

Cortland County studies data center impacts, prepares local guidance

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Cortland County Planning Director Trisha Hiemstra said the county is working to stay ahead of the potential development of data centers by researching their impacts and preparing guidance for local municipalities.

“People are comparing this all to when electricity was first invented,” Hiemstra said. A data center is a physical location that stores computing machines and their related hardware. It contains the computing infrastructure that IT systems require, such as servers, data storage drives and network equipment. Many people associate data centers with the rise of AI, given that it takes a lot of computing systems to operate them. Cortland County Planning Executive Administrative Officer Jessica Leet said the department plans to create a data center law template for municipalities, similar to their solar energy and battery storage law template. Leet said she attended the National Association of Counties (NACo) Legislative Conference in Washington D.C. where she learned more about other counties’ experiences with data centers.

Leet and Hiemstra said the planning department was recently accepted into the NACo Rural Energy Academy, and they plan on using that resource to its fullest extent for further research. The academy is focusing on helping rural county leaders navigate wind, solar, battery storage and data centers development and determine whether development is a right fit for their residents, economies and natural resources.

Hiemstra said they still need to research what data centers could provide for the community or the potential harms. She and Leet said their priority is ensuring the county is benefits from their development. Hiemstra said, like any kind of technology, they want to mitigate any negative impacts, as data centers use a lot of energy and natural resources. She added that the county wants to ensure they’re able to offset potential impacts that it may have on the county.

Leet said it may be difficult to research as there has been no study done yet on how data centers are impacting residents’ utility bills, according to NACo.

Legislators Reed Cleland and Beau Harbin said at the Agricultural, Planning and Environmental Committee meeting that they want the county to ban data centers.

Hiemstra told the Cortland Standard that New York is a home rule state, and that it’s up to municipalities to allow or ban data centers, if they choose to do so.

Leet said, in her experience, the legality of banning data centers might depend on the lawyer. She said the municipalities that do so sometimes face legal challenges.

The county will be researching more information on data centers, but their priority is the templates for solar energy and battery energy storage systems.