomes: nighttime noise at the nearest home, generator emissions and operating hours, lighting at the property line, emergency planning, setbacks from sensitive uses, and post-opening monitoring.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT NEARBY IMPACTS



- What Should Neighboring Communities Ask To See?
- A full-buildout site plan, including future phases
- Renderings and sight lines from nearby roads and homes
- Independent noise modeling for normal operations and generator testing
- A named contact and enforceable process for complaints and corrections
- Construction hours, truck routes, and road-improvement plans
- Generator counts, fuel storage, and emergency-response plans
- Lighting, landscaping, and tree-preservation plans



DO DATA CENTERS CREATE JOBS AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS?

Data centers can bring large private capital investments, demand for local contractors, property tax revenue, and infrastructure development. They typically support fewer permanent on-site jobs than labor-intensive facilities of comparable size or investment.

The right comparison separates temporary construction jobs from permanent positions and distinguishes direct jobs from indirect or induced estimates. It also accounts for tax exemptions, abatements, public infrastructure costs, and the opportunity cost of the land and utility capacity.

WHAT KINDS OF JOBS CAN A DATA CENTER CREATE?

Construction can employ electricians, plumbers and pipe fitters, equipment operators, engineers, security teams, and other tradespeople for several years, especially on a phased campus. Permanent roles may include technicians, network and facilities staff, electricians, engineers, security, and administration. Job totals vary by operating model.

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT JOBS



- Do jobs numbers refer to peak construction employment or permanent employees?
- What can the developer tell you about wages, benefits, local hiring, apprenticeships, vendor opportunities, and the expected number of workers on-site after the project is fully operational?

WHAT TAXES OR INCENTIVES MAY BE INVOLVED?

Georgia law provides a sales-and-use-tax exemption for qualifying high-technology data center equipment through a state-administered program. Qualification is tied to investment and quality-job requirements that vary with county population. A project may also receive local incentives, such as property-tax arrangements, infrastructure commitments, bonds, or other negotiated terms.

Gross tax-revenue announcements do not show the complete public balance sheet. Communities can ask for an independent fiscal-impact analysis that identifies expected revenue by year, every exemption or abatement, public debt or infrastructure cost, service demands, and financial risk if the project is delayed, built at a smaller scale, or sold.





WHO PAYS FOR ROADS, WATER, SEWER, AND EMERGENCY SERVICES?

It depends on local agreements and utility arrangements. Some improvements may be developer-funded; others may be financed or built by a public authority, utility, or local government. Even when a developer repays costs over time, the public entity may carry construction, financing, or performance risk. Ask for the source of funds, ownership of the completed infrastructure, repayment schedule, guarantees, and the consequences if later phases are not built or if the project ends operations earlier than anticipated. Also ask what road, intersection or access improvements the project will require, and who will pay to build, maintain, and replace them.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY BENEFITS AGREEMENT?

A Community Benefits Agreement, or CBA, is a negotiated agreement that outlines specific benefits or protections associated with a development. Depending on who signs it and how it is structured, it might address local hiring, workforce training, road improvements, water conservation, clean energy, noise controls, community investments, or reporting.

The label alone does not make a commitment strong. Important questions include who negotiated it, who is legally bound, who can enforce it, how performance is measured, whether the public can see results, and whether obligations transfer to a new owner or operator. Some commitments may instead be placed in zoning conditions, development agreements, permits, or utility contracts. Legal review is important.

Georgia WAND has developed a Statewide CBA Framework to help communities across Georgia secure legally enforceable protections, investments, and accountability when major development projects are proposed. If you are navigating a proposed development in your community, Georgia WAND can provide CBA strategy and guidance.

INFO@GEORGIAWAND.ORG
CBA FRAMEWORK



QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT ECONOMIC IMPACT & COMMITMENTS



- How many permanent full-time jobs will exist at full operation, at what wages and with what benefits?
- How many construction jobs are expressed as workers versus job-years?
- What state and local taxes would be paid without incentives, and what is projected after incentives?
- What public infrastructure or financing is required, and who bears each risk?
- What local hiring, training, small-business or community commitments are proposed?
- Which commitments are legally enforceable, publicly reported, and transferable to future owners?





HOW DOES A DATA CENTER GET APPROVED IN GEORGIA?

There is no single statewide “data center permit.” Approval is usually a series of decisions at the local, regional, state, federal, and utility levels. The path depends on the site, local zoning, project size, water source, equipment, and environmental conditions.

Local government often has the central land-use role. A city or county may consider rezoning, a special- or conditional-use permit, annexation, variances, a development agreement, site-plan approval, land-disturbance and building permits, and water or sewer service. If the site already has compatible zoning, fewer decisions may require a public vote—one reason early research matters.

WHAT IS A DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL IMPACT REVIEW?

Georgia’s Development of Regional Impact, or DRI, process is a communication and planning review for large projects whose effects may cross jurisdictional boundaries. It is not a state permit and does not approve or deny the development. Local governments retain their land-use authority.

Rules effective December 15, 2025 specifically classify technological facilities, including data centers, as a DRI category when a project is greater than 500,000 gross square feet or covers more than 200 acres. The same threshold applies in metropolitan and non-metropolitan tiers. Multi-phase projects may be considered cumulatively under the rules.

The host local government submits project information to its Regional Commission, which generally completes the DRI process within 30 days and shares a report with the local government and affected parties. Local review can occur at the same time, but the local government may not take final official action until the DRI process is complete and it has had time to consider the report.

A project below the threshold may still require significant local or environmental approvals. A DRI record is a valuable starting point, not a complete project file.

LEARN MORE ABOUT
THE DRI PROCESS





WHAT OTHER PERMITS OR REVIEWS MIGHT BE REQUIRED?

Depending on the project, the list may include:

Local rezoning, conditional-use, site-plan, land-disturbance, building, and infrastructure approvals

DRI review through the appropriate Regional Commission

Georgia Regional Transportation Authority review in applicable metro Atlanta jurisdictions

Georgia EPD permits or approvals for water withdrawal, wastewater, construction stormwater, and air emissions

Federal authorization for impacts to regulated wetlands or waters

Utility studies, contracts, transmission connections, substations, and generation planning

Road-access or right-of-way approvals from local governments or the Georgia Department of Transportation

Not every project needs every item. Ask the local planning department for a written list of required decisions, the agency responsible for each, and the expected opportunity for public notice or comment.

WHEN CAN THE PUBLIC WEIGH IN?

Public participation most often occurs during local rezoning or conditional-use proceedings, planning commission meetings, city council or county commission meetings, and comment periods for certain environmental permits. A DRI review can also surface project information and comments from affected governments, although it is not itself a referendum.

The best opportunity may occur before a formal hearing, while a site plan, ordinance, or development agreement can still change. Sign up for local agendas and notices, check the DRI portal, and ask planning staff whether a pre-application meeting or application has occurred.

Sources: [Georgia DCA DRI FAQs](#); [Georgia DRI rules effective December 15, 2025](#); [Georgia EPD eServices and permit portal](#).



WHAT CAN I DO BEFORE A DATA CENTER IS PROPOSED IN MY GEORGIA COMMUNITY?

In some communities, data centers only surface as an issue for consideration once a project has already been proposed and approved, to one degree or another, for construction. Tech companies and local governments sometimes utilize non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) to keep data center projects under the public radar during early negotiations. These confidential deals can conceal the true identity of the corporate buyer, along with projected consumption of local water and power resources, until projects are already greenlit.

But sound local development ordinances can help ensure that transparency and public participation are integral to the process from the beginning. With that goal in mind, you can ask your local elected officials these questions BEFORE a data center project is proposed in your community:

ASK YOUR LOCAL ELECTED OFFICIALS:

1

Are there any zoning districts in my city or county where data centers are permitted "by right," meaning no special use or other permit is required from the local government?

Zoning ordinances often include a table of permitted uses by zoning district and should show whether permission is by right or requires a permit.

If data centers are currently permitted by right in any district, local officials can change this by amending their ordinance to require a permit and establish conditions for obtaining one.

2

If data centers are not permitted by right, does obtaining a permit require a public hearing or other informational meeting before issuing a permit?

If a hearing or other public meeting is required, find out how these meetings are publicized and monitor that space.

If a hearing or public meeting is not required, the transparency of the zoning process can be improved by requiring a public hearing and/or additional public meetings before a permit is issued.

4

If your local ordinances require special permitting and public notice/comment for data center projects, find out what questions applicants must answer.

The list of the 10 Most Important Questions to Ask on page 25 of this toolkit is a good reference point to ensure applicants address potential impacts and provide communities with an opportunity to understand the effects a proposal will have on their city or county.





The Energy Policy and Innovation Center (EPICenter) at Georgia Tech hosts and maintains a robust reference of local ordinance examples from across Georgia and other states in their **Georgia Data Center Ordinance Hub**. The hub is organized around five major thematic areas that collectively provide a framework local governments and community activists can use to assess the completeness of their local ordinances:



SITE PLANNING &
BUILDING DESIGN

INFRASTRUCTURE &
UTILITIES

ENVIRONMENTAL &
COMMUNITY
PROTECTIONS

PUBLIC SAFETY &
SECURITY

LIFECYCLE
GOVERNANCE

HOW CAN I ENGAGE WHEN A DATA CENTER IS PROPOSED IN MY GEORGIA COMMUNITY?

Start by learning what decision is actually pending, who has authority over it, and when the public record will close. Effective engagement is specific, factual and connected to the standards the decision-maker must apply.

HOW DO I FIND OUT WHETHER A DATA CENTER IS PROPOSED IN MY COMMUNITY?

START WITH THESE PUBLIC SOURCES:

- ➡ Search the Georgia DCA DRI portal by county and project type.
- ➡ Check the city or county planning department's rezoning, special-use, annexation and development records.
- ➡ Review planning commission, city council and county commission agendas and minutes.
- ➡ Search Georgia EPD public notices for air, water and wastewater actions.
- ➡ Ask the local economic-development authority about land transactions, bonds, incentives, or infrastructure agreements that are public records.
- ➡ Ask the electric and water utilities whether service requests or infrastructure decisions have been publicly disclosed.

Project names can change, and applications may be filed by a limited-liability company rather than a familiar technology brand. Search the property address, parcel number, applicant, landowner, and related company names.





WHICH MEETINGS SHOULD I ATTEND?

The relevant meetings may include a neighborhood information session, planning commission hearing, zoning board meeting, city council or county commission meeting, development-authority meeting, utility or PSC proceeding, and state environmental-permit hearing.

Before attending, read the agenda and staff report. Determine whether the meeting is informational, a formal public hearing, or the final vote. Rules for speaking and submitting written comments vary.

HOW CAN I ASK QUESTIONS THAT PRODUCE USEFUL ANSWERS?

Ask for a number, document, responsible party, and deadline whenever possible. Using the questions in this toolkit will help you seek out specific, verifiable information.

If information is unavailable, ask when it will be provided and whether the decision can be made responsibly without it. Separate what the developer promises to pursue from what an agreement or permit requires.

WHAT RECORDS SHOULD I REQUEST?

Useful records may include the application, full-buildout site plan, traffic study, noise study, water-demand analysis, utility-capacity correspondence, fiscal-impact analysis, incentive term sheet, development agreement, staff report, DRI materials, environmental applications, and draft permit conditions.

Georgia's (QR Code: Open Records Act) may provide access to existing public records, subject to legal exemptions. A request is more useful when it identifies the agency, project, date range, and types of records sought. It cannot require an agency to create a new analysis that does not exist.

HOW CAN A COMMUNITY STAY ENGAGED AFTER APPROVAL?

Approval is not the end of the process. Track whether conditions are incorporated into final documents, whether permits are issued, whether the site plan changes, and whether required reports are published. Identify the local official or department responsible for enforcement and the process for reporting noise, dust, traffic, water, or other concerns.

Communities can ask for periodic public reporting on construction progress, permanent jobs, energy and water use, generator operation, environmental monitoring and community commitments while recognizing that some utility or business information may be treated as confidential.



10 MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK

➡ WHAT IS THE PROJECT AT FULL BUILDOUT?

Ask for total acreage, buildings, square footage, phases, intended computing use, tenant status, and timeline beyond the first phase. Find out if the facility complies with current zoning and the local comprehensive plan, or if it will require annexation, rezoning, or special permitting.

➡ HOW MUCH ELECTRICITY WILL IT REQUIRE?

Request peak demand and annual energy use at opening and full buildout, along with the serving utility and related generation, transmission, or substation needs. Find out if the local grid can support the project without raising outage risk or costs for existing customers.

➡ WHO PAYS FOR NEW INFRASTRUCTURE AND WHO HOLDS THE RISK?

Identify who funds new infrastructure and what contracts, minimum payments, collateral, and termination obligations protect other customers.

➡ HOW MUCH WATER WILL IT USE?

Request average, peak-day and annual demand; water source; cooling technology; wastewater plan; and operations during extreme heat or drought. Ask if the capacity of the water source supplying the facility has been independently verified.

➡ HOW WILL THE PROJECT SUPPORT CLEAN ENERGY AND EFFICIENCY?

Ask if the developer will commit to new solar or other climate solutions like battery storage, energy efficiency, renewable-energy credits and the ability to reduce demand when the grid is stressed.

➡ WHAT WILL NEARBY RESIDENTS EXPERIENCE?

Address construction, noise, use of diesel generators, air emissions, lighting, traffic, setbacks, landscaping and the process for resolving complaints. Ask how water use, energy use, emissions, and noise will be monitored after approval, and what happens if the facility expands, exceeds its projections, or changes ownership.

➡ HOW WILL LAND AND WATER RESOURCES BE PROTECTED?

Review streams, wetlands, floodplains, habitat, tree clearing, impervious surface, stormwater and mitigation across every phase.

➡ WHAT IS THE COMPLETE PUBLIC FINANCIAL PICTURE?

Compare permanent jobs and expected tax revenue with incentives, abatements, infrastructure spending, financing obligations and public-service costs.

➡ WHICH COMMITMENTS ARE ENFORCEABLE—AND BY WHOM?

Identify where each promise is documented, who monitors it, what must be reported, what happens if it is not met and whether it transfers to a future owner. Find out if there is an enforceable Community Benefit Agreement already in place, and what specific commitments it includes.

➡ WHEN AND HOW CAN THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATE?

List every remaining decision, responsible agency or governing body, public meeting or comment deadline, and location of the public record.



WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT DATA CENTERS IN GEORGIA?

START HERE: UNDERSTAND THE BASICS

Science for Georgia:

Georgia-specific data center organizing toolkit for communities, data, a live map of data center projects statewide, and other helpful resources.

UGA College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences:

Georgia-specific research on how data centers affect surface water and groundwater.

Southern Environmental Law Center:

Recommended first call for communities that need legal guidance on zoning, Community Benefit Agreement language, or permitting challenges. Provides free or low-cost guidance to communities and environmental advocates; not a developer-side firm. Publisher of the report, "Getting It Right: Local Approaches to Data Center Development."

Georgia Data Center Ordinance Hub (EPIcenter, Georgia Tech):

Interactive, side-by-side comparison of data center land-use ordinances across roughly 180 Georgia jurisdictions. Useful for any community drafting or evaluating its own ordinance.

Georgia Department of Community Affairs Development of Regional Impact (DRI) Process:

The state process that reviews large-scale developments, including many data centers, for regional impact. Communities should contact their Regional Commission directly to check DRI status or ask process questions.

DOWNLOAD THE FULL LIST OF
DATA CENTER RESOURCES



WHO DEVELOPED THIS TOOLKIT?

This toolkit was developed by Drawdown Georgia with content and data support from the Southern Environmental Law Center, Science for Georgia, and Sustainable Newton.

An educational video series is available online at DrawdownGA.org/data-centers by Melissa Nord, a Georgia Tech-trained atmospheric scientist, Certified Broadcast Meteorologist, and Emmy Award-winning communicator who helps make complex climate and science topics understandable and relevant to Georgians.

Information about data centers, regulations and individual projects changes quickly. This toolkit is educational and does not provide legal, engineering, financial or regulatory advice. Verify project-specific information with the responsible local government, agency, utility and qualified advisers before relying on it.



LAST UPDATED: SEPTEMBER 2026