

Supreme Court hears county climate case

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Jenny Singer-Rupp, a Boulder County, Colo., resident who lost her home in the 2021 Marshall Fire, stood in front of the U.S. Supreme Court Oct. 5, surrounded by environmental advocates and fellow Coloradans.

She traveled more than 1,500 miles to share her experience in the aftermath of the fire at a rally and press conference held before the Supreme Court heard *Suncor Energy (U.S.A.) Inc. v. County Commissioners of Boulder County*. She described the difficulty of navigating insurance claims and the years it has taken to recover and rebuild.

The Supreme Court opened its October 2026 term with the case. In it, Boulder County and the City of Boulder contend that oil companies should be held financially responsible, under state law, for local harms caused by climate change.

The Marshall Fire, which swept through parts of Boulder County, mainly the towns of Louisville and Superior, was the most destructive wildfire in county history. It led to roughly 37,000 evacuations, destroyed 1,109 homes and killed two people.

"I want my children to grow

up in a world where they don't have to wonder whether the place they call home will still be there tomorrow," Singer-Rupp said. "I also want them to know that when something is wrong, we do not simply accept it. We stand up, we ask questions, we seek accountability and then we fix the problems."

The county and city's brief to the Supreme Court contends that ExxonMobil and Suncor Energy "intentionally misled the public" about the impacts of climate change and should pay for damage they say is caused by fossil fuels' contribution to it.

All three Boulder County commissioners were in the courtroom for the argument. Afterward, on the steps outside the Supreme Court, they read a joint statement that alleges the community is already seeing current and future climate impacts, such as worsening air quality, wildfires, dangerous heat, historic flooding and drought.

"Roads and bridges washed away. Homes and communities burned down," the joint statement reads. "And the impacts go beyond physical. They leave social and emotional scars — for the families forced to evacuate with only minutes'

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Escambia County, Fla. resident Clayton Sanders points out a toppled dock near his home Oct. 10 after Hurricane Isaias swept through at top speeds of 117 MPH. The category 2 hurricane was linked to four deaths, power outages and flooding across counties in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi and North Carolina. County officials and staff helped with recovery efforts. Photo by USA Today Network

Counties reassess license plate surveillance amid privacy concerns

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Counties across the country are grappling with how to address mass public backlash against local governments' use of Flock cameras and other automated license plate readers. Some counties are doubling down and adding more of the

technology, while others are banning it altogether.

Flock, an artificial intelligence-powered surveillance camera company, is the nation's largest maker of automated license plate readers (ALPRs). Its network of 120,000 cameras across the country capture and analyze vehicle data into a mappable

database that local governments and police departments can use to help solve crimes.

Local government use of the technology has received massive backlash recently, with residents expressing concern over surveillance and reports of law enforcement abusing it

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Mentoring and transition planning brings momentum to county succession

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

For more than 20 years as a high school teacher, Tim Heffernan's life was guided by the bells that segmented classes throughout the day.

He used to chide Chip Abramovic, when he'd show

up late to a meeting. But now, as Abramovic's successor as a commissioner in Venango County, Pa., he's seeing how harshly he judged his friend's time management after being selected by the county's president judge to fill the unexpired term.

"I understand it now, be-

cause these days, I'm running from place to place as fast as I can to try to keep up with the next conversation, because there are so many things that county government addresses," Heffernan said. "I had been the kind of guy who

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Counties weigh pluses, minuses of camera surveillance

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for personal tracking queries. Dozens of counties have canceled Flock contracts and/or deactivated cameras, according to DeFlock, a project that maps license plate readers; one of those is Milwaukee County, Wis.

Earlier this month, the Milwaukee County Board unanimously approved the removal of all 42 Flock ALPRs in its county parks by the end of the year, citing concerns over privacy, data-sharing issues and instances across the country of officers misusing the technology for personal use.

“Government has a responsibility to protect people from harm,” said County Board Chairwoman Marcelia Nicholson-Bovell at an Oct. 1 Board of Supervisors meeting. “But

that doesn’t give us a blank check to monitor their movements.”

The proposed 2027 county budget does not include funding for any type of ALPR service, redirecting the \$140,000 previously allocated to Flock cameras to a Right to Counsel eviction-prevention program run by the Legal Aid Society.

However, the Milwaukee Police Department has announced it intends to renew its contract with Flock when it expires in January, funded through the city’s standard operational police budget. Milwaukee County Sheriff’s Office also defended its use of the technology, reporting a 43% decline in certain crimes around county parks between 2023 and 2026.

“I recognize the value cam-



A camera keeps watch from its position on a pole.

era surveillance can offer for our public safety partners,” said County Executive David Crowley. “I will keep working to strengthen public safety in Milwaukee County, including helping our Sheriff’s Office identify and implement more tools to prevent crime.

“But our residents’ constitutional rights must take precedence,” he noted. “We must be able to deliver both public safety and public trust. And we cannot build one by sacrificing the other ... We cannot wait for a data breach. We cannot wait until privacy is compromised or whether information is misused before we actually act.”

According to a *Washington Post* investigation published in August, at least 69 law enforcement employees across multiple states have been accused, charged or convicted of using ALPRs for unauthorized purposes, including to monitor romantic partners, former spouses and people they were interested in pursuing romantically.

Less than a week after the article was published, a series of organizations representing state and local enforcement across the country, including the National Sheriffs’ Associ-

ation and the National Real Time Crime Center Association, released a joint statement addressing concerns over ALPR technology.

“We are listening,” the statement reads. “We want to work with policymakers and the communities we serve to address these concerns and ensure this technology continues to be used responsibly. At the same time, we believe it is important that this conversation fully consider how ALPR technology is being used every day in communities across the country — to locate missing children, find victims, solve serious crimes and keep our communities safe.

“When a child is missing, a trafficking victim is being moved across jurisdictions or a violent offender is on the road, every minute matters. ALPR technology gives investigators a critical lead in seconds — helping law enforcement find someone in danger, identify a dangerous suspect or connect a vehicle to a series crime before that opportunity is lost.”

According to a recent National Policing Institute survey, 54.4% of U.S. adults oppose the use of ALPRs in their communities, with 34%

“strongly opposed” to them. Critiques of the technology have superseded party lines. On August 26, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders both released anti-ALPR statements. DeSantis said the use of license plate readers in Florida is “out of control” and that the public has a “right to be concerned” about the erosion of privacy, and Sanders said that the technology marked a move toward totalitarianism in the United States.

Despite facing some backlash from constituents, Chambers County, Texas, is preparing to add more Flock cameras, according to Sheriff Brian Hawthorne.

“Burglaries and thefts have greatly been reduced ever since we brought Flock into the county,” Hawthorne said. “... Violent crime, not a huge reduction, but arrests are being made. We’re clearing the cases.”

Chambers County’s violent crime clearance rate, which is the percentage of criminal incidents law enforcement consider “solved” relative to the number of crimes recorded, is up, and Hawthorne attributes that to ALPR technology.

Prior to using Flock, the county’s violent crime clearance rate averaged around 55%. In 2024, the year the county implemented the technology, the clearance rate jumped to 82%, according to Hawthorne.

“I want to be a sheriff that solves crime, not somebody that just reports crime,” Hawthorne said. “And I will tell you that automatic license plate readers are one of the greatest crime-solving tools since I’ve been in law enforcement, and I’ve been doing it 43 years.” 

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CEO INSIGHTS | BY MATTHEW D. CHASE

Chips, Compute and Counties

Within a seven-day span, I visited two book-end projects driving our nation's economy. Both are massive complexes transforming local communities while sparking

intense yet necessary debates over energy, labor, land, noise, tax and water policy.

First was a six-building, 4-million-square-foot data center campus for Google in Armstrong County, Texas, population 1,843, where 7,500 construction and craft workers show up each day.

Then Onondaga County, New York, where Micron has broken ground on a semiconductor megafab, an investment of up to \$100 billion over the next 20 years.

One site will train and run the advanced AI models. The other will make the ultra-fast chips that underpin the endless progression of AI from generative to agentic to autonomous intelligence. Both projects sit atop a global transition as consequential as any county has ever faced and as unforgiving to those unprepared for it.

We're living through a second Gilded Age, the term historians used for the late 1800s' extraordinary concentration of industrial capital in rail, steel and oil. This speed and scale of AI infrastructure investment is stunning: an estimated \$800 billion this year alone across the country.

At an estimated 3.6 percent of GDP, this dwarfs the start-up eras of canals, highways, airports and the internet of below 2 percent. It is rivaled only by the railroad expansion of the 1860s through 1890s, estimated at 6 percent of GDP at its peak.

Sit with the Armstrong County number again. More workers show up on this rural job site each morning than live in the entire county —



by roughly four times. The project is part of Google's \$40 billion commitment across Armstrong and Haskell counties alone. That single commitment approaches two-thirds of the federal government's entire highway and bridge budget. It's 10 times the FAA's entire airport improvement program. It's larger than FEMA's whole disaster relief appropriation for 700 to 900 counties dealing with major climate events each year.

This is why NACo has been deeply engaged in tracking these massive investments, while also building peer-learning networks and hosting site visits in Oregon, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia, among other places. We are studying community benefit agreements negotiated by counties. We are collecting and sharing county plans and ordinances for air quality, noise pollution, building setbacks, water qual-

ity and much more.

Here is what we've learned. Zoning decisions are intense and swift. Noise ordinances and decommission plans matter. Water agreements need teeth: tracking, public reporting and baseline studies before approval, not after. Setbacks, transmission corridors and workforce housing all need answers before the site plan arrives, not after the ribbon-cutting.

Many of these decisions may sit outside the authorities of counties, yet residents still hold county officials accountable.

So how should county leaders prepare? Study up. Go tour these facilities. Get ahead of it. Demand a seat at the table with federal, state and municipal officials.

We've lived this before — the Gilded Age, the post-World War II manufacturing glory years, the boom-and-bust cycles of oil and gas, housing and the internet. Now it's chips and compute.

The fundamentals remain the same: demand a seat at the

Will We Ever Learn from History?

When steam-powered rail cars first rolled through the countryside in the late 1800s, people who'd spent their lives depending on horses and buggies didn't see progress — they saw a threat. The automobile. The jet engine. The nuclear age. The internet. Each one triggered the same cycle: fear, resistance, adaptation, normalization.

We've gone from mainframes to PCs to handheld tablets, from switchboard operators to the phone book to the internet in our pocket. Now AI is moving through its own version of that arc — from deep learning to generative to agentic to autonomous intelligence.

Every one of these revolutions brought physical infrastructure, massive capital investment and workforce disruption that landed squarely on the doorstep of county officials. AI is no different — except this time, the speed, scale and thirst for resources are bigger and more concentrated than anything that came before.

table, study the supply chain, understand the financing capital stacks, ask hard questions and fight for a deal that leaves your community better off — not used and abused.

County government isn't a passive observer on this journey. We're on the ground where change is real, not in depots and switchyards this time, but in server farms and cleanrooms the size of NFL stadiums.

The last Gilded Age caught plenty of communities flat-footed. With chips and compute, let's make sure we're the ones writing the terms, not just living with them.

Matthew D. Chase is CEO and executive director of the National Association of Counties (NACo), the only national organization serving America's 3,069 counties, parishes and boroughs.

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If justices split 4-4, Colorado Supreme Court decision would stand in county case

From COURT page 1

notice, for workers whose livelihoods are interrupted, for the parents compelled to reassure worried children and for the public servants working around the clock to restore essential services.

"The costs are projected to climb higher for our families and our taxpayers. Faced with these rising costs, we ask, is it fair for communities to shoulder these costs alone? We believe it is not."

The Supreme Court is not deciding whether Boulder's allegations are true. It is considering two narrower questions.

First, does the court have jurisdiction to hear the case? Second, if it does, does federal law preclude Boulder's state-law claims seeking relief for injuries allegedly caused by interstate and international greenhouse-gas emissions?

In 2018, Boulder County, the City of Boulder and San Miguel County sued ExxonMobil and Suncor Energy in state court. San Miguel County's claims were later split off and are proceeding separately. The companies moved the case to federal court, but a fed-

eral judge sent it back to state court in 2019, and the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to review that decision in 2023.

In 2024, Boulder County District Court refused the companies' request to dismiss the case. In 2025, the Colorado Supreme Court ruled 5-2 that federal law, including the Clean Air Act, does not preempt Boulder's state-law claims. ExxonMobil and Suncor then asked the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn that ruling, with support from the Trump administration, which also argued on the companies' side Oct. 5.

The companies argue that greenhouse-gas emissions are governed mainly by federal law, including the Clean Air Act. Allowing state tort claims, they say, would improperly intrude on that federal regulatory framework.

"If Boulder's claims are allowed to go forward, some 90,000 municipalities across the country will have the ability to make national and international energy policy by asking juries to impose catastrophic damages on selected fossil fuel producers," Kannon



Flames engulf homes in the Marshall Fire, Dec. 30, 2021. Photo by NOAA Boulder

K. Shanmugam, a lawyer representing the companies, said in his opening statement before the Supreme Court.

Kevin Russell, the attorney representing the county and city, answered questions about the Clean Air Act. He said Boulder did not sue over emissions, which the Clean Air Act regulates. Instead, it sued over the companies' alleged deceptive marketing, their production, promotion, refining and sale of fossil fuels, and their alleged concealment and misrepresentation of climate risks, none of which that law regulates.

"Since the founding, states have had the power to provide tort remedies for injuries oc-

curring within their borders, even when the conduct causing those injuries occurred elsewhere," Russell told the justices Oct. 5.

After the argument, it wasn't clear whether a majority of justices would side with the oil companies or with Boulder. Justice Samuel Alito recused himself from the case without explanation. He has stepped aside from earlier oil and gas cases because of stock holdings. With only eight justices hearing the case, the vote could split evenly.

If the justices split 4-4, the Colorado Supreme Court's decision would stand, allowing Boulder's case to proceed. A decision is expected by sum-

mer 2027.

A win for Boulder would likely pave the way for dozens of similar lawsuits filed by local and state governments against major oil companies. A loss would set a precedent that federal law preempts state tort claims over climate change, handing a major legal victory to the fossil fuel industry.

"We believe we should have a fair opportunity to present the facts and allow a local court to determine whether the defendants have harmed Boulder County," Boulder County Commissioner Claire Levy read on behalf of the commission, in front of the Supreme Court after the Oct. 5 hearing.

"And if so, whether they should be required to pay their fair share of the damage. We urge the Supreme Court to allow our case to continue.

"No matter the outcome, the City of Boulder and Boulder County will continue to do our part. We will continue to prepare, to adapt, to reduce our emissions and to invest in a safer and more resilient future. Because that's our job as local government — to create safe and livable communities for our taxpayers." **CN**

Mentoring key to smooth transition as many positions turn over every two years

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would put his head down and get where I need to go, so I'm adjusting to having people stop me to talk."

After 10 years, then-Commissioner Abramovic had started thinking about life after office when a private sector opportunity was too good to turn down. And then he knew who to tip off — the former teacher and founder of the local nonprofit Innovation Institute for Tomorrow.

"Tim was someone I would vent to about being county commissioner all the time," Abramovic said. "Then one day he told me that if I left, he'd be interested [in the job]."

Roughly one-third of county elected officials' positions turn over every two years, and while the nature of political

campaigning might not allow for the same warm hand-off that the pair in Venango County enjoyed, Abramovic is encouraged by the results of their transition planning.

"I have advised and mentored a lot of county commissioners when I was state association president, and Tim works like a three-year veteran after a few months," he said.

Abramovic focused on imparting institutional knowledge and letting Heffernan's judgment take it from there. A lot of that background has been imparted over long phone calls, some lasting two hours.

"I told Tim I would give him the history and why we are where we are, but I am not going to give you advice on making decisions," Abramovic said. "There were a lot of

times someone would suggest something and I would say 'oh, we've tried that before,' but it was almost a decade ago. I'm enjoying seeing someone who is approaching these problems with fresh eyes."

One of those problems was county employee retention.

"A few years ago, we gave everyone a \$3 [an hour] raise, and they quit anyway," Abramovic said. "But that was years ago, and Tim didn't feel so connected to that attempt that he was scared off of trying again."

Heffernan, Abramovic said, brought renewed energy to the county's administrative team's effort, which ended up with a salary realignment and new pay scale.

"We brought everybody's pay up to a level that would sustain families and also set

the standard that Venango County is a good place to work," Heffernan said.

It was energy, insight and freshness Abramovic said he would not have brought to the job having fought those battles before. And that fuels his desire to remain a resource for Heffernan as he gets deeper into the job.

"I'm a guy who likes to connect the dots, so exploring county government, seeing how one department affects another, how county functions interact and overlap, that's been my big learning curve, but it's an enjoyable one," Heffernan said.

Preserving institutional knowledge

If his responsibilities as a first-year Roosevelt Coun-

ty, N.M. commissioner keep Durward Dixon awake at night in 2027, he won't have to sit alone with his thoughts too long. He'll need only to wake his wife, Tina, and if she isn't annoyed, draw on her eight years of experience.

He'll succeed Tina after she hits New Mexico's two-term limit for commissioners. The potential loss of institutional knowledge prompted her to keep Durward and fellow incoming commissioner Kenneth Reed in the loop as she wraps up her term. The pair of county government novices joined her at NACo's Energy Symposium in Potter County, Texas, a three-hour drive away, in September.

Dixon was the first female commissioner in Roosevelt

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Youth justice efforts eye productive outcomes

by Bryce Wilkom

October marks Youth Justice Action Month (YJAM), a month-long observance that seeks to raise awareness about the challenges young people face within the justice system, and advocates for fair, effective and developmentally appropriate responses.

YJAM began in 2008 as a 5k race organized by Missouri parent Tracy McClard to raise awareness about youth justice issues and educate lawmakers after her 17-year-old son Jonathan died by suicide while being held in solitary confinement in an adult jail earlier in the year.

What began as a local grass-roots movement in Missouri, spread rapidly across the country. By 2010, more than 20 states, and the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) had recognized the initiative. President Barack Obama issued a presidential proclamation recognizing October as YJAM in 2015 and 2016.

In 2026, with YJAM widely recognized across levels of government and a key month for organizations and practitioners across the country, the theme for this year is "Building a Future Where Youth Thrive."

At NACo's 2026 Annual Conference, President George Dunlap announced his presidential spotlight "Building Better Futures," which calls on counties across the country to examine what they are doing for young people and take at least one concrete action to improve outcomes for youth in their communities.

County-level systems shape the decisions made at every stage of the youth justice process, influencing whether young people move toward stability and accountability or become more deeply involved in the system. While interventions can occur at multiple points, including intake, adjudication, and disposition, one of the most effective opportunities to intervene is at the very beginning, when a young person first comes into contact with the system.



Orange County, N.C., a county of just more than 150,000 residents and home to Chapel Hill, operates an innovative Youth Deflection Program (YDP) for first-time offenders and youth who commit low-level, nonviolent misdemeanors. Rather than moving these young people deeper into the juvenile justice system, the YDP "deflects" them toward appropriate, community-based services.

The YDP launched in 2021, and was preceded by a county misdemeanor diversion program, which began in 2016, and aimed to divert 16- and 17-year-olds with first-time offenses from formal court proceedings. At the time, under North Carolina state law, 16- and 17-year-olds were automatically charged as adults—underscoring the importance of keeping them out of the system.

In 2019, North Carolina passed the Juvenile Justice Reinvestment Act, known as the "Raise the Age" law, which ended this practice and moved youth instead into the juvenile justice system. At the time, North Carolina was the last state in the country to adopt a Raise the Age law.

While this legislation was a large step forward, it didn't stop youth from being charged or contribute to building the systems for identifying and addressing root issues of crime. The responsibility to improve outcomes for

youth and families in the juvenile justice system fell largely to local governments.

Such is the case in Orange County.

"We began looking at ways to mitigate the circumstances that comes with a formal referral," said Tami Pfeifer, who serves as the YDP coordinator. Pfeifer, alongside Caitlin Fenhagen, former director of the

'If we can open doors for them...I know how much that can impact a kid.'

— Tami Pfeifer,
Orange County, N.C.

Criminal Justice Resources Department and now serving as deputy county manager, began exploring how to build a program to keep kids away from the system altogether.

They talked to stakeholders across the county, including the courts, district attorney's office, sheriff's office and more to gain buy-in on the importance of the program and what shape it could potentially take.

Law enforcement, however, was the key partnership in the YDPs formation. Law enforcement begins the deflection process when officers first make contact with a young person.

Officers use their discretion on eligible cases and instead of making an arrest or issuing

a formal juvenile petition, will provide the individual and their families with a note instructing them to call the CJRD within 72 hours. They also submit an online form detailing the encounter for the YDP staff handling the case.

Upon intake, youth are connected with a behavioral health liaison and given a general risk and needs assessment. An open dialogue begins, to give youth and families a chance to talk openly about what happened, who was affected and potential consequences. In these early conversations, Pfeifer added that "it's important for youth to understand that if they were to be sent to juvenile court, or if something in the future were to happen, how that could impact their lives and their families' lives, and how those consequences could become a barrier for them."

Pfeifer and county staff create individualized deflection plans, which typically last around 90 days and are built around a young person's needs and interests, subsequently making handoffs to community-support services.

Recent connections include referrals to school-based therapy and peer mentor groups, family counseling, a local bike nonprofit that provides hands-on learning and maintenance skills, after-school sports programming and more.

In one case, a youth defaced school property with graffiti,

an offense that would normally lead to a court petition and further involvement in the juvenile justice system. Instead, after further conversation and learning more about the youth's creative passions, they were connected with a local art nonprofit where they worked with a mentor, in addition to completing additional community service.

In an effort to repair harm that was done to the school, and to display the youth's creative talents in a positive way, the youth painted a mural of the school's mascot on the school resource officer's door — a project they felt proud of and received praise from classmates and the community.

Since its inception, the program has produced strong results: 97% of youth have completed the program, and 93% have incurred no new offenses. Law enforcement is kept in the loop throughout, receiving updates on each youth's progress and a final follow-up once the program is complete.

For at-risk youth, whether in Orange County or elsewhere, these connections, goal-setting and opportunities to own and repair mistakes build the strengths and support they need to move forward.

"If we can open doors for them... or even if they just meet that one person that can see them a different way, I know how much that can impact a kid," Pfeifer said.

In October, as Youth Justice Action Month highlights the challenges young people face, and as President Dunlap's initiative calls on counties to take concrete action for youth, it's a reminder that the programs, innovations and systems counties put in place, and the ways youth are viewed and treated within them, have a profound impact on young people's lives. When responses are built around support, connection and repair rather than punishment, youth are more likely to be given the chance to thrive. **CN**

Bryce Wilkom is a program associate in the Justice, County Practices & Innovations department at NACo.



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CountyNews

HOT topics

DATA CENTERS

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NATIONAL ASSOCIATION *of* COUNTIES

October 19, 2026

DATA CENTERS

Counties confront a range of issues during build-out.



NACo Associate Legislative Director Emma Conover shows Wake County, N.C., Commissioner Shinica Thomas and her husband, Raymond, the inside of a server rack at a Digital Realty data center in Loudoun County, Va., in October 2025. Photo by Charlie Ban

THE BACKSLASH BACKLASH: COUNTIES PIVOT IN THE DATA CENTER BUILD-OUT

by **Charlie Ban**
senior writer

For years, county officials have wondered what would get residents interested in local issues or encourage them to participate in public meetings. More than a few have probably asked a search engine or prompted artificial intelligence for ideas — and they were onto something.

Data centers, which power internet searches like those, have done just that. The physical infrastructure housed in enormous warehouses must go somewhere, and in the United States, “somewhere” means a county.

Two years ago, a data center might have seemed like a gift to a county looking for an economic boost. But a May 2026 Gallup poll found that seven in 10 Americans don’t want one built near them.

Data centers have become a linchpin of national and regional economic growth, a challenge for local elected leaders seeking to maintain control over land use and a puzzle for energy infrastructure and long-term planning. Most notably, they’ve pitted county of-

ficials against frustrated, sometimes angry, crowds. As the potential tax revenue for counties from these projects grows, so does public suspicion of the decision-makers, fueled by misgivings about the pace of technological advances.

“We couldn’t answer the misinformation fast enough,” said Box Elder County, Utah, Commissioner Lee Perry of a proposed data center in his county. “People got mad at us because they were worried about air quality and water, but those are under federal and state jurisdiction. I got emails from people in Florida saying we had to vote against this because the fate of the world depended on us.”

Cleanview tracks 1,341 operating data centers in the United States, with an additional 2,539 projects in progress. One proposed data center is Stratos, a 40,000-acre project that Perry and his colleagues learned about in March 2026. They said the state’s Military Installation Development Authority had backed them into a corner, leaving them among the last to know.

The commissioners moved a May 2026 meeting to a building at the coun-

ty fairgrounds that could hold more than 1,100 people. The land in question for Stratos, north of the Great Salt Lake, was miles from the nearest home. The project would draw water from agricultural sources and, most crucially for the county, sit on unzoned land, limiting the commissioners’ oversight. By the time the meeting began, the story had gone national. Speakers could barely get half a sentence out before the crowd drowned them out.

“We will not allow shouting, we will not allow cat calling. We expect you to be kind,” Commissioner Tyler Vincent pleaded with the audience early in the meeting.

Eventually, the commissioners retreated to a separate room to vote, broadcasting the proceedings to the auditorium. The county had solicited public feedback online before the meeting and counted 2,500 comments, 262 of them from Box Elder County residents.

Perry argued that the commission’s vote in favor of the project ensured the county would have some role in determining its future, making it easier to retain some control over the projected \$30 million in annual property tax rev-

enue. That figure was expected to grow to \$108 million annually — double Box Elder County’s current budget. Several partners in the deal reportedly told the commissioners that the project would move forward one way or another.

“It’s like you’re a bank teller and a bandit sticks a gun in your face and tells you to empty the drawer,” Perry said. “An onlooker will say the guy was never going to shoot you, or he didn’t have bullets in the gun, but you don’t know that when the gun’s in your face.”

Simple design, complex applications

For all their mystery, data centers are relatively simple. Inside the windowless buildings are warehouses full of computers surrounded by cooling infrastructure. While nearby roads can swell with construction crews and vehicles for 12 to 18 months, staffing and traffic are limited once the facilities are up and running. Data centers don’t place significant demands on schools and, with proper planning, can be confined to designated parts of a county where lo-

See BACKLASH, pg H3

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cal land use authority applies (see story on page H5).

Data centers generate tax revenue for counties in several ways, but real property taxes (on real estate) and personal property taxes (on equipment) can provide significant revenue infusions (see story on page H10). Community benefits agreements can sweeten the deal.

But their apparent simplicity belies the challenges developers face as they seek new sites with the power and IT infrastructure needed to support operations.

“Think of a normal industrial-type project where there’s power needs, there’s water needs, there’s construction impact and then multiply those by 100,” said Linn County, Iowa, Planning Director Charlie Nichols, whose county has one data center and two more on the way. “If you have not experienced one of these projects before, it’s hard to be completely ready.”

That includes preparing for concerns about noise, the effects on power and water bills, and how close those enormous, plain-looking buildings will be to homes.

Counties also face pressure to keep their economies moving. An analysis by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis found that recent investments in AI-related categories contributed significantly to real GDP growth in 2025. AI companies are expanding in hopes of delivering on the \$10.3 tril-

lion in domestic investment that economist Stijn Van Nieuwerburgh projected would go toward infrastructure buildout between 2025 and 2032, averaging 3.63% of GDP annually.

Both chambers of Congress have been working on legislation to shield residential ratepayers from rate increases and transmission infrastructure costs associated with serving data centers (see story on page H9).

And while counties compete with one another to attract data centers, the Trump administration is encouraging development on public land — a notoriously challenging proposition for counties seeking to generate tax revenue — which would leave the data centers in the counties without the benefits.

It’s a lot to place on the shoulders of often-part-time county leaders whose agendas have been full for years.

“They’re getting bombarded by data center developers who are throwing unbelievable sums of money at them,” said Michael Turner, a supervisor in Loudoun County, Va., the data center capital.

His county’s 233 data centers generate more than \$1.3 billion in property taxes annually, accounting for more than 40% of the county’s budget. That revenue has helped enable residential property tax cuts and fund the county’s school system.

Turner, who is in his second year as chair of NACo’s Energy, Environment and Land Use Policy Steering Committee, has drawn on Loudoun County’s 26 years of experience with data centers to become a leading local government expert in the field. He shares his insights in materials on his district website and tours the country speaking to state associations of county officials. He stress-

tions,” he said.

He recently saw that scenario play out in a Kentucky county.

Not all projects span 40,000 acres or are touted as among the largest in a county. Calloway County, Mo., is in the process of finalizing a 200-acre development with two buildings totaling 700,000 square feet.

“This isn’t a huge project,” said Presiding Commissioner Gary Jungermann. “It’s just cloud storage, and it’s all a bit smaller than the average.”

The letter, spirit and zeitgeist of the law

Hundreds of counties have enacted moratoriums targeting some aspect of data center development, mostly since the summer of 2026, in hopes of slowing development while they prepare their county codes. Meanwhile, Tex-

and vision for how this development works, so that we can move forward as a region instead of each of us having our own separate requirements,” he said during NACo’s Energy Symposium in Potter County, Texas, in September.

His counterpart in Grant County, Wash., believes moratoriums often reflect a lack of planning.

“A lot of local officials are just choosing to go with moratoriums, and I feel like that’s just kicking the can down the road,” Michelle Mercer said in response to Nichols. “I think they are, from a staffing perspective, very rushed and reactive.”

Counties should start reviewing their zoning codes and ordinances now, she said.

“Even if you don’t think [data centers] are coming to your area soon, I would get ahead of it as much as you can. And I feel like the worst codes are those that are rushed, even if it is an 18-month or 24-month timeline.”

McKenzie County, N.D. passed a three-page data center ordinance in 2024 that seems quaint by today’s standards. The current draft revision is nearly three times as long and reflects months of work by the county, its cities and residents.

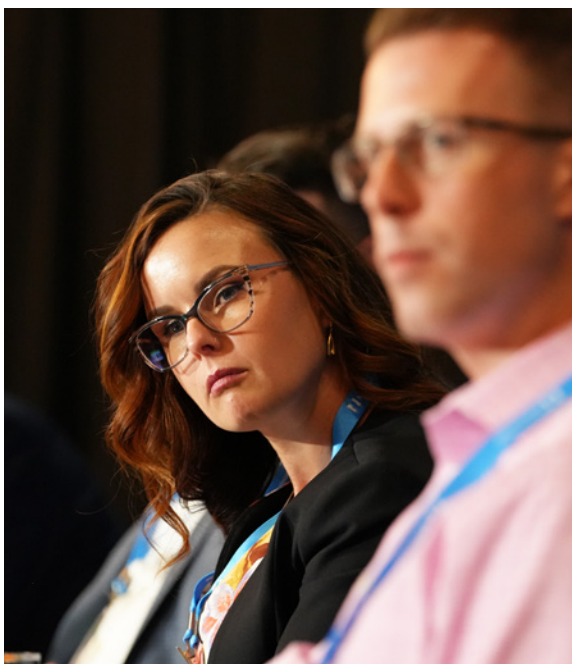
Commissioner Joel Brown said McKenzie County was motivated to get its ordinance right after dealing with a troublesome nearby cryptocurrency mining operation.

“We knew we needed to get ahead of this before there were any applications or any developers that were truly knocking on the door in McKenzie County,” he said.

He visited a data center elsewhere in North Dakota and joined a 15-person trip to Laramie County, Wyo., to examine how Microsoft and Meta data centers had changed the community around Cheyenne over 14 years. The group included county, city, economic development, planning and zoning personnel, along with residents who had voiced concerns about data centers.

The county then held community open houses featuring experienced subject-matter experts who could address concerns about different aspects of data centers, particularly noise.

“We didn’t get started late on this,” Brown said. “We’ve had a lot of experience already in educating ourselves on



Grant County, Wash., Planning Director Michelle Mercer listens to a question during the NACo Energy Symposium in Potter County, Texas, in September 2026.

Photo by Charlie Ban



Loudoun County, Va., Supervisor Michael Turner outlines six critical issues for data center development during the NACo Energy Symposium in Potter County, Texas, in September 2026. Photo by Charlie Ban

es the need to plan around six key concerns: noise, power, water, emissions, setbacks and appearance.

“There’s a tremendous disparity of what they know, but wherever their county is in the process, they generally have similar questions,” he said of county officials. “I try to think that if I were in this person’s shoes, and this is what I was facing, what would be a solution?”

What concerns Turner most is the potential for further state preemption of county zoning authority, as has happened in neighboring West Virginia (see story on page H5).

“If you ask tough questions and you really work hard to negotiate the proper arrangement for a county, there’s always a possibility that the industry will go to the state and get them to take the authority away from the county, so they don’t have to have these conversa-

as Gov. Greg Abbott (R) and New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) have both issued statewide moratoriums, and Maryland Gov. Wes Moore (D) is requiring projects above a certain capacity to undergo review.

County planning staff members are divided over the wisdom of imposing moratoriums on data centers.

Nichols believes moratoriums can signal urgency to partners and help bring a region together to develop an integrated plan. That’s how Linn County is approaching its moratorium, which is set to expire at the end of 2027.

“We’re inviting representatives from every city and a few neighboring counties to participate in a committee that’s looking at data centers, but also connected development, power production, energy storage, all that kind of stuff to come up with a shared set of principles

COUNTY OFFICIALS FACE DATA CENTER SCRUTINY

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data center development.”

He feels good about the revised draft ordinance as he discusses concerns with residents.

“Anytime I’ve got an opportunity to talk to a citizen who maybe leans towards an anti-data center mindset or proposal of a moratorium, when I start asking them about their specific concerns, there’s not one that we don’t have a really robust understanding of or that isn’t addressed already in the ordinance that we’re proposing,” he said.

He admits, though, that McKenzie County, located in the Bakken oil fields, likely has a different perspective on development than other rural counties.

“We live in a heavily industrialized area already,” he said. “It’s something we’re accustomed to and we’re probably a lot more comfortable with it than most rural counties are.”

One of one

Data centers moved into Loudoun County like a hermit crab claiming an empty shell. Data storage companies took advantage of infrastructure left over from the dot-com boom of 2000, and by 2003, data centers had been included in the county’s zoning ordinance. Five years later, Economic Development Director Buddy Rizer had consolidated the county’s marketing and permitting strategy, helping establish what would become the world’s densest concentration of data centers. In 2023, shortly after the launch of ChatGPT, the county updated its zoning ordinance. Two years later, the county Board of Supervisors ended by-right development, requiring all prospective developers to go through the county approval process.

Loudoun County’s head start, combined with the industry’s growing backlash, makes it unlikely that another county will unseat it as the king of data centers.

Although most facilities are concentrated in a region known as “Data Center Alley,” some developments have strayed beyond it.

“We have data centers that are placed in really bad places,” Turner said. “They’re right next to residential neighborhoods and we have data centers that are making a lot of noise that shouldn’t be making a lot of noise. But we also have a huge number of data centers that are in the right place. I think 85% to 90% of our data center community would be exactly what it is right now.”



Environmental health scientist Chris Olsson addresses a McKenzie County, N.D., open house on data center regulation in September 2026. To his left is acoustic specialist Ryan Callahan. Photo courtesy of McKenzie County

Looking back at the six factors he considers essential to data center development, Turner said Loudoun County had missed the mark on five of them.

“What we have to do, and the unique problem that we have in Loudoun County now, is how do we either incentivize or disincentivize our existing data centers to grow with the times?”

The county’s reputation has become something of a boogeyman for anti-data center groups, which warn other communities that they could become the next Loudoun County.

Repercussions

Public criticism has scuttled some data center deals. Nobles County, Minn., Commissioner Gene Metz was intrigued by the prospect of diversifying the county’s agricultural economy, but 90% of the comments on a rezoning request for a proposed project opposed it.

“No matter how much you think it might be the right thing to do, it’s hard to go against what your people tell you,” he said.

County officials in several states have lost primary elections after voting in favor of data centers.

Voters in Lincoln County, Neb., launched recall campaigns against three commissioners who voted against

a countywide moratorium, though the campaigns failed to secure enough signatures to get on the general election ballot.

Public officials across the country have reported receiving death threats tied to their votes on data centers, including Box Elder County’s Perry and one of the Lincoln County commissioners.

Hoping to spur reinvestment in a long-vacant site in his district, Marion County-Indianapolis, Ind., Councilmember Rob Gibson supported a data center project there.

In the middle of the night in April 2026, he awoke to the sound of breaking glass. Upon investigating, he found that his glass front door had been shattered.

“I figured someone banged on it really hard and broke it,” Gibson said.

The next morning, he realized that a bullet, not a fist, had broken the glass. He found 13 holes in his front door and pieces of wood from the door on his dining room table, among his son’s Legos.

“I’m so glad I didn’t know it was bullets in the middle of the night,” he said.

A note he found under his doormat made clear that his support for the data center had prompted the attack. It didn’t keep him from attending that

evening’s council meeting.

“I knew I was not going to allow that act of violence to keep me from doing my job,” he said. “I was grateful that I was not scared the way that they wanted me to be scared.”

The silicon lining

What surprised Perry about the primary election a month after the meeting wasn’t that he and his colleague Boyd Bingham lost their reelection campaigns. It was that they came as close as they did.

“I was surprised that as many people voted for us,” he said. “I thought it was going to be a slam dunk and just our families would support us.”

After he leaves office, his county’s financial future will be more secure than he could have imagined four years ago, when he began his term.

Perry is not only free from having to campaign in the general election, but he also feels the primary served as a catharsis, allowing the commission to resume governing without distractions.

“We would have been facing protests in every meeting for the rest of the year,” he said. “We’ll do our best job finishing up our terms and handing it on to the next guys. Hopefully they’ll do a good job.”

COUNTY LEADERS PUSH FOR A VOICE IN DATA CENTER DEVELOPMENT

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

Data centers are popping up in counties all over the country, but not all local governments have a say in how or where — or even if — they're built. Counties in certain states, such as Texas and West Virginia, lack zoning powers or land-use authority over data centers, leaving them with little to no control over development while still bearing its impacts.

In Loudoun County, Va., also known as "Data Center Alley," data centers generate \$1.3 billion in annual tax revenue, accounting for 40% of the county's total budget and significantly lowering residential property tax rates. The county receives 100% of the tax revenue generated.

But just next door in West Virginia, counties only receive 30% of the tax revenue generated (which is then split between county operations and education), leaving localities with all of the on-the-ground impacts of data centers — such as water and air pollution and higher energy bills — with a fraction of the financial benefits.

That's because the Power Generation and Consumption Act, which West Virginia Gov. Patrick Morrisey signed into law in April 2025, strips county governments of zoning and regulatory authority for data centers.

The legislation has put county officials in a difficult place, having to answer to constituents who are frustrated or fearful about data centers without holding any power to do anything about them, said Mason County, W. Va. Commissioner Rick Handley.

"Whether it's sound, whether it's water usage, whether it's the power, we have no jurisdiction over anything having to do with data centers, and it's been a hinderance," Handley said. "... This is my 30th year as a county commissioner, and I've never seen local authority taken away like this."

There should be guardrails in place for data center development to ensure that residents are protected, and counties need a seat at the table, according to Jefferson County, W.Va. Commissioner Cara Keys, who also serves on the county's planning commission.

"I have my feet closest to my people, and, as a proud Republican, I believe firmly that one of the core Republican principles is local control," Keys said. "So, to have local control, that means



you need to allow your constituents to be part of the decisions, for there to be transparency, these decisions being made before your local constituents, as opposed to state level or big government.

"I think these land development and land use decisions are probably one of the more important decisions that should be made by your local government and your local constituents," she noted. "Because they have the largest burden on your community.

"So, I'm hopeful that we can move this [legislation] in a positive direction that is led with local input first."

The Jefferson County Commission recently drafted Good Neighbor Data Center Guardrails with local city representatives in an effort to guide and regulate potential data center development. The proposal includes recommendations around water use, noise limits, land use and air quality and pollution control.

"Even though it's not codified, we wanted to submit something very public," Keys said. "So that any potential data center looking and coming to Jefferson County knows very much how the local elected officials believe these should be treated."

Hill County, Texas is another local government without land use authority that's created a checklist of regulations it's hoping developers comply with. It includes regulations around noise, water use and light pollution, according to Hill County Commissioner Jim Holcomb.

"We put together a development checklist of things that the county would like to see — not that they have to adhere to any of that — but that we can give [developers] and say, 'Look, here's what we need to see before you guys start,'" Holcomb said. "If they really want to be good neighbors and they truly want to come and be a part of the community, then they'll do some of those things."

According to the Pew Research Center, 39% of planned data centers in the U.S. are being built in counties that cur-

rently have no operating data centers at all, marking a heavy shift in data center development in rural counties in the South and Midwest.

Hill County doesn't currently have any operating data centers, but it has eight in the pipeline, one of which is under construction, according to Holcomb. In Texas, counties don't have the home-rule powers and zoning capabilities that cities do, so while the city of San Marcos was successful in its ban on new data centers, Hill County got hit with a \$100 million lawsuit for the moratorium its County Commission passed.

Counties should be able to have a say in what's developed in their community, according to Holcomb.

"We had to do something, even if we didn't have the authority to do it," Holcomb said, about the moratorium. "We had to do something to get our hands around the issue because we got caught flat-footed, and I think all the data center guys knew this area was ripe for the picking.

"They came down here with all guns blazing and did most of what they did under the table before anybody ever knew about it. The data center that is under construction, we never knew about it until dirt was already being moved."

The lawsuit, filed by a developer in federal court in Austin, argued that the county "exceeded its lawful powers" in passing the moratorium, prompting the County Commission to rescind it and create the list of proposed regulations for developers.

"We just don't have the authority that we need to regulate an industrial impact of that size, and we kind of took that one step too far, if you will," Holcomb said. "But it did raise the issue, and I think there's some good that has come out of that."

Under Texas law, counties can't increase maintenance and operations property tax revenue by more than 3.5% over the previous year's rate without triggering an automatic public election.

"So, if the year before, revenue was \$10 billion, and the next revenue for the following year, because of data center capital expenditures, or even rollback taxes, was more than 3.5% [higher], we would be forced to lower property taxes," Holcomb said. "Which is a good thing, but with a 'no new revenue cap' and a growing county and a larger strain and demand for services, you can't make that work financially.

"... It's just untenable. The state has done this so that they can control what happens at the county level, and it worked."

In Pennsylvania, localities hold primary authority over where and how data centers are developed, but they're unable to establish moratoriums on them. Lackawanna County, Pa., which has more data center and power plant proposals than any other county in the state, recently approved a \$165,000 countywide study to assess the cumulative effects of the county's existing and proposed data centers and power plants on residents' health, air quality and water.

"People's lungs don't recognize municipal boundaries," said Lackawanna County Commissioner Bill Gaughan. "Their children aren't breathing according to the way that a zoning map might look. The cumulative burden is the burden that matters."

In February, Gaughan sent a letter to Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro urging for a three-year state moratorium on the development of data centers, so that their impacts could be comprehensively studied. He hasn't received a response.

"We really want evidence," Gaughan said. "I've been at a lot of these meetings, and the

developers come in, and they promise this and they promise that, but the evidence should come first."

EmPower Analytics Group, which is conducting the countywide study, already examined the health impact of one proposed data center campus in Lackawanna County, finding that it could cause between \$3.3 million and \$124 million in annual health damages.

"Future generations are going to look back and say, 'Where was everybody? Where were all the elected officials? Why weren't there more people jumping up and down about this?'" Gaughan said. **HT**



Keys



Holcomb



Handley

WATER MATTERS FOR DATA CENTERS

by Shelby Butz

AI-ready capacity is expected to grow about 33% annually from 2025 to 2030, in a mid-range estimate. The best available national estimate is that U.S. data centers directly consumed about 17.4 billion gallons of water in 2023, up from an estimated 5.6 billion in 2014, according to Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

That is water used on-site, mostly for cooling. National totals can look small while a single county feels a large new customer. Data centers often cluster in a few places, need treated water and use the most when demand is already high in hot weather. This growing demand is driving data center development nationwide, accelerating local proposals and the importance for county officials to understand impacts to energy, land and water resources.

Why data centers need water

Nearly all the electricity that powers a data center's servers turns into heat, which must be removed to keep the equipment from overheating. AI workloads pack more computing power into each rack of servers, so more heat builds up in a smaller space.

Cooling breaks down into four functions

STEP 1: Heat is generated: nearly all electricity used by IT equipment becomes heat

STEP 2: Heat is captured: by air, direct-to-chip or immersion cooling

STEP 3: Heat is transferred: to a facility loop through equipment such as chillers

STEP 4: Heat is rejected: to outdoor air or water, which largely determines water consumption

The amount of water a facility uses depends largely on the last step of cooling, when heat is released outside the building. Many facilities use evaporative cooling, in which water absorbs heat and evaporates. It is the most efficient method of getting rid of heat, but it can put the most strain on water supplies. Others use fans and outdoor air, depending on weather, equipment and operating temperatures, which uses far less water but more electricity and can make more noise. Many designs combine the two, leaning on water mainly during hot weather.

"Closed-loop" cooling, in which coolant circulates in a sealed system instead of evaporating, has become pop-



An associate with Digital Realty shows county officials the cooling system in one of its Loudoun County, Va. data centers in October 2024. Photo by Charlie Ban

ular. A data center might use a closed loop to cool its chips and still evaporate water at the final stage.

Data centers also use water indirectly, through the power plants that supply their electricity. Across the entire power sector, fuel-burning and nuclear plants consumed an average of about 2.9 billion gallons of water a day from 2010 to 2020, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, but that figure covers all electricity users, not just data centers.

For data centers specifically, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory estimated that power generation consumed an additional 211 billion gallons in 2023, about 12 times what the facilities used directly. That water is typically untreated surface water or groundwater, not drinking water but researchers caution that there is no accurate national data on data center water use.

A different kind of water customer

Comparing data centers with other big water users is difficult. Farms and power plants generally use untreated water. Data centers often need treated water, which usually comes from public systems.

Where a facility gets its water matters as much as how much it uses. Water may come from a public utility, a reclaimed water network or direct groundwater and surface withdrawals from aquifers, rivers and lakes. Wastewater can include blowdown

containing treatment chemicals. Sewer discharge is typically reviewed by the receiving utility, and direct surface discharge requires National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System authorization. Impacts range from minimal to substantial depending on design and local conditions. Concerns may include water availability and discharge quality. Each raises different questions about capacity, infrastructure and downstream effects.

Data center water usage went from 5.6 billion gallons in 2014 to 17.5 billion in 2023.

Data center wastewater can contain treatment chemicals such as biocides and anti-corrosives, depending on the cooling design. Discharge to a sewer typically requires review by the receiving utility, while discharge to a river or lake requires federal pollution-discharge permitting.

Authority over these decisions is often split, varying by state and county, but counties often face land, energy and water decisions at once. Counties may run a water utility, share responsibility with other agencies, review land use or have little say at all. Water systems are interconnected, and impacts don't stop at a jurisdiction's boundary.

How some counties are responding

Faced with proposals for new data centers, counties have taken different approaches to protecting their water supplies and controlling infrastructure costs. Some counties have made water availability part of the land-use approval process, requiring developers to prove their water supply meets state requirements.

Others have used development agreements to make companies responsible for their own water and wastewater service, including paying for any on-site and off-site upgrades.

Other county approaches include requiring county approval for any new wells or barring the permanent use of drinking water for cooling instead focusing on reuse systems.

Several counties have focused on the water-cooling technology and type of water that can be used by requiring closed-loop cooling systems that use a limited amount of non-potable water, reserves drinking-quality water for plumbing fixtures and prohibits the use of groundwater.

County considerations and questions

NACo has put together a data center 101 planning checklist for officials contemplating data center development and is currently developing a technical brief in the County Consideration Series specifically on water use and technology.

The following considerations and questions are intended as starting points for discussion and may not directly apply to every county as legal authority varies by state:

- Work out which approvals are needed and which agency controls each.
- Check how much water capacity is left after existing commitments and seasonal limits and ask for backup or curtailment plans.
- Request detailed water-use estimates, including initial fills, construction and average and peak demand, and reviewing the chemicals involved and how wastewater and emergency discharges and releases would be handled.
- Request in clear language who pays for and maintains infrastructure, how water use will be metered against projections and what happens if the project closes or changes hands. **H**

Butz is associate program director for Environment and Land Use in NACo's County Practices and Innovations department.

DATA CENTER LEGISLATION SURGES AS STATES SHIFT FROM INCENTIVES TO OVERSIGHT

by Isabella Reed

The last three years have seen an increase in state legislation governing data centers. Bills have been passed more frequently, in almost all states and by governments of both parties. Increasingly, legislation seeks to restrict, regulate and study the negative effects of data centers, in contrast to the pro-development attitude that characterized legislation in 2024.

This is true of both Democratic and Republican state legislatures, whose legislation takes similar stances on data centers while lagging behind the turn against these facilities in public opinion. Overall, the legislation focuses on regulating resource use and altering tax structures to incentivize or, sometimes, discourage development.

NACo tracked 97 state bills that became law between 2024-2026 governing the new class of hyperscale facilities designed for generative AI and cloud computing.

Some laws reduce county tax revenue by introducing tax exemptions for data centers while others protect it by suspending existing exemptions. Some limit county authority over land use and public utilities while others expand their authority to foster agreements with data center developers.

The number of bills passed at the state level regarding data centers increased 323% over the past three years to 55 in 2026 from 29 in 2025 and 13 in 2024. This increase closely follows recent advances in and awareness of AI technology and highlights the attention warranted from counties as data centers expand across the country. Forty states with county governments enacted legislation on data centers from 2024 through 2026.

State legislation dealing with data centers over this period primarily falls into four policy areas: electricity, tax incentives, water and local government authority.

Over 78% of these bills involved electricity or tax incentives, with each being the focus of 38 bills. Only seven bills addressed water consumption by data centers, showing less attention or consensus compared to the consump-



The dome of the Mississippi Capitol Building in Hinds County, Miss. Mississippi is one of several states to pass data center legislation.

tion of electricity. This aligns with public opinion polling showing widespread voter concern over the impact of data centers on their electricity bills and taxes.

Legislation shows mixed sentiment among both parties

Out of the 97 bills passed over three years, 27% are “pro-data center,” 63% are “anti-data center” and 10% do not take a position.

The number of anti-data center laws has increased over time to 24 in 2026, up from 16 in 2025 and one in 2024, while the number of pro-data center laws has slowly decreased to five in 2026 from 10 in 2025 and 11 in 2024. These trends show a turn against data centers by state legislatures, likely driven by increased awareness and growing voter skepticism around the topic. For counties, this may mean a slowdown in the pace of data center construction or increased regulations that may place a greater administrative burden on county governments.

Electricity and tax incentives

While no electricity-related bills passed in 2024, 14 passed in 2025 and 24 in 2026, showing an increasing focus on the energy use and electricity costs of data centers. Electricity was the primary focus of data center legislation in 2025 and 2026.

Although most of the laws around electricity do not explicitly mention

counties, some specifically preserve county land use authority, including South Dakota’s SB135 (2026) and Florida’s SB484 (2026). This is a positive trend amid a landscape of frequent land use preemption.

The number of bills being passed around tax incentives has steadily increased to 14 in 2026 from 13 in 2025 and 11 in 2024. Most early laws dealing with tax incentives introduce or expand exemptions to state taxes for data centers, including Mississippi’s SB2001 (2024), which allows local governments to exempt data centers from sales and income taxes and Kentucky’s HB775 (2025), which exempts data centers from sales and use taxes in all 120 counties (the incentive was previously only available in localities with populations of at least 500,000).

More recently, state governments have begun passing bills to reduce or eliminate data center tax incentives, including Arizona’s HB4168 (2026), which imposes a three-year moratorium on new data center tax incentives; Oregon’s HB4084 (2026), which temporarily excludes data centers from property tax exemptions until at least 90 days after the end of the 2027 state legislative session and Minnesota’s HF9 (2025), which abolishes the sales and use tax exemptions for electricity consumed by data centers.

Other bills show increased skepticism of tax incentives for data centers without any firm action. Indiana’s HB1406 (2026) initiates a study on the effect of

the state’s existing data center tax incentives on state and local revenue and South Carolina’s H5122 (2026) explicitly excludes data centers from a new sales tax exemption for internet and telecommunications service providers.

A minority of bills affect county revenues through cuts to local sales taxes, with most only affecting state taxes. They also differ in the degree of control they grant to local governments over newly introduced tax incentives.

Local authority

Five bills directly deal with local government authority over data centers. Although few in number, legislation that alters county authority remains an important area of focus for county governments.

Virginia’s SB94 (2026) requires counties to perform additional bureaucratic assessments of proposed data centers without providing them with more funding to do so, and Louisiana’s SB79 (2025) unilaterally redefines data center development as an “industrial purpose,” potentially overreaching into county land use authority.

Delaware’s SB312 (2026) prohibits counties from entering into a nondisclosure agreement that would restrict the county from disclosing information to the public about large-scale data center development. Nondisclosure agreements are often targeted by data center opponents.

Where to now?

Counties can expect the number of laws on this topic to continue to rise and regulations to continue to change as data centers draw more public attention and more studies emerge on their impact and effects on surrounding communities. These changes may directly impact county revenues and authority. On the other hand, if the issue has not yet reached the legislative agenda at the state level, counties must be aware that they could be increasingly tasked with working with developers or addressing public concerns. 

Reed is a research analyst in NACo’s Research, Policy & Governance Studies department.

ARE WE BUILDING TOMORROW'S INFRASTRUCTURE OR YESTERDAY'S DATA CENTERS?

by John Matelski

Ask an artificial intelligence tool a question and the answer appears in seconds. Behind that simple exchange, processors, networks, power systems and cooling equipment all work together. That's why a technology that we experience as software is producing such a visible construction boom. But the buildings are only part of the story. As AI changes the work computers do, it also changes the machinery inside them. And the machinery changes are happening much faster than the facilities built to house them.

We've seen this before, but never this fast

Around the turn of the 20th century, many factories relied on a central steam engine or waterwheel, with shafts and belts carrying power to individual machines. That arrangement determined where equipment could go.

Electric motors loosened those constraints. Machines could have their own source of power and be arranged around the flow of production. Old and new systems existed alongside one another as businesses adapted, but the factory floor itself changed and the buildings had to change. The way people worked had to change.

Electrification took decades, but this is happening in years. The machinery inside data centers is evolving faster than the buildings can be built. Technology that's standard today is obsolete in five years.

From storing information to generating it

Data centers already supported online banking, streaming, cloud applications, healthcare and government services before the current AI boom. AI adds something different: generating new text, images, audio, video and other outputs through repeated calculations.

Two terms explain the demand. Training is developing a model by adjusting it using data. Inference is what happens when the trained model handles a new request. Training requires large groups of processors working together. Inference creates ongoing computing demand every time people use the model.

A single question is only part of the picture. Demand grows when AI is built into search, office software, customer service and other tools used through-

out the day. Systems that generate video or carry out multiple tasks require far more computation than a short text response.

The Department of Energy estimated that data centers could consume 6.7% - 12% of U.S. electricity by 2028, up from 4.4% in 2023. The International Energy Agency projects that global data center electricity consumption will roughly double between 2025 and 2030.

The machinery is changing rapidly

AI changes how computers work together. Graphics processing units perform many calculations at once, making them well suited to modern AI work. In large systems, groups of these processors need fast connections to share information and coordinate their work.

More computing capacity packed into a rack means more electricity and more concentrated heat, and cooling becomes an issue. Fluid flowing close to the computing components carries away the heat in a process called direct liquid cooling. Other designs immerse equipment in specialized liquids. These systems improve heat removal significantly, but their water consumption depends on the full cooling system.

The cooling technology that's standard today is not the cooling technology that will be standard in five years. Facilities built to current specs won't perform as well. Data centers built 10 years ago are being retooled or shut down because the technology has moved on. That's not a prediction, it's what's happening now.

Computing chips get more powerful and use less electricity every year. A data center that's cutting edge today is middle of the pack in three years, obsolete in seven. That's the lifecycle of data center technology.

Efficiency doesn't stop the building boom

It seems reasonable to expect that better chips and software would reduce the need for new facilities. They reduce the resources needed for a particular task, but that's only half the equation.

When computing becomes more affordable and useful, people find more ways to use it. Some applications demand more resources. A system that checks several sources and completes multiple steps does more work than one



MATELSKI

that returns a brief answer.

The International Energy Agency's analysis describes rapid improvements in energy efficiency per AI task. Even so, it projects that global data center electricity consumption will roughly double by 2030. Efficiency is improving while the volume and complexity

of the work are growing.

The next chapters will have more than one shape

Not every AI task requires a giant centralized facility. Some processing happens on phones, laptops, or smaller systems closer to where people are. Large facilities remain important for work that demands substantial computing capacity. These approaches coexist, with different tasks handled in different places.

The industry is moving toward distributed computing. Processing happens closer to where data originates instead of sending everything to one massive facility far away. It's faster, cheaper, and uses less electricity. That shift is already underway.

Quantum computing is being developed to complement conventional computing for certain problems. It doesn't replace the computers delivering everyday digital services.

The computing infrastructure of tomorrow won't look like the computing infrastructure of today. The massive, centralized facility built to current specifications may remain valuable. Or it becomes substantially different. Or it's in the wrong place. The technology itself is evolving faster than anyone can predict with certainty.

What counties are actually seeing

This technology shifts shows up for counties in the boom in data center proposals. The demand is real and driven by genuine computing needs. Every digital service people rely on, from healthcare to government to e-commerce to AI tools, depends on data center infrastructure somewhere.

If a county declines to host that infrastructure, the computing still happens elsewhere. The jobs, the tax revenue, the economic activity and the infrastructure investment move to communities that said yes. For counties that want to participate, construction brings

immediate work, operations employ specialized technicians and engineers and the facility signals to other tech-dependent businesses that the area can support their infrastructure needs.

The facility being proposed today will not be the facility operating in a decade. The cooling technology will change. The electricity demand will shift. The computing model will be different. Efficiency improvements already in development will reshape what's actually needed.

Committing electricity, water, and land use to a facility based on current technology means committing to something that's already becoming obsolete. That's not an argument against data centers. It's a reality about what you're committing to.

Three things counties should understand

The electricity-to-factories parallel is instructive. That shift took decades, but this one is happening in years. Infrastructure commitments counties make today are built for a computing world that's already changing.

- Infrastructure mismatch - Grid and water infrastructure built today won't match what the facility actually needs in five years. Cooling technology changes. Efficiency improves faster than projected. Electricity demand shifts. What was built to spec becomes oversized, under-sized, or simply wrong.
- Lifecycle mismatch - Facility lifecycles are 10 to 15 years, not 30 years. Data centers lose value faster than infrastructure costs are recovered. When the facility loses value to the developer, counties hold infrastructure that doesn't serve its purpose.
- Location mismatch - Computing is moving toward distributed models, not massive centralized facilities. Siting decisions that make sense today won't make sense in a decade. Current location assumptions become the wrong location.

Counties can still welcome data center development, but they need to do it from a position of understanding what the landscape is becoming. The machinery, the efficiency, the location, the cooling technology, the entire computing model will be different. That's not speculation, that's the current trajectory. **HI**

Counties can still welcome data center development, but they need to do it from a position of understanding what the landscape is becoming. The machinery, the efficiency, the location, the cooling technology, the entire computing model will be different. That's not speculation, that's the current trajectory. **HI**

Matelski is NACo's chief information officer and managing director of administration and operations.

CONGRESS MAKES PROGRESS ON DATA CENTER LEGISLATION

By Charlotte Mitchell Duyshart

Addressing the impacts of rapid data center expansion has been a priority for federal lawmakers in the 119th Congress. Before Congress adjourned for the October recess ahead of the mid-term elections, lawmakers made significant progress on this issue for the first time this year. When Congress returns to Capitol Hill, it is critical that lawmakers build on this momentum and advance legislation to protect counties and individual ratepayers from rising electricity costs associated with data center development.

The national conversation around data centers has shifted dramatically in recent years, and data center development has become a prominent political issue throughout the midterm election cycle. As residents continue to raise concerns about new data center projects, county leaders should stay informed about how Congress and their state legislatures are addressing the challenges associated with data center growth.

Recent congressional action

Republicans and Democrats in Congress have introduced dozens of bills addressing various aspects of data center development. However, the approaches outlined in these bills differ significantly, reflecting a lack of consensus on how best to address the issue. Lawmakers in both parties have called for moratoriums on data center development, while others support continued development to create construction jobs in their districts and maintain U.S.

competitiveness in artificial intelligence.

Of the data center-related bills introduced during the 119th Congress, NACo has endorsed two measures aimed at providing electricity cost relief to ratepayers.

On Sept. 16, the House passed the Ratepayer Protection Act in a strong bipartisan vote of 417-3. The legislation would require states to consider adopting a federal standard directing data centers with electricity demand of 100 megawatts (MW) or more to cover the incremental costs of the electricity infrastructure upgrades needed to serve them. The bill establishes a federal framework for consideration by state regulators while preserving state authority over electricity markets. It also builds on efforts already underway in states to protect residential customers and small businesses from shouldering the costs of infrastructure upgrades.

On Sept. 30, Senate lawmakers introduced the Bipartisan American Affordability and Jobs Act, a broad permitting reform package. In addition to reforming federal environmental review and permitting processes, the legislation includes provisions requiring data centers with electricity demand of 20 MW or more to cover their associated transmission costs. Unlike the Ratepayer Protection Act, which directs states to consider adopting a standard, the Senate proposal would establish a more direct requirement for covered data centers to pay these costs.

Counties support the responsible management of electric grid infrastructure to prevent ratepayers from shouldering the costs of upgrades needed to serve new data centers. The House passage of the

Ratepayer Protection Act and the inclusion of ratepayer protections in the Senate permitting package signal growing congressional support for ensuring that data center developers bear the costs of the infrastructure needed to serve their facilities, rather than shifting those costs to existing ratepayers.

What counties should tell Congress

With a limited number of legislative days remaining in the 119th Congress, counties should contact their con-

gressional delegations and urge their members to support the Bipartisan American Affordability and Jobs Act. When Congress returns to Washington following the midterm elections, lawmakers should advance legislation that protects counties, residents and small businesses from bearing the electricity infrastructure costs associated with data center development. 

Duyshart is an associate legislative director in NACo's Government Affairs department.



Addressing the impacts of rapid data center expansion has been a priority for federal lawmakers in the 119th Congress.

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COUNTIES FACE QUESTION ON DATA CENTERS: HOW TO STRUCTURE TAXES

by Aliyah Erskine

Data centers are among the most capital-intensive land uses a county may host. A single facility can represent billions of dollars in investment and require as much electricity as a mid-sized city.

The local fiscal impact of that investment depends on state and local tax structures and the authority granted to counties. County authority over taxation, land use and permitting varies widely across states. Counties may be responsible for addressing local impacts even when key development decisions are made or constrained at the state level.

Data center development presents a range of considerations for counties, including energy and water demands, land use, infrastructure needs and community impacts. Understanding the fiscal implications is important because large-scale development can affect the resources available to fund county services and meet local needs.

For county officials, the key question is whether a data center that attracts outside investment also creates lasting public value. The answer depends on three factors:

- Which portions of the facility are taxable under state law
- How much authority the county has over taxation, zoning and permitting
- What protections and community benefits can be secured before a project is approved

Local conditions differ, making informed decision-making and flexibility critical as counties navigate the opportunities and challenges of data center development.

TAXING OPTIONS FOR DATA CENTERS

Model	DESCRIPTION	ILLUSTRATIVE REVENUE POTENTIAL
Tax Base Model	Local property taxes drive revenue. Counties collect recurring revenue from real property and, where authorized, business personal property. Other revenue sources may include local sales taxes, income taxes, impact fees or other authorized charges. Outcomes depend on the taxable value of the development and the county's taxing authority.	■ Potentially high
State Incentive Model	State tax exemptions reduce some development costs. Sales and use tax exemptions on equipment purchases and other incentives may reduce state revenue, local revenue or both, depending on which taxes are affected. Counties may still collect substantial local revenue if taxable property and local taxing authority remain in place.	■ Variable; potentially moderate to high
Growth Model	Development speed and scale are policy priorities. State and local governments may emphasize infrastructure investment, utility readiness, streamlined permitting and other measures to attract development. Fiscal outcomes depend on project scale, available revenue sources and which infrastructure and service costs fall to local governments.	■ Variable
Preemption Model	State law limits local authority. Restrictions on taxation, siting, zoning, permitting or development agreements may reduce county control over project terms and community outcomes. State law may also determine how revenue is distributed. The county's remaining authority and revenue sources determine the fiscal implications.	■ Variable; potentially limited

Note: These models are a planning framework, not a state-by-state classification. A county's position depends on its specific taxing and land-use authority, available revenue sources and ability to negotiate agreements. Revenue-potential descriptions are illustrative assessments of potential fiscal outcomes, not empirical rankings or projections of actual revenue.

What is actually taxable?

A data center's announced investment value is not necessarily the same as its taxable value. Although land and buildings are generally subject to property taxes, much of a data center's value may be tied to the equipment inside the facility.

Servers, networking equipment, electrical systems, backup generators and cooling infrastructure can represent a substantial share of a project's total investment. Whether these assets are

subject to local taxation, often as tangible business personal property (BPP), varies considerably by state and jurisdiction.

When evaluating revenue estimates or tax incentives, county officials should consider:

- Which project components are taxable, a concept known as the taxable base
- How taxable property is assessed and valued
- Whether state or local tax exemp-

tions apply

County authority over these issues also varies. State law may determine which types of property counties can tax, whether local governments can establish tax rates or classifications, and how much control counties have over land use and permitting. Understanding this legal and fiscal framework is an essential first step in evaluating a proposed project's impact.

From TAXES pg H10

Data center fiscal and governance models

Data center projects operate within different tax, regulatory and governance frameworks across the country. The models below provide a practical framework for understanding how counties generate revenue and how state and local policies can shape long-term community value.

A county or state may fit more than one model at the same time. For example, a state may offer substantial tax incentives for data center development while allowing counties to collect significant local property tax revenue. Similarly, counties within the same state may have different levels of fiscal and land-use authority.

The models are not intended to classify jurisdictions into fixed categories. Instead, they help county officials assess the fiscal and policy environment in which they operate.

Negotiated agreements may operate across these models rather than constituting a separate fiscal environment. Where authorized, counties may use payments in lieu of taxes (PILOTs), tax abatements, development agreements, host community agreements or community benefit agreements to establish revenue commitments or address local impacts. The availability, structure and enforceability of these tools depend on state law and the authority granted to the county.

COUNTY DECISION FRAMEWORK

QUESTION	WHAT TO CONSIDER
Which tax framework applies?	- What state law allows the county to tax - Whether business personal property (BPP) is taxable - Whether data center-specific state laws limit local fiscal, zoning or permitting authority
What is the true taxable base?	- The assessed value of land and buildings - Whether equipment is taxable and at what rate - Applicable exemptions - Payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT) payments - Whether other local revenue streams, such as sales taxes, income taxes or impact fees, may apply
How do incentives affect local revenue?	- Whether state exemptions or local abatements reduce county revenue - Which taxes are affected - Whether performance requirements apply - Whether revenue-sharing mechanisms exist
What authority does the county have?	Authority over zoning, permitting, tax rates, development agreements, infrastructure planning and other local approvals after accounting for applicable state law “
What costs will the county bear?	- Roads and transportation improvements - Water and wastewater infrastructure - Utility and energy infrastructure needs - Emergency services - Planning and permitting capacity
Does public value exceed public cost?	- Long-term fiscal impacts - Infrastructure demands - Community benefits - Independent fiscal analysis - Impacts on other local taxing entities such as school districts

County decision framework

Understanding the legal, fiscal and operational framework that will shape

project outcomes is essential when evaluating a data center proposal. The questions below focus on tax structures,

revenue and related county costs. Other considerations—including environmental and community impacts, private property rights and local priorities—may also inform county decision-making.

Evaluating long-term public value
Data centers can represent a significant source of tax revenue for counties, but fiscal outcomes vary considerably across states and local jurisdictions. Two facilities with identical investment values can generate substantially different revenue depending on which assets are taxable, how property is assessed, which incentives apply and what authority counties have under state law.

As counties evaluate proposed projects, understanding the taxable base and the interaction between state and local tax policies is just as important as understanding the scale of the investment.

Tax revenue is only one part of the broader fiscal picture. Infrastructure and public service costs can also shape a project’s long-term net fiscal impact. Ultimately, data center development decisions depend on local conditions, state and local authority, and the fiscal, infrastructure and community considerations facing each county.

Preserving local flexibility allows counties to weigh these factors against the needs and priorities of their communities. ■

Aliyah Erskine is a research fellow for NACo’s Rural Energy Academy program.

RESOURCES

NACo
Data Centers Resource Hub



Loudoun County, Va.
Supervisor Michael Turner – Data Centers and Power Resources



Bipartisan Policy Center
Key Considerations for Data Center Development



American Planning Association
Data Center Trends



National Association of Development Organizations
Data Center Planning Resources for Economic Development Districts and Regional Development Organizations



Cuyahoga County, Ohio
Recommendations for Local Communities



York County, Pa.
Data Center Model Ordinance



HOT TOPICS

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SALUTE TO COUNTY LEADERS:

Tammy Pearson

Beaver County, Utah Commissioner Tammy Pearson often drove hours to an airport to then fly across the country to advocate for public lands counties in Washington, D.C.

With that journey in mind, she became a driving force behind bringing congressional staffers from offices and committees with jurisdiction over public lands to Utah through a congressional briefing trip so they could see the scope of the interaction between federal and county governments and see up-close what life is like in a public lands county.

That August tour became a model for NACo's Federal Fellowship program.

The Western Interstate Region recognized her in 2022 with the Dale Sowards Award, noting her excellence in public lands advocacy.

How were you introduced to NACo?

Once I joined the county commission and started going to state association meetings,

UAC is such a strong supporter of NACo that they made sure everyone who wanted could attend conferences to talk about legislative issues on a national level. That's where my heart and soul is, anything to do with public lands.

What concerns and perspectives from Beaver County did you bring into the national conversation?

The wild horse and burro issue, the overpopulation that's overwhelming the environment and water sources.

Not every Western state is affected, but the ones who are have a real challenge, with a heavy impact on our grazing lands. That's why I ran for office in the first place.

What excited you about working on the national level?

So many of our local issues are decided on a federal basis in the West. But not only



Beaver County, Utah Commissioner Tammy Pearson was a consistent presence at NACo conferences. Photo by Denny Henry

do you work with your congressional delegation, but the chance to pass resolutions and platform changes for NACo policy is very meaningful.

It's a chance to unify the counties on an issue, and it's in our platform how we will advocate, and it helps give anyone a roadmap for how we can work with the federal government to improve conditions for counties.

What did you learn about counties in other parts of the country different than your own?

I think, I think that counties have a unique perspective on

management. We all basically agree that the government closer to the people and on the ground is most effective. You don't always see direct comparisons between rural and urban counties, but you listen and learn because some day you might have a chance to tell someone something about what counties are facing whether they're rural or urban.

What is the most unlikely relationship you made through NACo?

[Coconino County, Ariz. Supervisor] Lena Fowler and I probably very different po-

litically, but that all dissolves when you're working on the specific issues rural counties deal with. Fires and flooding and emergencies don't see red and blue.

How should a new county official wade into federal advocacy?

Find that issue that means a lot to you and your county and jump on in. Start by listening more than you speak, then speaking up when you have something to say.

Be the champion your county deserves. You don't benefit your county by sitting at home inside county lines.

What's your favorite NACo memory?

The networking and camaraderie. I've got friends in some of the biggest cities and counties in the whole nation and we're able to communicate because our concern is not only the betterment of our own county but that we share in that responsibility. 

2026



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ON THE MOVE

NACo MEMBERS

West Region Representative **Bill Novotny**, chair of the Johnson County, Wyo., Board of Commissioners and Membership Engagement Director **Tammy Tincher** attended the North Dakota Association of Counties Annual Conference in Burleigh County.

NACo STAFF

Ed Leonard has joined NACo as managing director of information technology. He previously served as North American IT lead for Nestle and served as CIO for several Washington, D.C. government agencies. He earned a master's degree from George Washington University and a bachelor's degree from Marymount University.

Matt Wade has joined NACo as senior manager of multimedia production. He previously served as Mid-Atlantic video director for Kroger and content producer and videographer for Level Up Media Studio.



Leonard



Wade

Executive Director **Matt Chase**, Associate Membership Director **Grace Blanchard** and National Director of Executive Relationships **Craig Holmes** attended the New York State Association of Counties Fall Conference in Onondaga County.

National Center for Public Lands Counties Director **Gregory Nelson** attended the Montana Association of Counties Annual Conference in Lewis and Clark County and the County Supervisors Association of Arizona's Legislative Summit in Coconino County.

Mentoring makes for a smooth transition in county government

From MENTORS page 4

County, and she spent some of her early years feeling like she wasn't accepted. That motivated her to make sure other new commissioners don't lose valuable time in office learning the ropes and have the support to govern effectively.

"I don't want my eight years of experience to be for naught," she said.

Durward estimates that he has attended a quarter of the county commission meetings over the past eight years, not only as a spouse but also as mayor of their hometown. But while he's not new to local government, there are some

county nuances he has to learn.

"I'll always be able to learn more about the background on issues from her," he said.

She also plans to get Durward and Reed involved in NACo to keep Roosevelt County active members.

Tina will have served six months as president of the New Mexico Association of Counties and attended the County Leadership Institute in June.

"The relationships and networking have been so valuable," she said, adding with pride that she had helped pass a policy resolution advocating changes at the National Traffic Safety Institute. **CN**

GET TO KNOW...

East Baton Rouge Parish, La.

by Meredith Moran
staff writer

East Baton Rouge Parish, La., was established in 1810, when local settlers overthrew Spanish rule and declared independence as the West Florida Republic. Weeks later, U.S. President James Madison claimed the territory, and it was divided into parishes.

Baton Rouge, the parish county seat and capital of Louisiana, is named after the French phrase for "red stick." In 1699, while sailing on the Mississippi River, French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville saw a tall cypress pole stained with animal blood, which Native American tribes used as a boundary marker between their hunting grounds, and the name stuck.

Standing at 450 feet with 34 stories, the Louisiana State Capitol is the tallest state capitol building in the country. The Gothic Revival-style of the building, which sits on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, makes it look like a Medieval castle. The city of Baton Rouge and East Baton Rouge Parish share a consolidated local govern-

ment structure, which is run by a mayor-president and a 12-district metropolitan council.

The parish is home to Louisiana State University (LSU) and Southern University and Agricultural and Mechanical College at Baton Rouge, the flagship campus of the Southern University System, the country's only historically Black university system. On game days, LSU's Tiger Stadium, which holds 100,000 fans, is the fifth largest "city" in the state.

Spanish Town, the oldest neighborhood in Baton Rouge, hosts the city's largest Mardi Gras parade, which is famous for its pink flamingo mascot and flamboyant floats. The neighborhood's motto is

"Poor taste is better than no taste at all."

The Battle of Baton Rouge, the only American Revolution battle to occur outside the 13 colonies, removed British military control from the lower Mississippi River, securing a vital supply route for American revolutionaries and protecting New Orleans from the British. A 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott against racial segregation served as a direct model for the Montgomery bus boycott two years later, which was sparked by Rosa Park's arrest for refusing to surrender her bus seat to a white passenger and lasted 381 days.

Get to Know features new NACo member counties.



The Spanish Town Mardi Gras Parade is one of the most colorful parades in East Baton Rouge Parish.

BRIGHT IDEAS | CUMBERLAND COUNTY, KY.

When Teens and Retirees Work Together, an Entire County Benefits

PROBLEM: A small county staff was spread thin.

SOLUTION: A program aimed at retiree and teen volunteers helped fill the gap and became its own reward.

by **Meredith Moran**
staff writer

Cumberland County, Ky., an understaffed and under resourced rural county, is bringing together its teen and aging populations to serve as volunteers, enabling the county to launch new — and expand existing — programming.

The “Retired and Inspired” initiative mobilizes and trains students and older adults to help with everything from a toy drive to emergency management. It helps ease the burden for overworked county employees, while providing opportunities for youth to gain experience and for retirees with some extra time on their hands to get more involved with the community.

The enjoyment gained from volunteering “far outweighs the achy joints” it can create, joked volunteer Bob Howlett.

“It’s very enlightening and inspiring,” said his wife, Joyce, who also volunteers through the initiative. “To me, the youth are part of the team. I don’t think of age; it’s just we’re all in it together, and we each help each other.”

With a budget of \$8 million, Cumberland County’s roughly two dozen employees must be resourceful and flexible, noted County Judge/Executive Luke King. Last summer, when the county experienced record rainfall, road maintenance crews weren’t the only ones working to clear the roads.

County staff across departments, including King, took to the streets with chainsaws to



Cumberland County, Ky. “Retired and Inspired” volunteers gather for a photo. Photo courtesy of County Judge/Executive Luke King

help.

According to King, having more than 60 volunteers ready to help at a moment’s notice has eased the burden on overworked county staff, allowing them to focus on their core responsibilities and better serve the community.

“If you give the ‘under 20s’ a chance, it will give the ‘over 40s’ a reason to say yes,” King said. “... And by giving them a reason and the younger people an opportunity, you’re giving all the people in the middle a break, because those of us that are in these positions, especially in rural counties with very tight budgets, we’re doing four and five jobs already.”

“So, when they can take that phone call and help that constituent, that’s 30 minutes of my time on another task that only I could do.”

The county has distributed more than \$400,000 worth of groceries through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Commodity Supplemental

Food Program. Three years ago, it took an hour and 36 minutes to complete each distribution. Now, with the help of “Retired and Inspired” volunteers, it takes less than 30 minutes, according to King.

‘This is everyone’s home. Let’s make it better for everyone.’

— Evan Stotts,
youth volunteer

“Connecting with people has been wonderful and really getting out there and getting stuff like toys, food and other such things to the public, it’s been really fun,” said Evan Stotts, one of the program’s youth volunteers. “And it’s been a real drive. I didn’t know that that would be so fulfilling ... and it’s really built a bridge of us ‘under 20s’ and the ‘over 40s,’ really building a sense of community with each other.”

“This is everyone’s home.

Let’s make it better for everyone.”

Cumberland County Animal Control only has two full-time staff members. Having the support of volunteers has helped make countywide animal adoption day events possible, according to Animal Control Officer Danny Groce. One volunteer even sewed dog beds for the shelter.

“It’s been a big benefit,” Groce said. “We could not do the adoption days without them. There’s no way to control that many dogs with just two people, so we have to have them to help.”

Emmalee Fulton, a 17-year-old volunteer, said the experience has been a great opportunity to learn from people with more life experience and connect with the community, which she had recently moved to from Salt Lake City, Utah.

“When I got a call from my dad saying I was moving to the middle of nowhere, Kentucky, I was — I’ll be honest — not excited at all,” Fulton said. “I

mean we were moving onto a farm, so that was really new to me. One of the biggest things I was worried about was a lack of opportunity.”

Fulton got connected to “Retired and Inspired” through her high school’s Civics Club.

“I could not believe that a county of this size had a program like this,” Fulton said. “... For us younger people, it’s opened our minds to be more adaptable and flexible in whatever environment that we work with, and I’ve really loved volunteering and working with the older folks.”

Sadie Arterburn, a college freshman who previously served as the Civics Club judge executive, is the youngest-ever appointed member of the Cumberland County Chamber of Commerce. Another teen volunteer was appointed to the local board of health, according to King.

“Retired and Inspired” is a tool the county hopes will help retain its younger population, King noted. The median age in Cumberland County is 45.1 years old, which is roughly 16% higher than the median age of Kentucky and nationally.

“It is the only thing that I think can save a county like ours from itself when it comes to brain drain,” King said. “We talk about how ‘Oh we need something for the youth. Oh, we want our youth to stay.’”

“But if we’re not willing to pair all of that experience, all of that wisdom, all of that technical expertise and knowledge of our retired population with our younger folks, we’re not really giving them a fighting chance to stick around.” **CN**

Cumberland County’s Retired and Inspired initiative was the 2026 NACo Achievement Award “Best in Category” winner in the Volunteers category.

WORD
SEARCH

SISKIYOU COUNTY, CALIF.
Created by Mary Ann Barton

M V A O N E O S V S U J I D N W M O U J
W P T D W O T O P E B L F E Y H L I N E
X C O A X S O A N I M U O D T S U F E F
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S L A M Y R E K A T E X R M F R N J C R
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T V Z V D I M I T Y U Z K B Y U F B X O
Y O W C U S T B X E K O B Q L E Y R E U
D K O X P M A W F G R L F D G G R U A M
Y V H C N U G E J E S T U K D W G R S E
T N A R U A T S E R T N V H Z T D E X Z

FOUNDED: Siskiyou County was created on March 22, 1852, carved out of parts of Shasta and Klamath counties and named for the Siskiyou mountain range.

GOLD: In March 1851, mule-train packer Abraham Thompson spotted gold glistening in the grass where his mules were grazing, sparking what became known as California’s “second mother lode” and drawing 5,000 people to the area by late summer.

YREKA: The county seat’s name comes from wáik’a, a Shasta-language word meaning “north mountain” or “white mountain” that referred to nearby Mount Shasta.

SUMMIT: The county’s highest point is Mount Shasta, a dormant volcano rising about 14,180 feet that is the second-tallest volcano in the Cascade Range.

NEWSPAPER: *The Siskiyou Daily News* in Yreka traces its roots to 1878, when it began as the *Scott Valley News*; it is currently owned by Gannett.

MULES: Yreka’s first newspaper, the *Mountain Herald*, debuted on June 11, 1853, after its 430-pound hand press was hauled over the mountains by mules at \$50 a pound.

RESTAURANT: Mike and Tony’s in the city of Mount Shasta, a local institution serving American and Italian dinners, first opened in 1945. It went up for sale last year.

SALOON: Watson’s Vet’s Club in Mount Shasta, built in 1896, is the oldest bar in town and part of the historic “Whisky Row.”

INDUSTRIES: Agriculture, wood products, tourism, retail and manufacturing anchor the economy, and tourism spending rose 20% between 2010 and 2018.

FORESTS: Federal lands make up about 63% of the county.

SCREENWRITER: Anita Loos, author of “Gentlemen Prefer Blondes,” was born in Sisson (now the city of Mount Shasta) in 1888.

GRIDIRON: Former NFL defensive star Jason Sehorn graduated from Mount Shasta High School in 1989.

JEFFERSON: In 1941, Yreka was named capital of the proposed breakaway “State of Jefferson,” a rebellion by residents of far Northern California and Southern Oregon who felt neglected by their state governments.

WATER: Dunsmuir’s official slogan is “Home of the Best Water on Earth,” and fly fishermen travel from all over to catch wild trout on the Upper Sacramento River.

WEED: The lumber town of Weed welcomes visitors with the city motto “Weed like to welcome you,” and its Mount Shasta Brewing Co. made national headlines with a “Try Legal Weed” marketing campaign.

PROFILES IN
SERVICE

STANLEY DICK
NACo Board Member
Cavalier County, N.D.
Commissioner

Number of years active in NACo: Seven

Years in public service: 12

My first NACo event was: 2019 Annual Conference

NACo committees: Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Rural Action Caucus

Occupation: Farming

Education: Two years of college – general education.

The hardest thing I’ve ever done: Sponsor, raise and assimilate a young lady into our family, a brilliant person from Cameroon.

Three people (living or dead) I’d invite to dinner: Dad, grandfather and John Wooden

A dream I have is to: Visit all 50 states.

You’d be surprised to learn that I: Was in Brussels, Belgium during a terrorist attack and was stranded for four days.

The most adventurous thing I’ve ever done is: Help start a school for deaf children in Cameroon. And try to teach them basketball.



STANLEY DICK

My favorite way to relax is: Watch any sporting event.

I’m most proud of: My four boys and their families; Cavalier County, N.C.

Every morning I read: My texts, emails and Yahoo! News

My favorite meal is: Grilled steak and smoked brisket.

My pet peeve is: People who complain about government but don’t want to get involved.

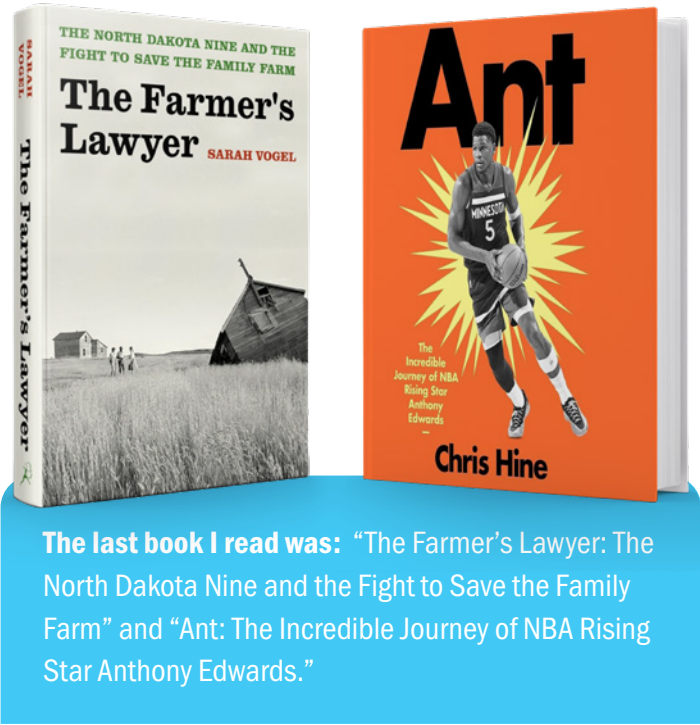
My motto is: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

My favorite movie is: “Hoo-siers” and “Remember the Titans”

My favorite music is: ’70s and contemporary

My favorite U.S. president is: Theodore Roosevelt

My county is a NACo member because: I’m a firm believer in local government. I consider NACo a bridge and a partner to federal government, which helps us keep things local.



The last book I read was: “The Farmer’s Lawyer: The North Dakota Nine and the Fight to Save the Family Farm” and “Ant: The Incredible Journey of NBA Rising Star Anthony Edwards.”

BEHIND
THE
SEAL

BARTHOLOMEW COUNTY, IND.



Founded in Jan. 12, 1821, Bartholomew County was named after Lt. Col. Joseph Bartholomew, a military leader who was wounded at the Battle of Tippecanoe.

In 1990, Catherine Burris won a county seal design contest conducted by the Bartholomew County Historical Society to design a county seal.

The striking 154-foot, six-level clock tower serves as the architectural masterpiece of the entire Second Empire-style structure. The county seat of Columbus sits near the confluence of the Flatrock and Driftwood rivers, which form the East Fork of the White River.

Her winning design places the tower of the county courthouse, framed by a star set against a background of waves, representing the county’s plentiful water, and cornstalks.

NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION

FLORIDA

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY Fire Rescue is launching what it says is the nation's first **drone program to deliver whole blood** to patients at the scene of an emergency. Commissioners approved the program Sept. 2, and live operations are expected to begin this month across two areas of unincorporated Hillsborough County totaling 70 square miles. Average delivery time is expected to be just under three minutes, with a maximum of five minutes to the edge of the coverage area.

The first year will serve as a proof-of-concept pilot, according to a Hillsborough County news release. The goal is to expand each operating area to 50 square miles and eventually cover the entire county.



GEORGIA

Develop Fulton, the **FULTON COUNTY** development

authority, approved \$97,500 for **AI Ready Georgia**, Metro Atlanta CEO reported. The program is a seven-month pilot that will provide free artificial intelligence training and industry-recognized certification pathways to at least 500 residents and municipal employees. The Enterprise Technology Association will administer the hybrid program, which is open to residents, small business owners, non-profit staff, people changing careers and employees of every municipality in the county.

The pilot runs through April 2027. Develop Fulton will collect data on who participates and how far they progress through the certificates, according to WSB Radio.

MARYLAND

A fiber broadband expansion in rural **SOMERSET COUNTY** is complete, bringing **high-speed internet service** to more than 1,300 homes and small businesses over more than 133 miles of new construction. State and county contributions of more than \$10.3 million, combined with more than \$2.1 million from the provider, Spectrum, brought the total investment to more than \$12.5 million, according to a Spectrum news release.

HAWAII

MAUI COUNTY has launched a **Housing Navigator Program** to provide case management for households affected by the August 2023 wildfires, taking over from a state-run, FEMA-funded disaster case management program. About 1,100 cases were open at the time of the transfer, according to Maui Now. The county will contact current participants by Oct. 23. Displaced households that were not enrolled in the state program can also seek help.

The county selected the firm BDO to run the program under a three-year contract of about \$4.5 million. The program will focus on each household's remaining housing needs and long-term stability, with translation, interpretation and accessible formats available.

development, halting construction, building permits and conditional use permits for data centers until new zoning rules are adopted or 12 months pass, whichever comes first. The county's current zoning regulations do not address data centers of any size.

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COLORADO

BOULDER COUNTY is accepting applications through Oct. 29 for the fall cycle of its **Strategic Fuels Mitigation Grant** program, which pays for landscape-scale, cross-boundary and community-wide projects that reduce hazardous wildfire fuels. Nonprofits, fire protection districts, homeowners' associations and municipalities are eligible, according to a Boulder County news release. One recent grantee, the Watershed Center, has completed more than 55 acres of mitigation in the Raymond/Riverside area.

The grants are part of the county's Wildfire Partners program, which is funded by a wildfire mitigation sales tax voters approved in 2022. The tax also pays for \$500 rebates for residents who complete approved mitigation work, a free community chipping program and rebates of up to \$500 per unit for multifamily communities that remove highly flammable juniper.

Charles Laird, president of the Somerset County Board of County Commissioners, said in the release that the investment has been critical to bridging the digital divide in rural communities.

NEBRASKA

NANCE COUNTY supervisors have placed a temporary moratorium on **data center**



MICHIGAN

The **KALAMAZOO COUNTY** Board of Commissioners is recruiting volunteers for an 11-member ad hoc task force that will recommend how to spend revenue, projected to be \$6 million to \$6.4 million when it is collected, from the county's new **childcare millage**. Eight seats are open to community members, including people with childcare expertise, parents who have struggled to find care and business representatives; three commissioners will round out the panel. Applications are due Oct. 30.

The task force will set priorities, identify gaps and draft a five-year plan, then hand the work off next year to an oversight panel of county staff, residents and experts, according to WKZO.

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The resolution cites potential impacts on natural resources, infrastructure, utilities and the health of residents and livestock. During the moratorium, the board plans to invite public input, review approaches taken by similar jurisdictions and research industry performance standards before amending its zoning regulations.

The county joins a growing number of Nebraska counties including **CASS**, **GAGE** and **LOGAN** — that have placed temporary pauses on data center developments to study impacts on local water use, electricity demand, and land.

NEW YORK

WESTCHESTER COUNTY has launched Westchester Waterways, an online portal that lets residents explore the county's roughly 60 sub watersheds and see where streams, flood zones, aquifers, lakes and ponds are in their own communities. Residents can also use the portal to **report flooding**, alerting municipal officials and county legislators.

The portal displays stream data gathered through the county's Rapid Stream Assessment program, in which



NORTH CAROLINA

WAKE COUNTY has become the first county in North Carolina to adopt a unified, long-term approach to **managing its water resources** with the approval of its 50-year One Water Plan, Board of Commissioners Chair Don Mial said in his State of the County address, WUNC reported. The county averages 66 new residents a day, Mial said.

The county has also permanently protected 407 acres of farmland on seven farms since the start of 2024, according to the station.

county staff train community volunteers to evaluate local streams and identify post-flood needs. Data is uploaded after review by the state Department of Environmental Conservation, according to the Westchester County Planning Department's website.

OHIO

LAKE COUNTY commissioners adopted a 2026-29 Senior Services Strategic Plan Sept. 24, updating a plan the county adopted in 2015. The new roadmap is meant to guide how the county spends and coordinates **senior services** as its older population

grows and levy funding stays flat. The county's Senior Citizen Advisory Panel recommended the plan for approval, according to Cleveland.com.

The county already runs Helping Hands for Seniors, which matches independent residents 60 and older with vetted volunteers who help with minor repairs, yard work, errands and technology, according to the Lake County Board of Commissioners.

PENNSYLVANIA

The **ALLEGHENY COUNTY** Board of Health approved an updated paid **parental leave program** that would require businesses with 15 or more eligible employees to provide at least 12 weeks of paid leave to new parents. The proposal now goes to the 15-member County Council.

The board unveiled its revisions Sept. 16 as officials sought to balance public health goals with employers' concerns about cost. If the council passes it and County Executive Sara Innamorato approves it, covered employers would have a year to put the policy in place, according to the Mon Valley Independent.

SOUTH DAKOTA

LINCOLN COUNTY commissioners are meeting with **TURNER COUNTY** commissioners to discuss forming a **multi-county ambulance district** to secure long-term service for the rural area around Lennox. Lennox Area Ambulance responds to more than 500 calls a year across nearly 200 square miles, and most of those calls come from outside city limits.

Lincoln County has set aside \$60,000 for potential service. The Lennox City Council, facing a year-end deadline, told the county it is instead pursuing a joint operating agreement with several local governments, according to Sioux Falls Live.

TEXAS

BEXAR COUNTY commissioners voted 3-2 to approve a fiscal 2026-27 budget that keeps the **property tax** rate unchanged, extending a streak of more than 30 years without a rate increase, according to a Bexar County news release. The budget, which took effect Oct. 1, funds three digital navigators for BiblioTech, the county's bookless public library system.

Commissioners also created an Office of General Counsel to provide legal advice to the county and support governance, administrative matters and non-litigation civil legal services.

WASHINGTON

The **WHATCOM COUNTY** Council approved a \$7.05 million contract with Aid-Kit to run the new **Whatcom Kids First Child Care Subsidy Program**. The program will help pay childcare costs for at least 1,400 children its first year. Families earning up to 75 percent of the state median income will qualify.

The program is paid for by the voter-approved Healthy Children's Fund. Subsidy payments are expected to begin in 2027; application details will be shared in late 2026, according to the county.



VIRGINIA

LOUDOUN COUNTY has finished building a **Crisis Receiving and Stabilization Center** in Leesburg that will provide around-the-clock care for adults experiencing a behavioral health crisis. The center, which held a ribbon cutting Sept. 19 and is expected to open this month, includes a 23-hour assessment and stabilization unit and a short-term crisis stabilization unit. It is a "no wrong door" facility, meaning no one is turned away, according to Loudoun County.

The county's Department of Mental Health, Substance Abuse and Developmental Services will oversee the 20,500-square-foot center through a contract with Connections Health Services. More than \$9.7 million in grants paid for construction. County officials say the center will reduce reliance on law enforcement and give police and EMS a place to bring people in crisis other than an emergency room.

Send your news to Editor Mary Ann Barton: mbarton@naco.org.

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Legislative Conference

February 20-23
Washington, D.C.



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REGISTRATION NOW OPEN

