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Our opinion

Keep questions coming in data center hearings

The Editorial Board

At a town-hall meeting he organized, to speak about an issue that has been boiling over throughout Northeast Pennsylvania over the last year, Republican state Rep. Jamie Walsh got to the heart of the matter when it came to the fears and concerns of a data center boom hitting our region.

It is the unknown.

It is centered in the potential negative effects of a technological revolution we know is coming, because we've seen the likes of it come before in other areas of our lives, from the internet to social media to artificial intelligence. It is a concern based on a scary experience, that we have failed before to grip the scope of life-altering change we couldn't possibly comprehend any of those would bring.

This is why the Sugarloaf Fire Company hall in Luzerne County was packed with concerned residents Tuesday night. They were there not to hear out the positives of having data centers in their communities, but to unearth best practices small towns that dot our region can use to fight off major corporations looking to change the face of their hometowns.

This is not a group of people arguing to argue. It is a group of people learning and understanding, preparing to defend themselves against an industry that will change everything.

"This is what I hope is going to save us," Walsh, R-117, Ross Township, told the crowd. "Go to these meetings. Find out what is going on in your local municipality."

If we've learned anything from data centers over the last year, it is that this may be the one uniting issue that has reinvigorated the value of education, knowledge and activism in our communities. We spend so much time as Americans worrying about what a group of men who lived 250 years ago would think about how we navigate governmental processes today, but when it comes to data centers, it is difficult to believe our founding fathers wouldn't be proud of the diligence and tenacity area residents have shown tackling this issue head-on.

Last Sunday, officials from Archbald, Lackawanna County, advertised a second public hearing to discuss particulars surrounding the proposed Wildcat Ridge Data Center campus in the borough. It will be held at 5 p.m. on March 10 at Valley View High School's auditorium.

The reason they need a second hearing: The first one held in late January was packed with concerned citizens, who questioned the first of the proposed developer's two on-hand witnesses for so long, so intensely, there was no time to even bring the second expert's testimony to the public.

The questions for the first witness were legitimate, focused less on rhetoric that has become all too common in the political arena. The answers were, for the most part, thorough and followed up on when they generated further questions.

Those questions are not just pertinent for individual communities, but the area as a whole. During another public meeting in early January concerning Project Gravity, a different data center proposal in Archbald, developers said they planned to use up to 360,000 gallons of water per day from Lake Scranton — Scranton's drinking water source — to cool nearly 2 million square feet of data centers. That led officials and residents in Scranton to ask plenty of questions of their own, challenging these proposals.

Strong communities work together, across neighboring towns and even counties, to ensure a greater quality of life for the entire region. The hearings are our outlet. The podium is our voice.

It is imperative that those whose lives are affected most by any data center operating in the area know the benefits and risks, are educated in what exactly these businesses plan to do for our communities and what they expect in return. It is just as important for the elected officials who ultimately will make the decisions to have a full appreciation for the public's views.

We urge you, as Walsh did at the meeting in Sugarloaf, to understand and accept that this may be a long battle, one that could last years. Keeping the momentum and the interest level at its current status will be critical as residents gain knowledge to decide whether data centers are right for their communities.

In announcing his town hall in Sugarloaf, Walsh said he supported a series of bills in the General Assembly that would "establish clear and reasonable standards to ensure data center development in Pennsylvania occurs responsibly, transparently and with real community involvement." That should be the ultimate goal. But in the end, it is the people who have to determine whether the risks outweigh the rewards.