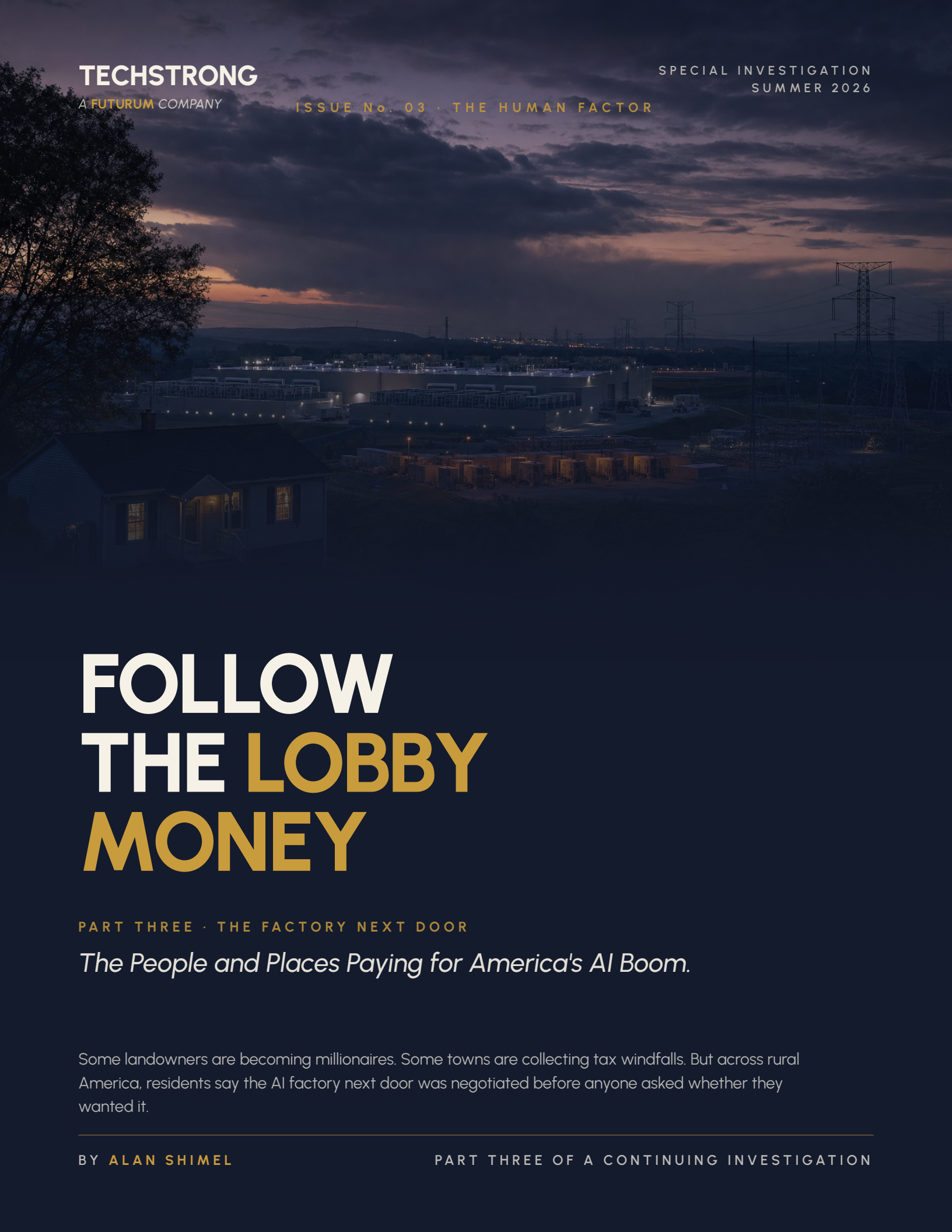




TECHSTRONG

A FUTURUM COMPANY

SPECIAL INVESTIGATION
SUMMER 2026

ISSUE No. 03 · THE HUMAN FACTOR

FOLLOW THE LOBBY MONEY

PART THREE · THE FACTORY NEXT DOOR

The People and Places Paying for America's AI Boom.

Some landowners are becoming millionaires. Some towns are collecting tax windfalls. But across rural America, residents say the AI factory next door was negotiated before anyone asked whether they wanted it.

BY ALAN SHIMEL

PART THREE OF A CONTINUING INVESTIGATION

OPENING

The Morning Tim Bachak Learned His Woods Were Sold

Archbald has about 7,000 residents. Plans reported this year could bring six data-center campuses, 51 warehouse-sized buildings, 574 diesel generators, and development covering roughly 14 percent of the borough's land.



ARCHBALD, PENNSYLVANIA *Where black bears, deer and wild turkeys once moved through the hills, 180 acres of forest were cleared in a single phase. Illustrative image.*

Tim Bachak woke one morning to the sound of chainsaws behind his home in Archbald, Pennsylvania. Workers were clearing roughly 180 acres of woods where he had watched black bears, deer and wild turkeys move through the hills. The explanation was not a new subdivision or another warehouse. It was the beginning of an industrial transformation that could surround this small borough with data centers.

Archbald has about 7,000 residents. Plans reported by [The Washington Post](#) could bring six data-center campuses, 51 warehouse-sized buildings and development covering roughly 14 percent of the borough's land. One proposed campus alone could include 14 buildings and as many as 574 diesel generators. Each generator would be rated at three megawatts and connected to a 2,000-gallon fuel tank, according to [local reporting on the Wildcat Ridge proposal](#).

The developer's pitch promised prosperity. A glossy mailer projected millions of dollars in annual tax revenue for the town and its schools, more than a thousand permanent jobs, limited water use and sound no louder than ordinary conversation at the property line.

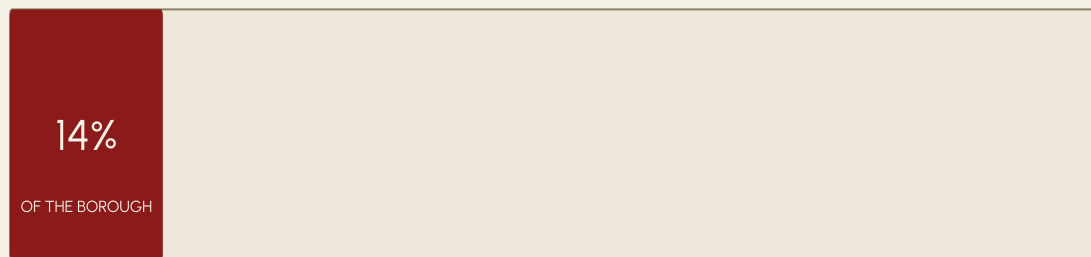
Many residents did not find the promises reassuring. They had questions about the generators, the fuel, the power lines, the water, the wildlife, the noise and the effect on their homes. They also had a more basic question: How had something capable of remaking their entire town moved this far before most of them understood what was happening?

That question is now being asked across America.

THE BUILDOUT COMES IN WAVES

Archbald, Pennsylvania (pop. 6,700): six data-center campuses approved in 18 months.

SIX CAMPUSES · 51 BUILDINGS · 574 DIESEL GENERATORS



One Pennsylvania borough. One approval wave. A footprint measured not in square footage but in whole neighborhoods.

180+

acres of forest cleared
in the initial phase

51

planned buildings across
six approved campuses

574

backup diesel generators
authorized on the site

Sources: *The Washington Post* (April 26, 2026); local reporting on the Wildcat Ridge proposal via Yahoo News.

The AI industry describes data centers as the essential infrastructure of the next economy. That description is not wrong. Artificial intelligence is not an ethereal cloud. It is land, steel, chips, substations, transmission lines, cooling systems, generators and staggering amounts of capital. McKinsey estimates that meeting worldwide demand for data center capacity through 2030 could require \$6.7 trillion in capital spending, including \$5.2 trillion for AI workloads. More than 40 percent of projected demand is expected to be in the United States.

But an AI factory is still a factory. It consumes resources. It produces noise, heat and emissions. It changes land values and utility planning. It creates winners and losers, sometimes on opposite sides of the same fence. And unlike the companies financing this buildout, the people living beside it cannot diversify their geography. A developer can sell a project. A hyperscaler can change its plans. A tenant can leave. The homeowner, farmer or rancher next door is left with whatever remains.

That is the human factor in America's data-center boom. It is not simply a dispute over technology, and it is not adequately explained by dismissing resistance as NIMBYism. It is a growing crisis of consent.

"They believe their town's future was treated as a transaction among other parties."

— THE CONSENT PROBLEM IN A SENTENCE

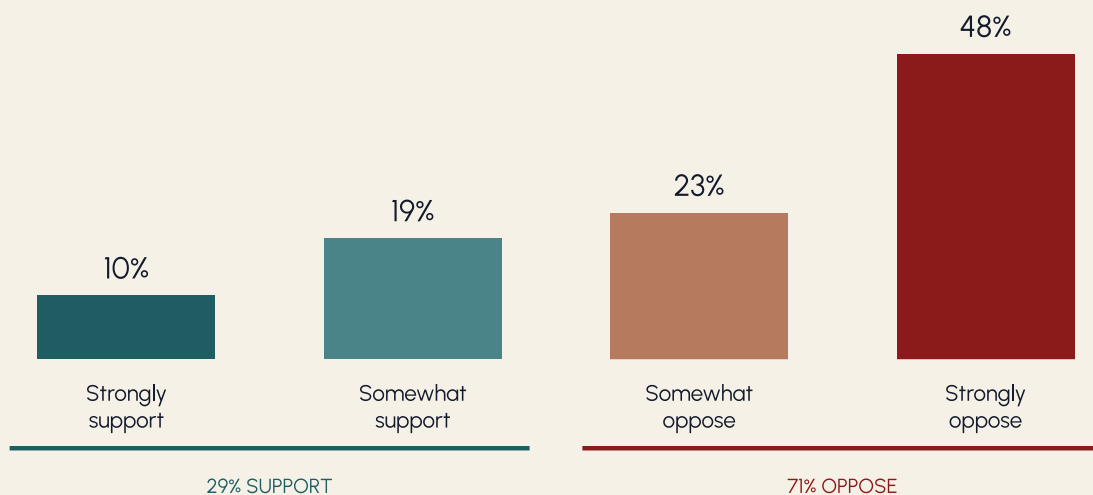
CHAPTER TWO · CONSENT

America Does Not Want the AI Factory Next Door

In a national Gallup survey conducted in March 2026, 71 percent of Americans opposed construction of an AI data center where they live. Opposition crossed every party, region and income line.

AMERICANS ASKED: WOULD YOU SUPPORT A DATA CENTER IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Nationally representative Gallup poll of 5,000+ adults, released September 2026.



Source: Gallup, "Americans Oppose Data Centers in Their Area," May 2026

Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

The breadth of the resistance is no longer anecdotal. In a national survey conducted in March 2026, [Gallup](#) found that 71 percent of Americans opposed construction of an AI data center where they live. Forty-eight percent were strongly opposed, while only 7 percent were strongly in favor. Opposition crossed party, age, racial, educational and income lines. It reached 76 percent in the Midwest and 75 percent in the South.

The reasons are revealing. Half of opponents cited excessive resource use. Water and energy each figured prominently. Others pointed to noise and air or water pollution, diminished quality of life, higher utility bills and the public cost of supporting private development. Supporters also had a coherent case. Two-thirds cited economic benefits, with jobs and tax revenue leading the list.

Both sides are describing real parts of the bargain. What they are not describing is an even bargain.

The companies arriving in these communities employ teams of lawyers, engineers, lobbyists, tax specialists and site selectors. A rural township may have a part-time board, a small staff and little experience evaluating an industrial campus whose power demand can rival that of a city. Residents are asked to assess air permits, utility tariffs, aquifer drawdowns, noise studies, tax abatements and promises about future employment, often after land has been assembled and political support secured.

By then, a public hearing may be legally meaningful but practically late. The project has money behind it, momentum around it and public officials invested in its success. Residents are allowed to speak, but many come away feeling they were never in a position to negotiate.

AUGUST 4, 2026 · AUSTIN, TEXAS

Even Texas Called Time-Out.

On August 4, 2026, [Gov. Greg Abbott](#) [ordered a pause on new data-center grid approvals](#) pending a state audit of energy demand, water use, tax incentives, ownership and local mitigation. Proposed large-load requests under review had grown far beyond the state's existing peak electricity demand.

CONSERVATIVES

Property rights, electricity bills, generational farm value.

PROGRESSIVES

Pollution, corporate subsidies, environmental justice.

LOCAL OFFICIALS

Discovering that "open for business" can mean absorbing risks the business will not carry.

That sense of being steamrolled may be the most politically combustible part of the entire buildout. People do not merely believe a bad project is being placed near them. They believe their town's future was treated as a transaction among other parties.

The backlash is beginning to change policy. Communities have adopted moratoriums, rejected rezonings and organized opposition groups. Even Texas, a state that has aggressively courted large industrial development, reached a limit.

This is not a fringe environmental movement. It includes conservatives worried about property rights and electric bills, progressives focused on pollution and corporate subsidies, farmers protecting water, homeowners protecting the value of their largest asset, and local officials discovering that being "open for business" can become a promise to absorb risks that a business does not want to carry itself.

CHAPTER THREE · THE VIEW FROM THE KITCHEN WINDOW

"We're Trapped Here."

Omaira Garcia is an Air Force veteran and a mother of two. She lives beside the Stargate development in Abilene, Texas — and she can see the turbines from her kitchen sink.



ABILENE, TEXAS Roughly 500 yards from a home whose owner cannot find a buyer. Illustrative image.

Omaira Garcia, an Air Force veteran and mother of two, lives beside the Stargate development in Abilene, Texas. She learned the scale of what was coming through construction activity and dust, not through an early community process that gave her a meaningful voice. A gas power installation rose roughly 500 yards from her home. She can see turbines from her kitchen.

When Garcia tried to sell, she could not find a buyer. "We're trapped here," she told [Floodlight](#). The planned expansion has sought authority for dozens of gas turbines and backup diesel generators. Developer [Crusoe](#) has emphasized the project's community contributions, including support for fire trucks, school expansion and road improvements. Those benefits matter. They do not give Garcia back the market for her home or the landscape she thought she had purchased.

"We should be demanding plans like solid concrete information. We're not getting anything in Broadview."

— KASSI SOLBERG, RANCHER, BROADVIEW, MONTANA · TO KRTV



BROADVIEW, MONTANA A ranching community of roughly 150 people. Interconnection requests for the nearby Quantica proposal have reached several gigawatts. Illustrative image.

In Broadview, Montana, the conflict looks different but feels familiar. Broadview is a ranching community of roughly 150 people. Quantica Infrastructure has proposed a data-center complex across thousands of acres nearby, with natural gas generation among the power options under consideration. Interconnection requests associated with the proposal have reached several gigawatts, although a request is not the same thing as capacity that will actually be built.

For rancher and mother Kassi Solberg, uncertainty is itself part of the injury. "We should be demanding plans like solid concrete information," she told [KRTV](#). "We're not getting anything in Broadview." Solberg and her family had hoped to establish roots and leave an inheritance to their children. Instead, they are trying to understand an enormous industrial proposal from incomplete information.

Not everyone in town opposes it. Restaurant owner Duane Swartz sees customers and jobs that could help the only business in town. His position is not naïve. Rural communities have watched young people leave, schools shrink and local businesses disappear. A construction project with thousands of workers can fill restaurants, hotels and rental properties. New tax revenue can fund services that an eroding tax base cannot.

That tension is the real story. Broadview is not divided between enlightened opponents and foolish supporters. It is divided among people trying to protect different parts of the same fragile community. One wants to preserve land, water and an inheritance. Another wants enough economic activity to keep the town alive. The problem is that neither side has been given the certainty necessary to measure the trade.

The town's mayor has said the project lies outside municipal boundaries and that Broadview has limited authority over it. That is a familiar pattern. The people most affected may live within sight of a project while the decisive permits, utility proceedings and tax agreements are handled somewhere else.

Pollution Does Not Arrive on a Blank Map



SOUTH MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE xAI installed 59 turbines for the Colossus 2 project without federal air permits, according to a Reuters analysis. The NAACP and the [Southern Environmental Law Center](#) are challenging the operation in court. Illustrative image.

In South Memphis, the AI boom landed in a place already carrying a heavy industrial burden. Elon Musk's xAI installed gas turbines to power its Colossus facilities near predominantly Black neighborhoods. In July 2026, [Reuters reported](#) that 59 turbines had been installed for the Colossus 2 project without federal air permits, according to the news organization's analysis. The NAACP and the Southern Environmental Law Center challenged the operation in court.

The legal questions matter, but so does the geography. Boxtown and surrounding neighborhoods were not pristine laboratory settings before xAI arrived. Residents had lived for years with pollution from highways, rail yards and industrial operations. Adding an AI power plant to that landscape does not distribute harm evenly. It concentrates another burden where public health, property values and political power were already unequal.

The industry often separates the data center from the source of its electricity. On a spreadsheet, the servers are one facility, the turbines another, the transmission upgrade a utility project and the emissions part of a regional grid. People experience them together. The child with asthma does not care which corporate entity owns the generator. The homeowner does not experience low-frequency sound according to the boundary between two permits.

This is why cumulative impact matters. Every data-center proposal can appear manageable when evaluated by itself. The water draw is a percentage of supply. The noise stays beneath a numerical threshold. The generators are described as backup equipment. The transmission line is discussed in a separate proceeding. The gas plant is temporary. The tax abatement is compared only with the revenue that would exist if the land remained undeveloped.

"The community lives with the sum."

— THE CUMULATIVE-IMPACT PROBLEM

CHAPTER FIVE · THE RESOURCE BILL

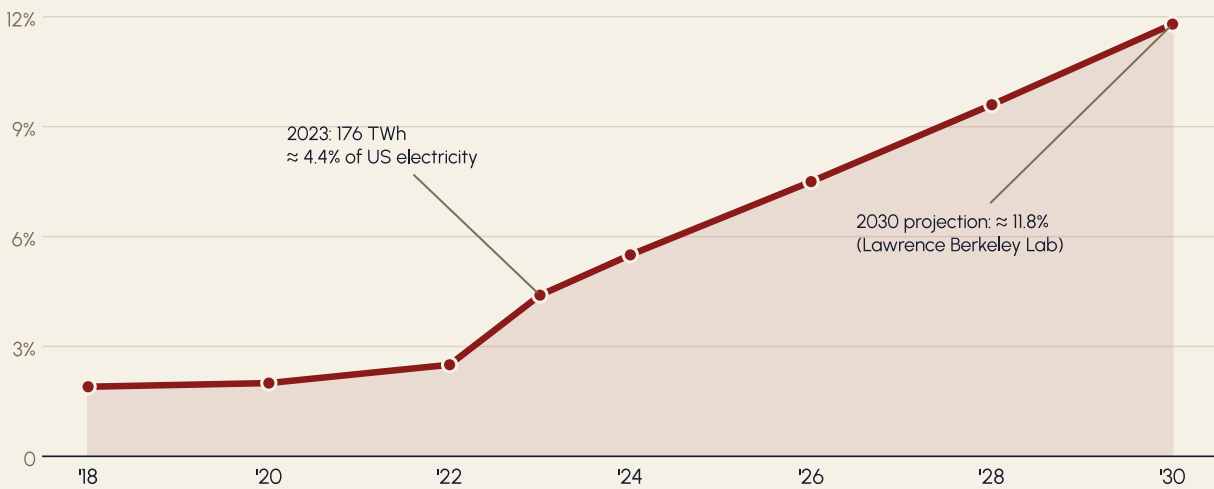
Big Numbers Land in Small Places

Data centers consumed about 4.4 percent of US electricity in 2023. By 2030, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory projects the share could reach 11.8 percent.

That load does not arrive as an abstraction. It arrives on one utility, one substation, one town.

DATA CENTERS ARE EATING THE GRID

US data-center electricity consumption as a share of all US electricity, 2018–2030.



Source: [Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, 2025 update to the U.S. Data Center Energy Report](#). 2018–2023 values are historical; 2024–2030 are the report's projections.

The national numbers are large enough to become abstract. Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory estimated that U.S. data centers consumed approximately 176 terawatt-hours of electricity in 2023, or 4.4 percent of the national total. Its projections place future consumption far higher, with the laboratory's [2025 update](#) estimating that data centers could account for 11.8 percent of U.S. electricity use by 2030, with a broad range reflecting major uncertainty.

That demand is not spread evenly. It arrives as a very large load on a particular utility in a particular county. Meeting it can require new substations, transmission corridors, gas plants and years of capital spending. If the data center pays the full cost, the arrangement can protect other customers. If growth forecasts are wrong or the allocation rules are weak, households and ordinary businesses can be left paying for infrastructure built to serve customers with far greater bargaining power.

Water is equally local. The 2024 Berkeley Lab report estimated direct water consumption by U.S. data centers at about 66 billion liters in 2023. The water used to generate their electricity was much larger, roughly 800 billion liters. Those totals do not tell a farmer whether a particular aquifer will decline or a town whether it will need a new treatment plant. They do show why a company's claim of low on-site water use can be incomplete.

DIRECT WATER, 2023

66B liters

Consumed by U.S. data centers directly at their facilities.

UPSTREAM WATER, 2023

≈800B liters

Water used to generate the electricity those facilities consumed.

2030 ELECTRICITY SHARE

11.8%

Projected share of all U.S. electricity going to data centers.

A BURDEN CAN BE LEGAL AND STILL BE LIFE-CHANGING

The Sound That Never Stops

Noise is harder to put into a corporate sustainability report. Cooling equipment, transformers and generators can create a persistent hum, including low-frequency sound that travels differently from ordinary traffic noise.

A [Virginia legislative study](#) found that data-center noise was generally below levels associated with hearing damage and often complied with local limits. It also found that its constant character can affect well-being and that many ordinances were not designed for this type of sound.

That distinction is essential. A burden can be legal and still be life-changing. A noise standard may average sound over time or measure it at a property line. A resident experiences it in a bedroom at two in the morning. A generator test may satisfy a permit and still frighten livestock or disrupt a school day.

Compliance is the floor of the public argument, not the end of it.

WHAT THE VIRGINIA STUDY ACTUALLY SAID

Below the Damage Threshold Is Not the Same as Livable.

The JLARC review found data-center noise was **generally within local ordinance limits** and **below hearing-damage thresholds**. It also found that most ordinances were written for cars, factories and construction — not for a facility that runs continuously, at low frequency, next to bedrooms and pastures.

Meaning: a data center can be simultaneously permitted, compliant and disruptive. Every one of those descriptions can be true at once.

The Workarounds Need an Audit Too

The industry has an answer for nearly every resource concern. Some are genuine improvements. None should be treated as magic.

THE WORKAROUND AUDIT — DO THE STORIES HOLD UP?

Five technical fixes offered by the industry — and what the record actually shows.

BEHIND-THE-METER GAS GENERATION	Presented as: quick fix so utilities don't have to expand. In practice: Meta's El Paso site alone plans 813 gas units / 366 MW — plus 240 MW more if it needs to island itself from the grid.	PARTIAL
REC PURCHASES (annual matching)	Presented as: "100% renewable" operations. In practice: the company can be pulling coal- or gas-fired power in real time. Microsoft and Meta now push for hourly matching; AWS resists.	WEAK
GRID-SCALE BATTERIES	Presented as: dispatchable clean backup. In practice: real gains, but still expensive; growing costs land on ratepayers, and backup diesels remain the default for hyperscalers.	PROMISING
SMALL MODULAR REACTORS (SMRs)	Presented as: nuclear power for the AI era. In practice: no US SMR is operating commercially. Timelines slip into the 2030s while turbines and gensets are being installed today.	UNPROVEN
EFFICIENCY GAINS	Presented as: chips and cooling get more efficient every year. In practice: Jevons paradox. Cheaper compute means more compute. Aggregate demand keeps climbing even as per-query efficiency improves.	REBOUND

Sources: [DatacenterDynamics on Meta El Paso](#); [Reuters on hourly matching](#); McKinsey on the compute rebound effect.

"Bring your own power" can reduce pressure on a constrained grid, but the phrase often means bringing a private gas plant onto or beside the site. Meta's planned one-gigawatt El Paso project has included a proposed 366-megawatt installation of [813 modular gas generators](#) as a multiyear bridge to grid service. Behind-the-meter power may change who owns the equipment. It does not create a boundary that stops emissions or noise.

"Waterless" or air-based cooling can sharply reduce water consumed at the data center. In many climates it also requires more electricity. If that electricity comes from thermal generation, some water use moves upstream rather than disappearing. Closed-loop systems recirculate water, but they still may require initial fills, makeup water, flushing and discharge.

Even a sound idea can fail in execution. In Cheyenne, Wyoming, city officials suspended certain discharges in 2026 after wastewater associated with filling and flushing a Meta contractor's cooling system introduced a metal-resistant bacterium that disrupted reclamation operations. That incident does not prove reclaimed-water cooling is inherently unsafe. It proves that "reclaimed water" is not a complete risk assessment.

Flexible computing is promising. Some training and batch workloads can be shifted away from periods of grid stress. Demonstrations have shown that groups of GPUs can reduce demand for several hours while maintaining service targets. That is useful engineering. It is not yet proof that a gigawatt-scale AI campus, especially one dominated by latency-sensitive inference, will operate as a fully dispatchable grid resource.

Batteries can smooth ramps and cover short interruptions. They do not generate the continuous energy a campus consumes.

Renewable-energy matching raises a similar problem. A company can buy enough renewable certificates to match its annual electricity consumption while its facility draws fossil-heavy power during particular hours in the region where it operates. The debate over whether greenhouse-gas accounting should become more hourly and location-specific has [split major technology companies](#). Annual matching can support renewable development, but it should not be confused with running a data center on carbon-free electricity every hour.

Small modular nuclear reactors may eventually supply reliable low-carbon power, but most commercial deployments remain years away. Near-term projects that invoke future nuclear power often require an immediate bridge, and that bridge is frequently natural gas.

Efficiency belongs in the same category. Better chips, cooling and software can reduce the energy needed for each unit of compute. If cheaper compute produces vastly more AI use, total consumption can still rise. McKinsey explicitly identifies this rebound effect as one reason technical efficiency may not reduce aggregate demand.

The right response is not to reject the workarounds. It is to measure what they actually accomplish, identify which burden they move and refuse to count a future promise as a present solution.

"A future promise is not a present solution."

— THE AUDITOR'S PRINCIPLE

There Are Winners, and They Matter

Any honest account of this boom must acknowledge that some people and places benefit enormously. Salem Township landowners shared \$586 million. Louisiana teachers received \$50,935 bonuses. Consent means the yes deserves the same respect as the no.



SALEM TOWNSHIP, PENNSYLVANIA Nearly 100 landowners shared approximately \$586 million from the sale of about 1,700 acres for data-center development. Illustrative image.

In Salem Township, Pennsylvania, nearly 100 landowners shared approximately \$586 million from the sale of about 1,700 acres for data-center development, according to [The Wall Street Journal](#). Marilee and David Kiliti reportedly received more than \$22 million for their 89-acre farm. For families whose wealth had been tied up in land for generations, a sale can provide security that farming or rural real estate never could.

In Richland Parish, Louisiana, Meta's enormous Hyperion development has delivered a direct public windfall. Teachers received bonuses of up to \$50,935. Local sales and use tax collections reached \$42.9 million in the first nine months of the fiscal year, more than double the prior year, and Meta made a \$22.4 million tax payment in May, according to [The Wall Street Journal](#). Those are not theoretical benefits. They show up in paychecks, school budgets and public services.

Umatilla, Oregon, offers another version of the case for saying yes. Amazon Web Services data centers brought construction activity, tax revenue and new customers to a region of roughly 8,000 people. The growth supported local businesses and increased demand for housing. It also pushed home prices higher and produced fewer permanent jobs than the visible construction boom might suggest, as [The Wall Street Journal](#) reported. Prosperity arrived, but it did not arrive evenly.

THE UNEVEN LEDGER

Not every host community loses — but the winners are specific, and the losers are widely scattered.

WHO CASHED OUT

\$586M

SALEM TWP., PA

≈100 landowners share one Amazon land deal; the Kiliti family alone received about \$22M.

\$50,935

RICHLAND PARISH, LA

Bonus for every full-time teacher in the district, funded by a \$22.4M Meta tax payment.

Steady jobs

UMATILLA, OREGON

AWS is now among the county's largest employers; tax base and services have grown.

WHO WAITS AND HOPES

100–150

JAY, MAINE

Projected data-center jobs replace a paper mill that once employed 1,500.

\$0

254 TEXAS COUNTIES

Ball State study finds no net employment gain from data centers over two decades.

\$500/yr

OHIO HOUSEHOLDS

Estimated added electricity cost per household as AEP prepares to pass buildout costs through.

Sources: [WSJ, "The Americans Striking It Rich"](#); [WSJ on Richland Parish teacher bonuses](#); [Michael Hicks, "Data Centers and Local Job Creation."](#)

That is usually how the gains are distributed. Landowners inside the acquisition boundary may become wealthy. A school district may collect new revenue. Construction workers, electricians, equipment suppliers, restaurants and landlords may enjoy a multiyear surge. People who own no land, rent their homes or live just outside the tax jurisdiction may receive much less while sharing the traffic, noise, utility pressure and higher housing costs.

Jobs are the most frequently advertised benefit and the most difficult to evaluate. Data centers create substantial construction work. They also require skilled permanent employees. But they are capital-intensive facilities, not labor-intensive factories. Economist [Michael Hicks](#) examined data centers across 254 Texas counties and found [no discernible net increase in county employment associated with them](#). That is one analysis, not a universal law, but it challenges the assumption that every large project produces broad, lasting job growth.



JAY, MAINE The paper mill once employed as many as 1,500 people. A proposed \$550 million data center projects 100 to 150 jobs. Illustrative image.

Jay, Maine, understands the distinction. Its paper mill once employed as many as 1,500 people. A proposed \$550 million data center projected 100 to 150 jobs, a meaningful number for the town but a fraction of what the old industrial economy supported. Residents backing the project are not confused about the math. They are weighing 100 jobs against zero and trying to reuse a devastated industrial site. Reporting by [The Verge](#) captured why communities that have lost their economic anchor may welcome a data center even when it cannot replace what disappeared.

Those communities deserve respect too. Consent does not mean every town must say no. It means a yes should be informed, negotiated and made by the people who will live with the result.

"Consent does not mean every town must say no. It means a yes should be informed, negotiated and made by the people who will live with the result."

— A DEFINITION

If the Boom Falters, Who Owns the Downside?

The industry's growth forecasts are extraordinary, but they are still forecasts. A community can be left holding the substation whether or not the tenant ever arrives.

IF THE BOOM FALTERS — 25 GW ON THE LINE

RMI estimates data-center load forecasts may exceed real demand by roughly 25 GW.

FORECAST

≈ 55 GW forecast peak load

REALISTIC

≈ 30 GW likely real

25 GW "phantom"

If projections overshoot by 25 GW, someone still has to pay for the transformers, transmission and turbines already ordered against them.

Source: RMI, "Planners Have Tools to Manage Large-Load Forecast Uncertainty. Are They Working?"

AI demand could exceed today's expectations. It could also be constrained by efficiency, financing, chip supply, permitting, business adoption or a change in investor appetite.

The project pipeline already contains more ambition than certainty. RMI has warned that utility forecasts may overstate data-center load by roughly 25 gigawatts by 2030. Projects are announced at different levels of maturity, and the same prospective demand may appear in more than one utility queue while developers preserve options.

For a technology company, optionality is prudent. For a community, it can be dangerous.

A utility may build a substation, transmission line or power plant for load that arrives late, arrives smaller than promised or never arrives. A town may expand water and sewer capacity. A state may grant tax concessions. Roads may be rebuilt and land rezoned. If the project is cancelled or a tenant leaves, much of that infrastructure remains. The cost does not vanish merely because the forecast changed.

THE TERMS OF A REAL DEAL

Voluntary Promises Are Better Than Silence. Enforceable Contracts Are Better Than Promises.

Ohio's [AEP tariff](#) requires very large new loads to pay for most of their contracted capacity over a long term. The White House's 2026 [Ratepayer Protection Pledge](#) asks technology companies to cover grid upgrades and unused reserved capacity rather than shifting those costs to households.

TAKE-OR-PAY

Customers pay for the capacity reserved, whether they end up using it or not.

CLAWBACKS

Tax abatements repayable if promised jobs, revenue or investment never materialize.

DECOMMISSIONING BONDS

Funds set aside upfront to close, remediate and re-vegetate a site if it fails.

Communities also need transparent ownership, enforceable employment commitments and a clear answer to what happens if a special-purpose developer fails. Property owners facing an industrial change of use should have access to independent appraisals, noise monitoring and, in extreme cases, funded buyout programs. These are not anti-development measures. They are the terms sophisticated parties use when they expect a counterparty to keep its promises.

The People Who Cannot Walk Away

The first installment of this series followed the lobbying around H.R. 9340 and the federal effort to decide who pays for the grid infrastructure demanded by enormous new loads. The second examined the deal before the vote: code names, nondisclosure agreements, land options, tax incentives and fragmented approvals that give projects momentum before the public sees the full picture.

This final chapter is what happens after the abstractions become a neighbor.

The lobbying fight is not separate from the human fight. Rules governing cost allocation, permitting, environmental review and local authority determine whether the AI boom is financed by its beneficiaries or subsidized by people with far less power. The rush to streamline approvals is also a rush to overcome a consent problem. Local resistance is increasingly portrayed as an obstacle to American competitiveness and national security. Sometimes it is an obstacle. Democracy is designed to create obstacles when powerful institutions want to transform the places where people live.

America needs a serious conversation about how much AI infrastructure it wants and what it is prepared to pay for it. That conversation cannot be reduced to a choice between technological leadership and economic stagnation. Nor can every opponent be caricatured as someone demanding cloud services while refusing to host the machinery behind them.

The real question is whether the industry will earn a social license to build.

WHAT A GENUINE CONSENT PROCESS LOOKS LIKE

Before the Land Is Assembled — Not After.

Residents need the identity of the developer and likely operator, the maximum buildout rather than only the first phase, expected electricity and water use, generation plans, backup-generator counts, emissions, noise modeling, tax terms, job assumptions and the infrastructure costs that could survive the project.

Communities need money for independent technical and legal advice. Cumulative impacts must be assessed across campuses, power sources and utility projects. Benefits should be enforceable, burdens monitored and promises backed by consequences.

Most important, the process must allow a community to say no. Consent is not meaningful when rejection is no longer a practical option.



SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA *The last chair. The porch that is still yours. The horizon that no longer is. Illustrative image.*

Some landowners will make fortunes. Some teachers will receive bonuses they never imagined. Some dying towns may gain a second economic life. Those wins are real and should not be minimized.

So are the experiences of homeowners who cannot sell, ranchers who fear for their water, neighborhoods absorbing another layer of pollution and residents learning from construction equipment that their surroundings have already been committed to someone else's vision of the future.

The scandal is not that every data center is a bad deal. It is that the people living with the deal are too often the last to see it, the least equipped to negotiate it and the only participants who cannot walk away.

America may decide that a multitrillion-dollar AI infrastructure buildout is necessary. If so, the people hosting it should not be treated as an inconvenience to be managed after the contracts are signed. They should be parties to the decision.

"No community should discover that its future was sold before anyone bothered to ask the people who already lived there."

— THE PRINCIPLE

END OF PART THREE

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