

Remarks in Opposition to the Proposed One-Year Data Center Moratorium

Polk County Board of Supervisors

Thank you, Chair.

I am opposed to this moratorium. And I want to be clear from the start: my objection isn't that it goes too far, or that it doesn't go far enough. My objection is that it points us in exactly the wrong direction — because everything this moratorium tries to stop is something Polk County should be working, right now, to responsibly welcome.

Let me start with what this really is. A moratorium is a pause. But you only pause something that's happening. And here, nothing is happening. Look at our own zoning ordinance. In ten of our twelve zoning districts, a data center is not listed as a permitted use or conditional use, meaning in those districts it is already flatly prohibited. It cannot be built. In two more, you'd have to squint hard and stretch the language just to argue that maybe, possibly, someone could apply for a conditional use permit — a weak argument in the industrial district, and a weaker one still in the commercial district. And if that gray area truly worried us, the honest fix is a one-paragraph ordinance amendment, not a year-long ban.

So let's call this what it is. We are being asked to solemnly prohibit what is, for all practical purposes, already prohibited. This moratorium doesn't protect a single resident from a single thing that could actually happen tomorrow. It doesn't change the water. It doesn't change the power grid. It doesn't change one line of our land-use rules that matters. What it changes is the message. And that's the part that should worry every one of us.

Because the message doesn't stay inside our zoning map. It travels. Every site selector, every employer, every utility, every family thinking about where to build a future reads a headline that says: Polk County just voted to ban an entire category of modern investment. We can tell ourselves it only applies to the towns under county zoning. The rest of the world won't read the footnote. They'll read one word: closed.

And here's what makes that indefensible. This same county spends more than fifty thousand dollars a year funding an economic development corporation whose entire mission is to bring business and jobs to Polk County. We cannot, with a straight face, write that check on one page of the budget and vote to hang a "closed for business" sign on the next. If this board decides we're against development, then let's at least be honest about it and stop paying an organization to go recruit it. I'll say it plainly: if this moratorium passes, I will not vote to keep funding the EDC — because it would be spending real money to do a job this board just voted to undo. I'd rather we mean what we say, whichever way we choose to go.

Now let me turn to the concerns, because some of them are real, and they deserve a real answer — not a year of silence. Every one of them is something we manage through a conditional use permit and a development agreement. So let me take them one at a time.

Start with water, because it's the one you hear most. The picture people carry in their heads — a data center pulling millions of gallons out of our aquifer every day — describes an older kind of cooling. The facilities being built today, including the large Microsoft campus down in Mount Pleasant, use closed-loop, chip-level cooling. The system is filled once, and then it recirculates the same water over and over, like the coolant in your car. Ongoing water use for cooling is effectively zero. The head of one of these companies put it this way: a full year of water use is about what a single restaurant uses. And here's the key point for us — we don't have to take that on faith. We can make closed-loop or air-cooled design a written condition of approval. No water plan we can live with, no permit. And we could do that today if an application came in for a CUP in the Industrial District. We don't have to add or change one sentence in our ordinance to have such a condition. The Environmental Services Committee already has the authority to impose that condition and any other reasonable measurable conditions.

And that brings up an important point that no one seems to discuss. The moratorium won't lead to a ban of data centers. It cannot. It will lead to permitting them in one way shape or form in Polk County. That's what the law requires and that's how this story will end. In one year from now, assuming this moratorium passes, this same board will pass amendments to its zoning ordinance and those amendments will permit data centers as a conditional use in certain parts of Polk County. So if that's the endgame, why send the signal that we are closed for business? Why not, instead, make some simple ordinance revisions while working toward an open and transparent process that identifies potential sites for this kind of development?

Next, electricity — the fear that a data center will send everyone else's power bill through the roof. The demand from these facilities is real, and it is large. That is exactly why you don't hand them a blank check — you make them pay their own way. Two dozen states now use what are called large-load agreements, and they are fast becoming standard. They require the data center to fund its own grid upgrades, to post collateral so the ratepayers aren't left holding the bag, to sign long-term contracts that pay for capacity whether they use it or not, and in many cases to bring or build its own power. We work this out up front — with the utility and the Public Service Commission at the table — before a shovel goes in the ground. Done right, the company pays for the power it uses, not the family on a fixed income three miles down the road. By the way, at this point this is all theoretical, because Polk County's electric utilities simply do not have the capacity to support a data center in any way shape or form.

Then there's noise, light, and the diesel backup generators. All manageable, all routine. We set setbacks and require sound walls and landscaped buffers. We cap the hours those generators

can be tested. We require full-cutoff, dark-sky lighting, so the night sky over your farm stays the night sky. These aren't novel demands. They're the ordinary tools we already use every time a CUP application comes before the Environmental Services Committee — and a moratorium is this board saying we've suddenly forgotten how to use them.

And let's talk about jobs, because you'll hear this one too — that a data center employs only a handful of people once it's built. The construction phase is enormous: these projects put dozens, hundreds or thousands of building-trades workers to work, at good union wages, for years. The permanent headcount is smaller, yes — but those are skilled, well-paid, benefited jobs, and they aren't even the main prize. The main prize is the tax base.

So let me talk about that, because this is the part that should make every one of us sit up. One of these facilities is among the most valuable things, per acre, that a county can host. Down in Racine County, a single Microsoft campus paid the village millions of dollars in property taxes last year alone, with a guaranteed assessed value in the billions still to come — and the village didn't have to borrow a dime or lay new infrastructure to get it. Think about what even a fraction of that would mean here. That's a new school roof that doesn't come out of your levy. That's county roads repaved without a wheel-tax fight. That's deputies on the road, paid for by a taxpayer that never sends a child to our schools and never calls 911. When we wave that away, we aren't protecting our neighbors — we're handing it to the county next door and then asking our own families to make up the difference.

There's also a problem hiding in the fine print of this ordinance. The definition of "data center" in front of us is written so broadly that it may sweep in the very facilities our local phone and internet companies rely on to deliver broadband. I actually spent time talking with some executives at some of Polk County's local telephone / broadband companies. When I read them the definition of "Data Center", they all agreed it swept in what they are already doing. Expanding broadband is one of this county's stated goals. We say it in our plans; we chase grants for it. And yet here we are, one vote from banning the infrastructure it runs on. These are the facilities that anchor the cloud services our businesses, our schools, our clinics, and our farms already depend on. We would be voting against our own priorities and calling it caution.

Now — I've given you the real concerns and the real answers. But I also want to talk about the fiction, because a great deal of it is circulating, and some of it has found its way into this very debate. I'm not going to stand up here and mock my neighbors. But I will tell you the truth. There is no data center proposed for Polk County. None. Not one. Neither I, nor anyone else has proposed a data center. It's just plain fiction. Here's some other fiction: A data center is not a surveillance center. It is not a secret military base. It is not — and I say this because I've genuinely seen it claimed — a tool for population control, or a machine for implanting chips in

people. Those aren't arguments; they're rumors, and saying them louder doesn't make them true.

The claim that these buildings beam dangerous radiation into your home is not supported by a single mainstream scientific or public-health body. A data center is servers behind walls. The phone in your pocket, held to your head, puts out more radio energy than a server hall behind a berm a mile away ever will. And a modern data center is not a bitcoin mine — that's a different use entirely, and in any case, we decide what we permit and what we don't.

Here's what I'd ask you to notice, though. This kind of fear grows fastest in the dark — in a vacuum, where a project appears out of nowhere, wrapped in secrecy, on a timeline nobody in the community had any say in. That is exactly how it went in some other Wisconsin towns, and exactly why the backlash there was so fierce. The cure for that isn't a moratorium. The cure is sunlight — an open, honest, community-led process. Which is precisely what I'm about to propose.

But first, one more thing, as plainly as I can say it. Every one of us who claims to be against data centers is, in fact, completely dependent on them. The phone in your pocket. Your email. Your bank. Your medical records. The photos of your grandkids in the cloud. The music you streamed on the drive here tonight. All of it lives in a data center somewhere. So the objection isn't really to data centers — everyone in this room wants what they provide. The objection is to data centers here. We want every benefit of the modern economy; we just want the building to sit in somebody else's community. That isn't a policy. It's asking our neighbors to carry what we won't.

So here is what I'd ask this board to do, instead of passing a ban that bans nothing and signals everything. Let's not spend our energy building a wall. Let's spend it drawing a map. In place of this moratorium, let's establish a task force — county staff working hand in hand with our villages, our cities, and our utility partners — to do the real work, in the open. To identify where a facility like this actually fits. To find out from the power companies whether the capacity exists, and where. To sit down with communities, before anything is ever proposed, and ask them where they would welcome it, on what conditions, and at what benefit to them. That is how a serious county turns a challenge into schools that are funded, roads that are paved, and jobs that stay home.

A moratorium is the easy vote. It feels like doing something. But it does nothing — except tell the future that Polk County flinched. This is already working, responsibly, in our own state. I am not willing to be the county that told the next employer, the next utility, the next family, that we put up a wall. I'd ask my colleagues to vote no — and then to join me in the harder, better, and far more valuable work of getting this right.

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Tue, Aug 18 at 5:02 PM

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Yup on my way

Does the new hospital plans
have a data center in it

I guess nvm that's city zoning

It probably would apply because
there's wetlands by the site

To: Anders Helquist



Are you coming to the meeting tonight or someone else?

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Sitting through the comments



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