PART TWO · SUMMER 2026 · STATE, CITY & LOCAL

FOLLOW THE LOBBY MONEY

PART TWO

The deal before the vote — how the data-center buildout is decided before the public ever gets to speak.

How developers, utilities and political allies build money, momentum and government support at the state, city and local level before communities know what is coming — or retain the power to stop it.

BY ALAN SHIMEL

PART TWO OF A CONTINUING INVESTIGATION

BY ALAN SHIMEL · EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, TECHSTRONG GROUP

“We were the guys that basically wrote the bill.”

On July 6, 2026, an engineer stood before a city council in North Carolina to explain what a small town should demand before a data center arrived. Then, without meaning to, he explained everything else.

TED MCGAVRAN is an electrical engineer and the chairman of Belmont's Environmental Sustainability Board. He was there to help. He talked about noise, power generation, zoning, and the protections a community might want before a developer chose a site and started applying pressure.

Then he described a project he already knew: the Ridgeline data-center and power-generation complex being pursued by Fundamental Data in Tucker and Grant counties, West Virginia. In explaining the regulatory environment around it, McGavran made an extraordinary claim.

“We were the guys that basically wrote the bill and got it through the Legislature,” he said. He then described the practical consequence more plainly: *“We can pretty much do whatever we want to do up there.”*

The legislation was West Virginia House Bill 2014 — the Power Generation and Consumption Act. It created a state-level framework for qualifying data centers and their power projects while sharply restricting the ability of local governments to regulate them.

Fundamental Data says that is not true. The company said McGavran was not authorized to speak on its behalf and categorically denied drafting or participating in drafting HB 2014. Governor Patrick Morrisey's office said the legislation was drafted within the governor's office. A representative for House Speaker Roger Hanshaw said the same.

Those denials matter. McGavran's statement is not proof that Fundamental Data wrote West Virginia law. It is a recorded statement by someone who identified himself as working on the company's project, and it raises questions that deserve answers.

The circumstances make those questions harder to dismiss. McGavran was urging *his own community* to establish protections while describing a project operating in a state that had removed comparable local authority. He appeared to understand both sides of the equation: the value of preserving local control where he lived, and the value of eliminating it where the project was being built.

This is where Part Two of our investigation begins.

Part One of "Follow the Lobby Money" examined how the data-center and AI infrastructure industries were shaping national policy around energy, permitting, subsidies, and who ultimately pays for the buildout. Part Two follows that money out of Washington and into statehouses, governors' offices, utility commissions, economic-development authorities, county governments, and city councils.

Part One asked who was shaping the *national* rules governing who pays for the AI infrastructure boom.

Part Two asks who is shaping the *state and local* rules governing who gets to decide.

Businesses lobby. Utilities cultivate political relationships. Governors compete for major projects. Economic-development officials negotiate confidentially. None of that began with artificial intelligence, and none of it is necessarily improper.

Companies have legitimate reasons to protect site-selection information. Land prices can soar when a buyer's identity becomes public. Competitors can interfere. A premature announcement can create expectations around a project that may never be built. State officials do not want to lose multibillion-dollar investments because they could not maintain confidentiality during an early negotiation.

But confidentiality has consequences when it extends beyond protecting a possible site and begins concealing the *laws, subsidies, utility commitments and land-use changes* being assembled to make a project possible.

Across the cases we examined, a recurring period appears between a government's first substantive engagement with a data-center project and the public's first meaningful opportunity to understand it.

We call it the **public-information gap**.

During that gap, officials may negotiate tax treatment, commission infrastructure studies, alter zoning rules, secure land, hire consultants, build legislative support, and commit public resources. Residents may eventually receive formal notice. They may be invited to a hearing. They may be given three minutes at a microphone.

The question is what remains undecided by the time they arrive.

> *"A public hearing is meaningful only if public participation can still change the result."*
>
> THE PREMISE OF THIS INVESTIGATION

If the government has already redesigned the law, made financial commitments, promised infrastructure and invested its political credibility in landing the project, the hearing risks becoming something else: a ceremony conducted after the real decision.

THE PATTERN

What we saw, over and over, in three states.

Louisiana, West Virginia and Pine Island are not identical cases. They share a shape.

THE PLAYBOOK — HOW THE APPROVAL SYSTEM ITSELF CHANGES

01 DEFINE
Frame data centers as strategically important — jobs, tax base, national AI competitiveness.

02 PREEMPT
Move approval authority to the state. Restrict local governments from applying stricter standards.

03 COMPRESS
Shorten hearing windows. Set default-approval clocks. Deem silence consent.

04 CONFINE
Confidentiality on names, sites, and terms. Distribute NDAs to the officials being asked to decide.

05 COMMIT
Subsidies, land, roads, and utility commitments assembled before the public knows what's being built.

06 EXPORT
Package the model into reusable legislation. Carry it from one statehouse to another.

A composite drawn from three case studies and one bill still moving through the Pennsylvania Legislature. No single actor executes all six steps; the pattern emerges from many decisions taken together.

Not every step is used in every place. But the pattern is now recognizable enough that a resident, a city attorney or a state legislator confronting a new proposal can ask the right questions in advance instead of the right questions in hindsight. The three case studies that follow — Louisiana, West Virginia and Pine Island — do not each execute all six steps. Read together, they show the whole architecture at work.

RICHLAND PARISH, LOUISIANA

Building the deal behind the NDA.

Meta's Hyperion campus began publicly as a $10 billion project. It has grown into a planned AI infrastructure buildout the company says could ultimately reach $50 billion. The relevant question is how much of that achievement occurred before Louisiana residents knew what their government was negotiating on their behalf.

THE GROUND *Cleared land in Richland Parish. Meta says the Hyperion campus could ultimately represent up to $50 billion in AI infrastructure investment — jobs, tax revenue, and a potentially transformative opportunity for a rural region that has watched younger residents leave for decades. Those benefits are real. So is the political achievement required to land the project.*

LOUISIANA · THE RECONSTRUCTED SEQUENCE JAN — NOV 2024

Entergy executives began discussions with Meta in January 2024. The following month, representatives of Meta met privately with Gov. Jeff Landry, Entergy, Louisiana Economic Development, and senior legislative officials. According to a detailed reconstruction of the negotiations, some of the people brought into the process were not initially told that the company was Meta.

Meta communicated a central requirement: the project would not move forward without favorable sales-tax treatment.

On April 23, 2024, Landry personally signed a mutual nondisclosure agreement with Laidley LLC, the Meta subsidiary used for the project. The NDA covered proposed terms, pricing and other financial information, restricted public announcements and treated the agreement's own existence as confidential.

The NDA was not confined to a junior economic-development official evaluating a prospective site. **The governor had personally placed his office inside the confidential relationship.**

Landry then brought additional cabinet members and legislative leaders into the process. Louisiana Economic Development Secretary Susan Bourgeois later described blank NDAs being distributed for participants to sign.

Six days after Landry executed the Laidley agreement, another piece of the influence machinery appeared in Louisiana's public records.

On April 29, Christian Rhodes of Pelican State Partners registered to represent Meta before Louisiana's legislative, executive and local governments. Rhodes was already registered to represent Entergy Services.

Louisiana Board of Ethics records therefore place the same lobbyist on behalf of the company seeking the data center and the utility recruiting and preparing to power it — during the critical period in which Louisiana was constructing the policy package.

That fact does not prove Rhodes drafted legislation, negotiated Hyperion's terms, or acted improperly. Shared lobbyists and overlapping clients are common in state capitals. What the registration establishes is a precise relationship at a precise time.

> *"Meta added a lobbyist who already represented Entergy six days after the governor signed the secret agreement."*
>
> LOUISIANA BOARD OF ETHICS REGISTRATIONS, APRIL 2024

THE SEQUENCE MOVED QUICKLY

What HB 827 became on the way through the Legislature.

The original measure dealt primarily with broadband-related tax treatment. During the legislative process it was substantially rewritten — and the rewrite tracked the private timeline almost exactly.

THE HYPERION SEQUENCE — WHAT HAPPENED BEHIND THE NDA

Jan 2024	Entergy begins private discussions with Meta.
Feb 2024	Meta meets privately with Gov. Landry, Entergy, LED and legislative leaders.
Apr 23	Landry personally signs mutual NDA with Laidley LLC (Meta subsidiary).
Apr 23	House Ways and Means Committee reports amendments to HB 827 the same day.
Apr 29	Christian Rhodes of Pelican State Partners registers to represent Meta — six days after the NDA. He already represents Entergy.
May 13	Appropriations reports amendments that transform HB 827 into the data-center incentive.
May 15	House passes the amended bill. Senate passes unanimously May 23.
Nov 2024	Entergy files LPSC application identifying the AI data center and three new natural-gas plants — long after the political architecture is set.

Reconstruction of public records, Louisiana Board of Ethics filings, and legislative history.

> *Reconstructed from public records, Louisiana Board of Ethics filings, and the enrolled legislative history of HB 827 — ultimately signed into law as Act 730. The program authorized sales- and use-tax rebates for approved data centers for as long as 20 years, with the possibility of a ten-year renewal.*

Rep. Chris Turner, the bill's original sponsor, later said House Speaker Phillip DeVillier told him the measure would have to be repurposed — but Turner said he was not initially told why. Turner also acknowledged the discomfort created by trying to move a significant policy change while participants were restrained by confidentiality requirements.

A PRIVATE TRANSACTION INSIDE A PUBLIC ARGUMENT

What the NDA also protected.

The most troubling Louisiana sequence did not emerge from a campaign-finance spreadsheet. It emerged from the land.

State Sen. John "Jay" Morris was an advocate for bringing Hyperion to Louisiana. He co-sponsored legislation that expanded Louisiana Economic Development's authority, voted for the data-center tax incentives, and supported Entergy's proposed power infrastructure.

Morris also owned or co-owned more than 2,000 acres around the Hyperion site.

Reporting by Floodlight found that Morris and his business partners bought and sold property around the project while the development moved forward. Property in which Morris had an interest was used as a source of dirt for construction. He acquired additional property after Meta's public announcement.

The most consequential transaction involved Entergy. Morris contacted Public Service Commissioner Jean-Paul Coussan in support of Entergy's application to build the power plants required for Hyperion. At the same time, Morris was negotiating under an NDA to sell land to Entergy.

Four weeks after the commission approved the utility plan, Morris and his partners signed agreements to sell Entergy almost 300 acres for one of the generating stations, along with additional property rights needed for transmission and other infrastructure.

Coussan reportedly did not know about the pending land transaction when Morris advocated for the application. Morris said the Entergy NDA prevented him from disclosing it.

Morris denies wrongdoing. He says his land ownership was publicly recorded, the legislation was general rather than written exclusively for Meta, and his participation helped bring an enormously valuable development to an economically challenged part of Louisiana.

Those defenses deserve to be heard. Rural landowners were entitled to sell their property. Public officials are not prohibited from having private businesses merely because legislation may affect their region. The existence of an NDA is not proof of corruption. Nor does the timing alone establish that Morris used his office illegally for personal enrichment.

But the sequence exposes a failure that does not depend on proving a crime.

The NDA did not merely prevent residents from understanding the deal. It prevented a regulator from knowing that an elected official advocating for the utility's application was negotiating to sell property to that utility.

That information was material whether the transaction was legal or not. Disclosure would not necessarily have stopped the project or disqualified Morris from participating. It would have allowed the people hearing his argument to understand the interests accompanying it.

TUCKER COUNTY, WEST VIRGINIA

Louisiana assembled a deal. West Virginia changed the system.

HB 2014 did not simply encourage data-center development. It created a certified microgrid and high-impact data-center framework designed to make the state attractive to projects capable of consuming and generating extraordinary amounts of electricity — and it did so by moving authority away from the counties that would host them.

THE RESOURCE *Appalachian West Virginia at dawn. The state's argument for HB 2014 is easy to understand: coal, natural gas, land, and communities that need investment. Data centers require power. A coordinated state framework can convert those resources into construction jobs, industrial demand and tax revenue. That is the strongest case for the law. It is also a description of preemption.*

WEST VIRGINIA · THE ENROLLED LAW

HB 2014, POWER GENERATION & CONSUMPTION ACT

The enrolled law advertises the state's energy resources and favorable regulatory environment as competitive advantages. It centralizes important approval authority, limits the ability of county and municipal governments to regulate qualifying projects, and permits certain project information designated as confidential business information to remain outside ordinary public disclosure.

The state's argument is easy to understand. West Virginia has coal, natural gas, available land, and communities that need investment. Data centers require power. Allowing every local government to impose different conditions could delay projects for years, produce inconsistent standards, and send investment elsewhere.

That is the strongest case for HB 2014.

It is also a description of preemption. The law's competitive advantage is partly that the communities hosting qualifying projects possess less authority to reject or condition them.

The Ridgeline project illustrates what that means on the ground. Fundamental Data has pursued a large natural-gas generation and data-center complex near Davis and Thomas in Tucker County. McGavran described a project capable of producing between three and five gigawatts. Fundamental Data later characterized aspects of the project as conceptual, while West Virginia agencies produced differing accounts of the company's control over the proposed site.

Residents have struggled to determine exactly what is being built, how large it will become, and which agency is responsible for considering the project as a whole. Environmental regulators evaluated the proposed generation facilities within the limits of their statutory authority. Other agencies considered different pieces.

No single process provided the public with a complete evaluation of the combined power plant, data center, transmission requirements, and long-term community effects.

Each state agency can say, truthfully, that some other part of the project is outside its jurisdiction. The developer can address each regulator only on the narrow issue before it. Residents are left trying to assemble the full picture themselves — even though they have less access to the relevant information than the company or the state.

WHAT THE DISCLOSURES SHOW

West Virginia's lobbying rules were built for a different era.

The West Virginia Coal Association actively advocated for provisions favorable to coal generation and publicly thanked Gov. Morrisey for including the industry in the development and passage of HB 2014. During the first half of the 2025 legislative year, association president Chris Hamilton reported **$22,162** in lobbying expenditures — making the association one of the state's largest identified spenders during the period.

Other lobbyists active during the session represented combinations of natural-gas, technology, and data-center interests. But West Virginia generally does not require lobbyists to identify *which bill* generated each expense or how compensation should be allocated among clients. That limitation is not a footnote. It is part of the story.

THE CONVERGENCE AROUND ROGER HANSHAW

The overlap the disclosure laws do not require the state to reveal.

Hanshaw was a principal legislative sponsor of HB 2014 and helped move it through the House. He is also an attorney with Bowles Rice. In March 2026, after the legislative session ended, Hanshaw appeared as counsel for Fundamental Data in litigation involving the Ridgeline project. He has also represented an affiliate associated with another data-center-related power project.

There is no evidence presently establishing that Hanshaw represented Fundamental Data while HB 2014 was being drafted or passed. We should not suggest otherwise. Legislators in West Virginia are permitted to maintain private legal practices, and Hanshaw's representation may comply with the state's ethics requirements.

The issue is the overlap between public authority and private professional opportunity, combined with disclosure laws too weak to reveal the entire relationship.

The speaker helped enact the rules governing a new industry. His law firm operates in that industry. He later represented a company benefiting from the framework. The public is entitled to know when the private relationship began, what conflicts were reviewed, and whether the firm or its clients communicated with the speaker or governor's office about the legislation.

Those are questions, not accusations. They are questions created by the state's own choices about transparency.

Which brings us back to McGavran.

Perhaps he exaggerated. Perhaps he casually took credit for legislation his company did not write. Perhaps he was referring broadly to industry influence rather than literal corporate authorship. Fundamental Data's denial may be entirely accurate.

But when a person working on a project tells a public body that his side wrote the law and can now do largely what it wants, the appropriate response is not to shrug because the statement was unauthorized.

It is to produce the communications that show what actually happened.

PINE ISLAND, MINNESOTA

The subsidy before the name.

In Pine Island, the public process was not eliminated. Meetings were held. Notices were issued. An environmental review was conducted. The project appeared in public documents. Yet residents did not know the identity of the company behind it.

THE TOWN *A small Midwestern main street at dusk. Pine Island approved approximately $36.5 million in property-tax abatements for Project Skyway on Feb. 4, 2026. Google was not publicly identified as the end user until Feb. 24 — 20 days after the financial agreement was approved. A project can be publicly visible without being meaningfully disclosed.*

PINE ISLAND · THE CHRONOLOGY

JAN 2024 — FEB 2026

The development known as **Project Skyway** encompasses approximately 482 acres and includes at least 100 acres of planned data-center development. A May 22, 2026, Goodhue County District Court order established that city communications concerning potential data-center development began as early as January 2024.

On November 15, 2024, Pine Island City Administrator Elizabeth Howard entered into an NDA with Ryan Companies. An engineering firm working with the city signed a substantially identical agreement. The agreements described Ryan as the agent of an unnamed client, gave that client rights under the confidentiality arrangement, and contemplated its participation in the transaction.

By February 2025, Ryan had supplied city officials with "community talking points" describing a campus for an unidentified Fortune 200 company.

Evidence presented in the litigation indicated that the unnamed client reviewed and approved a draft environmental document even though the public-facing Alternative Urban Areawide Review analyzed generic development scenarios.

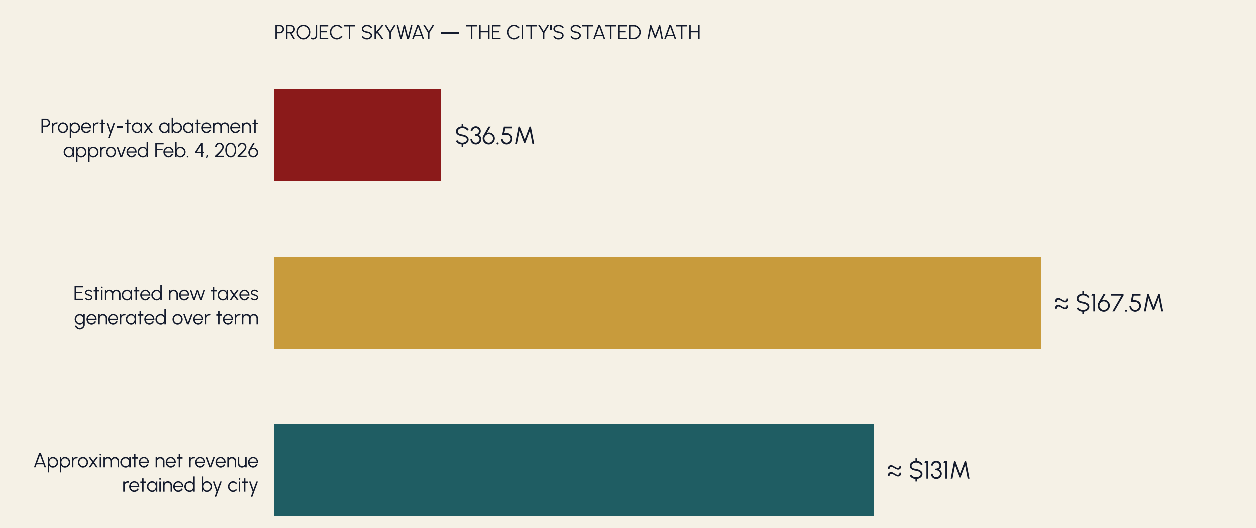
The City of Pine Island disputes the suggestion that the public process was a sham. Its official Project Skyway timeline lists environmental notices, open houses, comment periods, hearings, and council action. The city says the two staff NDAs were terminated, Minnesota disclosure law took precedence, and the documents formally presented to the council were public.

Those facts matter. So does the chronology.

On **February 4, 2026,** the City Council approved approximately $36.5 million in property-tax abatements for Project Skyway. **Google was not publicly identified as the end user until February 24 — 20 days after the financial agreement was approved.**

The initial phase carried a commitment of at least 38 full-time on-site jobs associated with approximately $700 million in investment. The abatements can apply to individual parcels for 20 years and extend across the agreement's broader term. The contract also contains confidentiality mechanisms for information claimed as a trade secret and remedies if the city impairs or breaches the agreement.

Those provisions are not inherently extraordinary in a complex industrial-development contract. They do, however, demonstrate that Pine Island was entering a sophisticated, long-term financial relationship while the public still did not know the corporate party ultimately expected to benefit.



Approved 20 days before Google was named as the beneficiary. Source: City of Pine Island.

> *This is not a giveaway in which Pine Island receives nothing. The existence of a benefit does not answer the question at the heart of the transaction: how could residents evaluate whether $36.5 million in abatements was necessary to attract Google when they were not told Google was the beneficiary until after the agreement had been approved?*

The company's identity matters. Google's financial capacity matters. Its site alternatives matter. Its need for the incentive matters. Its environmental commitments, negotiating history, and long-term intentions matter.

Residents were asked to evaluate shell entities, a developer, and an unnamed Fortune 200 company. City officials and Ryan knew more. The unnamed client knew more. The court record indicates that the client was not merely browsing possible sites but participating in the review of a document shaping the public's understanding of the development.

The court has not ruled on the ultimate merits of the environmental challenge. Its temporary order halted construction because the plaintiffs showed a sufficient possibility of success and risked losing meaningful relief if building commenced before the dispute was decided.

That is not a final finding that Pine Island, Ryan or Google violated the law. It is confirmation that the information gap was consequential enough to warrant judicial intervention.

> *"A project can be publicly visible without being meaningfully disclosed."*

THE PINE ISLAND PARADOX

THE INSTRUMENT *The NDA is a routine tool in industrial site selection. It becomes something else when it is signed not only by developers but by governors, city administrators, engineering consultants and elected officials — and when its scope extends beyond protecting a possible site to shaping the laws, subsidies and utility commitments being assembled to make a project possible.*

TWO COMMUNITIES THAT STILL GOT TO SAY NO

Not every community loses.

Indianapolis and Chandler offer a useful comparison — and a warning about what preemption removes.

FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP, INDIANA

Google withdrew before the vote.

Google sought to rezone approximately 468 acres for a proposed data-center campus. The project advanced through parts of the local process despite intense opposition. An NDA signed by a council member contributed to residents' distrust and raised familiar questions about who knew what and when.

But the Indianapolis City-County Council still possessed the authority to vote. Residents organized. Hundreds appeared at the council meeting. Elected officials faced a real decision before the rezoning became final.

Google withdrew the proposal before the vote.

CHANDLER, ARIZONA

Rejected unanimously.

A developer sought rezoning for a proposed AI data-center project in a city already hosting numerous data centers. Former Sen. Kyrsten Sinema advocated for the development through the AI Infrastructure Coalition, whose supporters have included major technology, energy and financial interests.

The campaign did not succeed. More than 200 public comments opposed the project, according to reporting on the proceeding, while only eight supported it.

The Chandler City Council rejected the rezoning unanimously.

These cases do not prove that local opposition is always wise or that every rejection serves the national interest. They prove something more basic. When communities retain authority, receive enough information to organize, and reach a genuine vote before the government has irreversibly committed itself, *public participation can change an outcome*.

That is why preemption and secrecy matter. They do not merely make approval more efficient. They can eliminate the conditions that made the Indianapolis and Chandler outcomes possible.

THE PATTERN IN ONE VIEW

Two conditions changed everything.

Local authority. And time enough to know the name.

WHERE THE PUBLIC PROCESS STILL HAD TEETH

PLACE	PROJECT	Local authority retained?	Public knew end user?	Reached a genuine vote?	Outcome
Richland Parish, LA	Hyperion / Meta	NO	AFTER APPROVAL	NO	APPROVED
Tucker County, WV	Ridgeline	NO	YES	NO	ADVANCED
Pine Island, MN	Project Skyway / Google	YES	AFTER APPROVAL	YES	APPROVED
Franklin Twp., IN	Google rezoning	YES	YES	YES	WITHDRAWN
Chandler, AZ	AI data center	YES	YES	YES	REJECTED

Public participation had power where local authority was retained AND the community learned the end user in time to organize.

Where local authority was retained AND the end user was publicly identified in time for residents to organize, communities were able to shape or reject the outcome. Where either condition failed, the vote arrived after the meaningful choices had been made.

THE ROOM *A public hearing is supposed to happen before the government decides. It is not supposed to be the ceremony at which officials explain a decision already secured through private agreements, political pressure, and money the public never had a chance to see.*

THE MODEL SPREADS

From individual projects into reusable legislation.

Pennsylvania shows how the contest is moving from individual projects into reusable legislation.

Senate Bill 939 would establish an Artificial Intelligence, Data Center and Emerging Technology Regulatory Sandbox Program and create an expedited framework for high-impact data centers with dedicated power. Supporters say Pennsylvania needs predictable permitting, consistent rules, and a coordinated development strategy if it wants to compete for AI infrastructure investment.

The proposal would also restrict municipalities from applying certain data-center-specific zoning standards more stringent than those applied to comparable industrial uses. It establishes compressed periods for considering some applications, including **a 30-day window for use permits and 120 days for conditional-use decisions**, with approval possible by default when a municipality fails to act in time.

The Pennsylvania Municipal League has warned that the approach would preempt meaningful aspects of municipal land-use authority.

SB 939 remains proposed legislation. It has not created an accomplished bypass, and Pennsylvania lawmakers continue considering other measures that would give municipalities additional time to revise local data-center rules. The final balance between state coordination and municipal control remains unsettled.

But the strategy is now visible.

Define data centers as strategically important. Characterize varying local rules as an impediment. Create expedited reviews. Prevent communities from treating the facilities differently from other industrial uses. Allow delay itself to produce approval.

Once that model exists, it can be carried from one statehouse to another.

THE QUESTIONS PENNSYLVANIA SHOULD ANSWER FIRST

Efficiency can be good public policy. A countdown clock is not a substitute for consent.

Who requested the preemption language? Which companies, utilities, trade associations and lobbying firms promoted it? Were municipalities consulted before their authority was placed on the table? Are particular projects awaiting its passage?

Who benefits when an application is approved because a small local government could not complete a complex review within an abbreviated deadline?

THE BIGGER FRAME

The benefits and burdens do not always land in the same place.

I have argued that America is not merely building data centers. It is building an **Intelligence Grid**: a new national infrastructure layer composed of compute, power generation, transmission, networking, semiconductor capacity, cooling, and the software needed to coordinate it. I stand by that.

AI may become as fundamental to economic and national power as the electrical grid, interstate highways and telecommunications networks. The United States cannot compete in AI without building physical infrastructure at extraordinary scale. Pretending otherwise will not reduce electricity demand, create transformer capacity, or manufacture the chips.

But artificial intelligence may live in the cloud — its physical and economic costs land locally.

The data center occupies someone's landscape. The transmission line crosses someone's farm. The turbines emit into someone's air. The utility investment appears in someone's rate base. The tax abatement reduces the revenue available to someone's local government.

The benefits and burdens do not always land in the same place.

Workloads can move. Corporate strategies can change. A model company can switch providers, renegotiate a contract, or decline. The power plants, transmission corridors, water systems, and publicly financed infrastructure remain with the host community.

That asymmetry makes the approval process more important, not less.

Industry advocates increasingly frame the issue as a conflict between national leadership and local obstruction: America must win the AI race, while communities concerned about noise, water, electric rates or land use are delaying the infrastructure necessary to win it.

That framing is too convenient.

Some opposition is parochial. Some complaints are exaggerated. Some communities want the tax revenue but none of the infrastructure required to produce it. Local governments can be slow, inconsistent, and vulnerable to organized minorities that oppose any development.

None of that justifies an approval system designed to keep the public uninformed until its authority has disappeared.

THE GAP, IN ONE SENTENCE

Important decisions were made during periods when the people most affected had less information than the companies, utilities, and governments making them.

LOUISIANA

The path was **hidden**. Corporate requirements, political agreements and financial relationships developed behind NDAs before the full bargain became public.

PINE ISLAND

It was **compressed**. Residents received notices and hearings, but the city approved a long-term subsidy before identifying Google as the project's ultimate beneficiary.

WEST VIRGINIA

It was **preempted**. The state changed who possessed the power to decide and restricted the information available about qualifying projects.

These are not interchangeable accusations. A confidentiality agreement is not the same as a bribe. A campaign contribution is not proof of a quid pro quo. A state preemption law can be legal and openly enacted. A zoning interpretation may be defensible. A public official may have a private financial interest without violating criminal law.

The investigation becomes credible only when we maintain those distinctions.

The question is not whether anyone used the word "lobbyist" or signed an NDA. The question is whether money, access, and government authority combined to create a process in which the public was permitted to speak only after speaking could no longer change anything.

§ § §

THE REPORTING BEHIND THIS PIECE

What we asked, and what still remains to answer.

We have sent detailed requests for comment to the companies, utilities, lobbyists, developers, elected officials and public bodies discussed in this report. We have also sought communications, legislative records, agreements and other public documents intended to establish who participated in developing the relevant laws and transactions.

01 **Who requested the preemption language** in HB 2014 and in Pennsylvania's SB 939 — and which companies, utilities, trade associations and lobbying firms promoted it?

02 **What role, if any, did Meta's lobbyists** — including a lobbyist simultaneously representing Entergy — play in developing or advancing HB 827 and the broader Hyperion incentive package?

03 **When did the private relationship** between Speaker Hanshaw's law firm and Fundamental Data begin, what conflicts were reviewed, and did the firm or its clients communicate with the speaker's or governor's office about HB 2014?

04 **Did the unnamed Fortune 200 client** in Pine Island participate in shaping the environmental review or any city communications intended to inform the public about the project?

05 **Were municipalities consulted** before their authority was placed on the table — in West Virginia before HB 2014, and in Pennsylvania before SB 939?

06 **What safeguards**, if any, did officials impose privately during the confidentiality windows that were not visible in the public record?

07 **Are particular projects awaiting** the passage of preemption legislation now under consideration in other states?

Those requests were pending when this draft was completed. Responses, denials and newly produced records will be incorporated before publication. If significant material arrives afterward, **Techstrong will update the report transparently.**

THE POINT OF A HEARING

A hearing is supposed to happen before the government decides.

It is not supposed to be the ceremony at which officials explain a decision already secured through private agreements, political pressure, and money the public never had a chance to see.

America may decide that it needs these data centers. A state may decide the investment is worth the cost. A town may ultimately welcome the jobs, tax revenue and infrastructure.

Those conclusions should emerge from an informed public decision, not from a process engineered to make public resistance irrelevant.

> *"The issue is not whether every community gets to say no. It is whether the people who must live with the consequences ever received a genuine opportunity to say anything at all."*

THE END OF PART TWO

COLOPHON · FOLLOW THE LOBBY MONEY, PART TWO

Reported and written by **Alan Shimel**, Editorial Director, Techstrong Group. Data visualization, production and design by the Techstrong editorial team. Photography is generative and illustrative, not documentary; captions describe the scenes conceptually. Set in Urbanist.

Primary sources include the Louisiana Board of Ethics; the enrolled text and legislative history of Louisiana HB 827 (Act 730) and West Virginia HB 2014; the May 22, 2026 Goodhue County District Court order and the City of Pine Island's Project Skyway timeline; reporting by Floodlight, Gulf States Newsroom and Type Investigations, and Mountain State Spotlight; the Pennsylvania Municipal League statement on SB 939; and public statements by Fundamental Data, Meta, Entergy, Google, Ryan Companies, and the offices of Gov. Landry, Gov. Morrisey and Speaker Hanshaw.

Denials and further responses received after publication will be incorporated into the online record at techstrong.ai and its affiliated properties.

Read Part One — *The Room Around a Five-Page Bill* — at techstrong.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Follow-the-Lobby-Money-Part-One.pdf

TECHSTRONG GROUP · A FUTURUM COMPANY · SUMMER 2026