DCR Signals

Issue January 2026, Volume 1

DEEP DIVE

> *"I've come to the conclusion, sir, that your system sucks.*

NIMBY & Digital Infrastructure

DATA CENTER REVIEWS

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DEEP DIVE

Issue January 2026, Volume 1

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DCR SIGNALS

SIGNAL-DRIVEN INSIGHT | INDEPENDENT INTELLIGENCE | INFRASTRUCTURE CLARITY

A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

HOW "DATA CENTERS SUCK" BECAME THE STORY

NOTE: Items tagged Research Insights reflect synthesized conclusions from peer-reviewed studies and regulatory analyses listed below, not direct quotations unless otherwise indicated.

WHAT WE HAVE HERE, IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

At PTC 2026, amid conversations about AI scale, power constraints, and the future of global connectivity, one moment cut through the technical noise with surprising clarity.

During a candid exchange, the CEO of QTS Data Centers offered a blunt reflection on how parts of the public now view his company, and, by extension, much of the digital infrastructure industry.

In some communities, he said plainly, he is seen as the Devil.

It landed not as hyperbole, but as recognition.

Not because data center operators see themselves that way, but because that is how mistrust manifests when communication breaks down. When infrastructure arrives at scale without shared understanding. When decisions feel final before conversations begin.

It was an uncomfortable moment. And an honest one.

“YOUR SYSTEM SUCKS” - A USEFUL SIGNAL

There’s a scene in the 1983 film WarGames where a military leader, seeing the world brought to near nuclear war because of a misbehaving computer system, sums it up in a single sentence:

“After very careful consideration, sir, I've come to the conclusion that your system sucks.”

It’s clear. It’s blunt. And it’s surprisingly instructive.
Not because the technology is malicious, but because the system is brittle, opaque, and blind to its own consequences.

In a strange way, that line has become a fitting mantra for where the digital infrastructure industry finds itself today.

Not “data centers suck.”

Not “communities don’t understand.”

But something more honest, and more useful:
Our system of communication sucks.

HOW WE GOT HERE

At PTC26, no one questioned the necessity of data centers (except for maybe one farmer from Wisconsin that said he doesn’t need a data center in his area because all of his stuff “is in the cloud”). The world runs on them. AI depends on them. Economies scale through them.

What was questioned, sometimes quietly, sometimes angrily, was how the industry arrived at a place where communities feel blindsided, unheard, or threatened by infrastructure designed to support a digital future they also rely on.

This article is not about assigning villains.

It’s about acknowledging that trust is cumulative, perception hardens quickly, and silence, intentional or not, creates its own narrative. When communities lack context, they fill the gap themselves. And too often, the story they arrive at is a simple one:

“After careful consideration, we’ve come to the conclusion that data centers suck.”

That conclusion may be wrong.

But it didn’t come from nowhere.

WHY THIS CONVERSATION MATTERS NOW

The AI era has taken what was once abstract infrastructure and made it intensely local. Power lines. Water systems. Noise. Light. Land use. These are no longer footnotes, they are lived experiences.

If the industry wants to change how it is perceived, it must first understand why it is perceived this way at all.

That starts with history.

It continues with accountability.

And it only succeeds through better communication.

Because if there’s one lesson worth taking from PTC26, and from a 40-year-old movie, it’s this:

When people tell you your system sucks, they’re not always rejecting the outcome.

They’re rejecting how they were brought into it.

THE HISTORY OF “DATA CENTERS SUCK”

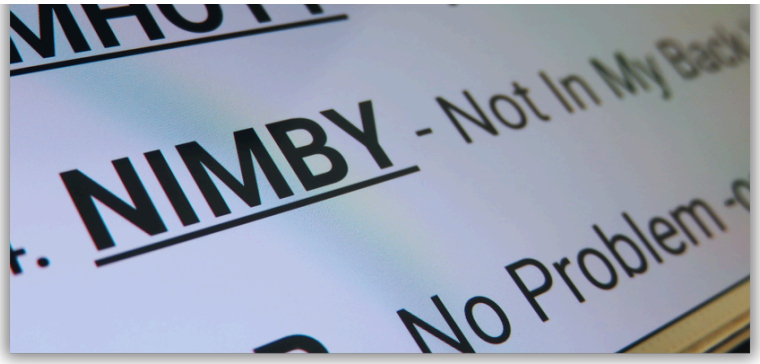
NIMBY.

Not In My Backyard.

This message has been clear to CEO’s, boards of directors, developers, and politicians alike. It has not been raised as a slogan or a dismissal. It has been raised as a reality. Communities that feel unheard. Local governments stretched thin. Operators confronting the consequences of decisions made years earlier, under very different assumptions.

To talk honestly about where the digital infrastructure industry needs to go, we first must acknowledge where it has been. George Santayana told us, “those who do not understand history are doomed to repeat it”, or, more aptly for our world, “history doesn’t disappear, it just shows up as technical debt.”

So, let’s study the history: how NIMBYism formed, how data centers became entangled in it, and why today’s resistance is not a sudden backlash, but a delayed response.



A PATTERN OLDER THAN DATA CENTERS

NIMBY did not originate with digital infrastructure. Long before data centers became critical to the global economy, communities pushed back against highways, landfills, power plants, airports, and industrial zoning decisions that reshaped their environments without their consent.

Academic research from urban planning and public policy journals throughout the 1970s and 1980s reached a consistent conclusion:

community opposition was rarely irrational. It was rooted in asymmetry. The costs (noise, pollution, water stress, visual disruption) were local. The benefits (economic growth, regional resilience, national security) were distant.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Public opposition increases when communities experience concentrated impacts while benefits accrue elsewhere.

(Journal of the American Planning Association)

This was not a cultural flaw. It was a governance signal. When people were brought into decisions late, spoken to in abstractions, or presented with irreversible outcomes, resistance followed—predictably.

FROM INVISIBLE INFRASTRUCTURE TO COMMUNITY FLASHPOINT (1960S-2020S)

For much of their early history, data centers existed in what could best be described as an invisibility phase. From the 1960s through the 1990s, computing facilities were physically isolated, institutionally contained,

and socially opaque. Mainframe systems lived inside government buildings, universities, and corporate campuses, largely detached from municipal planning conversations.

Because these facilities were few in number and modest in scale, their energy and water demands were absorbed into existing infrastructure. There was no public narrative around “data center impact” because, for decades, there was little visible impact to discuss.

The modern data center era began to take shape in the early 2000s, accelerating with the rise of cloud computing. Platforms like Amazon Web Services (launched in 2006) and Google's expanding infrastructure footprint transformed data centers from back-office facilities into global economic engines. During this period, many communities welcomed them. Compared to manufacturing or heavy industry, data centers promised tax revenue, technical prestige, and relatively minimal visible disruption.

Opposition in these early years was sporadic and localized. Where resistance did emerge, it was often tied not to servers themselves, but to the infrastructure required to power them.

One of the earliest documented flashpoints occurred in 2014 at the University of Delaware's Science, Technology & Advanced Research (STAR) Campus. A proposed data center paired with a cogeneration power plant faced fierce resistance from local residents concerned about air quality and public health. The project was ultimately canceled.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Energy infrastructure often becomes the focal point for opposition, even when the primary project is digital.

(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine)

The lesson was subtle but important: communities were not reacting to data centers as abstract digital systems, but to the physical and environmental realities that accompanied them.

That same year, Apple's planned data center in Galway, Ireland ignited environmental protests centered on habitat disruption and long-term energy demand. The opposition escalated through years of legal challenges, ultimately reaching Ireland's Supreme Court. After nearly five years of delay, Apple abandoned the project in 2019 and sold the land.

Independent hydrological studies and state water authority reports showed that evaporative cooling systems, when deployed at scale and clustered within the same basin, could materially affect local water resources, particularly in arid and semi-arid regions. In many cases, residents learned the scope of water usage only after permits had been approved.

The prolonged legal escalation was not simply a regulatory hurdle; it was a signal that existing planning frameworks were ill-equipped to reconcile global digital infrastructure with local environmental stewardship.

WHEN "LOW IMPACT" BECAME A LOADED PHRASE

As data center capacity expanded through the 2010s, impacts that once seemed marginal began to compound.

Noise followed a similar pattern. Environmental impact assessments filed with state agencies documented that backup generators and cooling systems could exceed nighttime thresholds if not aggressively mitigated. Communities experienced the disruption first; explanations came later.

Power emerged as the third and most sensitive issue. Grid operator filings and public utility commission analyses showed that rapid load growth from data centers could accelerate transmission

upgrades. In some regions, those costs were socialized across ratepayers rather than borne solely by the facilities driving demand.

From the community perspective, the pattern felt familiar: private development, public consequence.

It is also important to acknowledge a critical nuance often lost in public debate: grid strain is not solely a data center problem. In many regions, the electrical grid data centers connected to were already aging, capacity-constrained, and under-invested long before hyperscale growth accelerated. Utility filings and regulatory reviews show that deferred maintenance, slow transmission build-outs, and decades of incremental upgrades left grids structurally unprepared for any form of rapid electrification, whether driven by data centers, electric vehicles, industrial reshoring, or population growth. Data centers did not create these weaknesses, but their scale made them visible.

This distinction matters. When infrastructure shortcomings are misattributed, communities lose the opportunity for honest conversations about who is responsible for modernization, and how costs should be fairly allocated going forward.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Large new loads tend to expose existing grid fragility rather than create it.

(Independent System Operator planning assessments)

THE TRUST GAP WAS BUILT ON PROCESS, NOT FEAR

What hardened opposition was not technology, it was process.

By the early 2020s, independent research began catching up with lived experience. Studies on infrastructure governance consistently showed that resistance intensifies when communities feel excluded from early planning, when impacts are communicated in technical jargon, and when decisions appear predetermined.

Many data center projects relied on legal compliance as a substitute for engagement. Economic development narratives were offered without clear local job data. Environmental assurances were technically accurate but contextually incomplete.

This was rarely malicious, but it was dismissive. And dismissiveness compounds.

SUSTAINABILITY WAS NOT THE FIRST CONSTRAINT

It is important to say this plainly.

Sustainability was not always a central design constraint in early hyperscale expansion.

Industry benchmarks from the 2000s and early 2010s, power usage effectiveness targets, cooling strategies, site selection priorities, reflect a clear hierarchy. Speed to market, latency, and cost per megawatt came first. Environmental and community considerations were addressed, but rarely foundational.

That reality does not make the industry negligent. It reflects the pace at which the digital economy outgrew its social contract.

What matters now is that this history is increasingly acknowledged, and that behavior is changing.

DENSITY: THE 2020S INFLECTION POINT

What fundamentally shifted in the 2020s was not the existence of data centers, but their density.

Driven by fiber routes, latency requirements, and power availability, facilities began clustering near population centers. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital dependence. The rise of AI further intensified compute demand. Global data center counts climbed rapidly, moving from roughly 8,000 facilities in 2020 to well over 10,000 within a few years.

Independent sustainability research quantified the cumulative impact, noting that global data center energy consumption had reached levels comparable to mid-sized industrialized nations. Noise pollution, water stress, and grid strain, once considered edge cases, became central planning concerns.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

The environmental footprint of data centers is increasingly defined by concentration, not individual efficiency.

(MIT Climate & Sustainability Consortium)

By 2021, some regions responded with moratoriums. In parts of the UK, including Slough, new data center development paused due to grid and water constraints. Across Europe and North America, public opposition increasingly translated into permitting delays or cancellations.

Uptime Institute analysis suggests that by 2023, public resistance contributed to delays or cancellations in approximately 10–15% of proposed projects; not because data centers were inherently incompatible with communities, but because engagement and cumulative impact modeling lagged development timelines.

WHY THIS HISTORY STILL SHAPES TODAY'S RESISTANCE

Modern NIMBY opposition is often framed as misinformation or fear of technology. That framing misses the point.

Communities remember:

- Water usage assurances that proved incomplete
- Noise mitigation that arrived too late
- Power costs they did not anticipate
- Decisions made about them, not with them

Every new project inherits the memory of the last. Until this history is acknowledged honestly, no amount of technical sophistication will rebuild trust on its own.

THE AI SHOCKWAVE

The public release of generative AI tools in late 2022, most visibly large language models capable of human-like interaction, triggered a structural shift in global compute demand. What had been a steady climb in data center growth became a vertical curve.

By 2024, AI workloads were no longer experimental edge cases. They were production-critical. Training and inference required dense clusters of GPUs, unprecedented power density, and continuous availability. By 2025, the International Energy Agency projected that global data center electricity consumption could double by 2026, driven largely by AI-related demand.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Global data center energy consumption is projected to accelerate sharply as AI workloads move from experimentation to core infrastructure.

(International Energy Agency)

This was not just more of the same. It was different physics.

FROM LOCAL FRICTION TO WIDESPREAD REVOLT

What followed was predictable: and still disruptive.

The scale, speed, and visibility of AI-driven expansion transformed NIMBYism from isolated community resistance into a coordinated, multi-region response. Data centers were no longer rare industrial neighbors. They were becoming defining features of regional infrastructure systems.

In the United States, Loudoun County, Virginia, often referred to as Data Center Alley, became a national symbol of this tension. Residents raised concerns about groundwater drawdown, noise levels consistently exceeding 65 decibels, and the cumulative impact of dozens of facilities clustered within miles of residential neighborhoods.

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Image credit WUSA Reproduced under fair use for purposes of reporting and analysis.

Academic and policy research began to reflect what communities were already experiencing.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Rapid infrastructure densification increases community exposure to environmental and economic risk when cumulative impacts are not modeled holistically.

(University of Pennsylvania Kleinman Center for Energy Policy)

Electricity costs became a flashpoint. Grid upgrades required to support AI-scale loads carried real price tags, and in many regions, those costs flowed, at least in part, into broader rate bases. Residents did not see the data centers on their bills, but they felt the effects.

Air quality concerns followed. EPA-regulated emissions data showed that communities located within close proximity to large facilities experienced elevated exposure to particulate matter and nitrogen oxides, largely attributable to backup generation and construction-related activity.

The narrative shifted. This was no longer about hypothetical risk. It was about lived experience.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Proximity to large-scale energy infrastructure correlates with increased localized air pollution burdens.

(U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)

2025: WHEN OPPOSITION BECAME DECISIVE

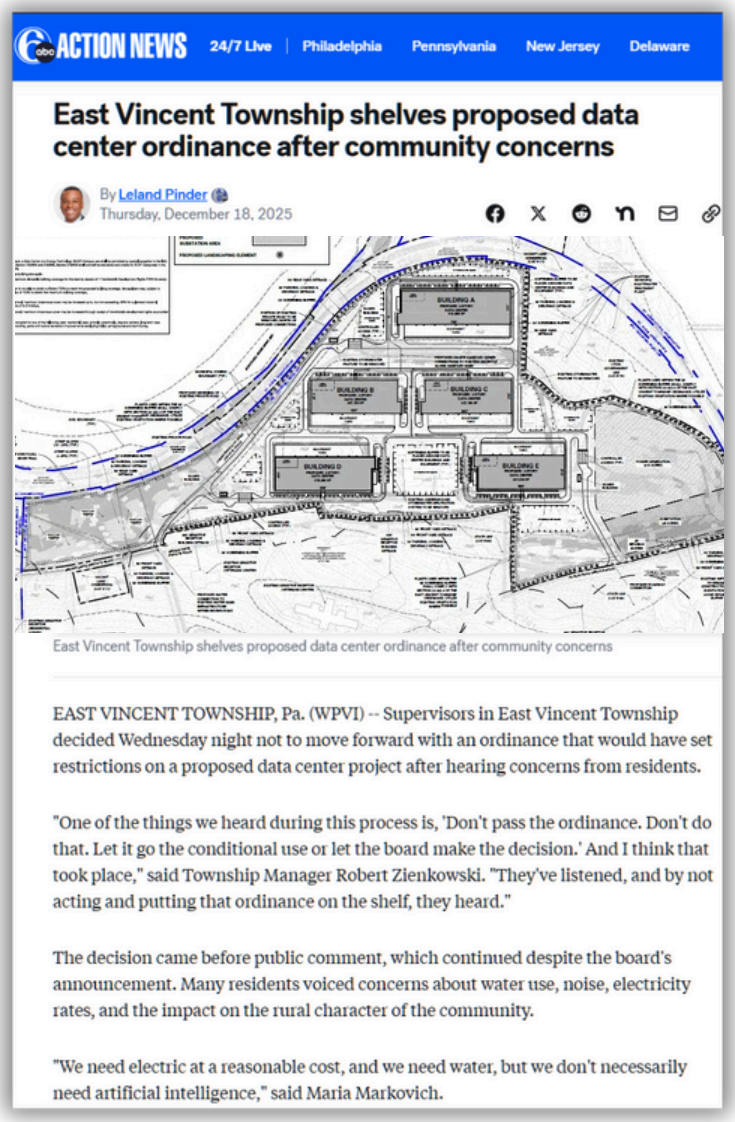
By 2025, community resistance began producing tangible outcomes.

In East Vincent Township, Pennsylvania, residents opposed a proposed data center campus on historic preservation and quality-of-life grounds. The project stalled amid public hearings that drew record attendance.

In Matthews, North Carolina, unanimous community pushback forced developers to withdraw a proposal entirely; an outcome almost unheard of just a few years earlier.

In Hermantown, Minnesota, a massive multi-building campus was paused after residents and local officials cited inadequate environmental review processes and a lack of transparency around water and power usage.

These were not fringe cases.



6 ACTION NEWS 24/7 Live | Philadelphia Pennsylvania New Jersey Delaware

East Vincent Township shelves proposed data center ordinance after community concerns

By Leland Pinder
Thursday, December 18, 2025

East Vincent Township shelves proposed data center ordinance after community concerns

EAST VINCENT TOWNSHIP, Pa. (WPVI) -- Supervisors in East Vincent Township decided Wednesday night not to move forward with an ordinance that would have set restrictions on a proposed data center project after hearing concerns from residents.

"One of the things we heard during this process is, 'Don't pass the ordinance. Don't do that. Let it go the conditional use or let the board make the decision.' And I think that took place," said Township Manager Robert Zienkowski. "They've listened, and by not acting and putting that ordinance on the shelf, they heard."

The decision came before public comment, which continued despite the board's announcement. Many residents voiced concerns about water use, noise, electricity rates, and the impact on the rural character of the community.

"We need electric at a reasonable cost, and we need water, but we don't necessarily need artificial intelligence," said Maria Markovich.

Industry trackers reported that by mid-2025, **20 data center proposals worth nearly $100 billion had been delayed or blocked** across 11 U.S. states alone. Internationally, similar patterns emerged, with conservation groups raising alarms over habitat disruption, light pollution, and land-use conversion tied to large-scale facilities.

The signal was unmistakable: the old playbook no longer worked.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Public opposition is increasingly shaping infrastructure outcomes, not merely delaying them.

(Data Center Watch, industry analysis)

A NECESSARY REFRAME: THIS IS A SYSTEMS PROBLEM

Looking back, the path that led us here becomes clearer, and so does an uncomfortable truth: trust, or the absence of it, is cumulative. It is shaped over years, sometimes decades, by what communities experience, what they are told, and what ultimately proves true.

Rebuilding that trust begins with honesty from those of us inside the industry. Not deflection. Not minimization. An honest accounting of how decisions were made, what was prioritized, and where gaps emerged.

At this stage, assigning blame has become a tempting, but ultimately unproductive simplification.

Data centers were visible. They were new. And they were large. That made them easy targets. But as established earlier, many of the stresses now surfacing, such as aging electrical grids, constrained water systems, outdated zoning frameworks, long predated the AI-driven surge that brought these facilities into sharper public focus.

What AI did was not create systemic fragility. It exposed existing fragility at scale.

This distinction matters. Because it reframes the question from “How do we stop data centers?” to “How do we modernize critical infrastructure responsibly”; and importantly, “who should bear that responsibility?”

Much of the public discourse has skipped this context, favoring urgency over understanding. Headlines move faster than history.

In that vacuum, data centers became shorthand for a broader set of infrastructure failures they did not originate, even as the industry itself contributed, sometimes unknowingly, sometimes by design, to the conditions that made those failures visible.

To the industry's credit, many operators have already begun correcting course. But changing perception is harder than changing design. Communities carry long memories, shaped by past projects and reinforced by incomplete narratives. Trust, once lost, is not restored by better technology alone.

It is restored through transparency, shared accountability, and a willingness to confront the system, not just the symptoms.

THE COURSE CORRECTION IS ALREADY UNDERWAY

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Long-term grid resilience for AI-scale workloads will require generation sources beyond incremental renewable additions.

(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine)

By 2024–2026, leading operators began redesigning facilities around community impact as a primary constraint, not an afterthought.

Closed-loop and advanced liquid cooling systems dramatically reduced or eliminated consumptive water use, while also preventing biological contamination. On-site power generation, often fueled by natural gas, reduced reliance on overstressed regional grids. In some cases, operators began developing self-powered microgrids capable of supporting both facilities and surrounding communities during peak demand or outage conditions.

Perhaps most notably, serious conversations around nuclear energy re-entered mainstream infrastructure planning. Small modular reactors, long considered politically untouchable, began to appear in long-term feasibility studies: not as near-term fixes, but as durable solutions aligned with AI's persistent energy demands.

Just as important as the technology shift was the process shift.

Developers increasingly engaged communities earlier. Impact modeling expanded beyond compliance checklists. Some operators invited local stakeholders

into planning discussions before permits were filed; a quiet but meaningful reversal of historical practice.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Communities respond negatively when outcomes appear fixed, regardless of technical merit.

(Policy Studies Journal)

COMPLIANCE STILL ISN'T CONSENT, BUT IT'S NO LONGER THE END STATE

The lesson of the AI surge is not that communities are anti-technology. It is that scale without trust is unsustainable.

Legal compliance remains necessary. Environmental reviews still matter. But the industry is learning (sometimes the hard way) that legitimacy is not granted by permits alone.

It is earned through transparency, shared infrastructure responsibility, and honest acknowledgment of trade-offs.

REBUILDING TRUST: WHAT "GOOD" LOOKS LIKE NOW

What does responsible digital infrastructure actually look like?

Not in theory. Not in marketing decks. But in real places, with real people, and real consequences.

Because systems that don't learn from past failures eventually re-encounter them, at scale.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Early, transparent engagement significantly reduces long-term opposition to large-scale infrastructure projects.

(Journal of the American Planning Association)

FROM PERMISSION TO PARTNERSHIP

For decades, the industry operated on a simple assumption: If a project is permitted, it is accepted.

That assumption no longer holds.

Across regions where opposition has cooled, or never ignited in the first place, one pattern is consistent: communities were treated as stakeholders, not obstacles. Engagement began early, before site plans hardened and capital was fully committed. Residents were not presented with conclusions; they were invited into conversations.

The most successful operators no longer ask, “How do we explain this later?”

They ask, “Who needs to understand this now?”

That shift from permission to partnership is foundational.

DESIGNING FOR IMPACT, NOT JUST EFFICIENCY

The second hallmark of “good” is a reframing of design priorities.

Efficiency still matters. PUE still matters. Cost per megawatt still matters. But they are no longer the only constraints. Increasingly, facilities are being designed around impact minimization as a first-order requirement.

Closed-loop cooling systems dramatically reduce, or eliminate, consumptive water use. Advanced liquid cooling not only supports higher power densities but also removes the need for evaporative processes that strained local water resources in earlier builds.

Noise mitigation is now addressed at the architectural level, not retrofitted after complaints arise. Lighting is shielded, directional, and responsive to local ordinances. Landscaping is used not as cosmetic cover, but as functional buffering.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Advanced cooling architectures can reduce facility-level water consumption by more than 90% compared to legacy designs.

(MIT Climate & Sustainability Consortium)

Good infrastructure no longer asks communities to adapt to it.

It adapts **to them**.

POWER THAT STRENGTHENS THE GRID—INSTEAD OF STRESSING IT

Perhaps the most consequential evolution is how data centers now approach power.

In earlier eras, facilities were large loads connected to overstretched grids. Today, leading operators are becoming grid participants, not just consumers.

On-site generation using natural gas, combined with battery storage and intelligent load management, allows some campuses to operate as self-contained microgrids. During peak demand events, these systems can reduce draw, or even export capacity, supporting regional

regional stability rather than undermining it. THIS is a significant community impact differentiator.

This shift reframes the community conversation entirely. Instead of asking, “What will this facility take from us?” residents begin asking, “How does this strengthen our community?”

That question changes everything. And when you can answer it, it changes minds.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Distributed generation and microgrids can improve regional grid resilience when designed for bidirectional participation.

(ISO / RTO resilience studies)

THE RETURN OF LONG-HORIZON THINKING: NUCLEAR RE-ENTERS THE CONVERSATION

No discussion of trust and sustainability is complete without confronting the energy horizon problem.

AI workloads are not transient. They are persistent, power-dense, and growing. Incremental efficiency gains alone will not close that gap.

As a result, serious conversations around nuclear energy, particularly small modular reactors, have re-entered infrastructure planning. Not as a talking point, but as a long-term alignment between energy density, reliability, and decarbonization.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

High-density, always-on compute workloads require generation sources capable of sustained baseload delivery.

(National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine)

These discussions are cautious, early, and community-sensitive, for good reason. But they signal something important: the industry is beginning to plan on civilization timelines, not quarterly ones.

TRANSPARENCY AS AN OPERATING PRINCIPLE

Across every successful example, one principle stands out: nothing builds trust faster than visibility.

Operators who publish water usage data, noise modeling assumptions, and power sourcing plans reduce speculation. Those who explain trade-offs honestly, rather than promising “zero impact”, are more likely to be believed.

RESEARCH INSIGHT

Perceived transparency correlates more strongly with public acceptance than projected economic benefit.

(Policy Studies Journal)

Transparency does not eliminate opposition.

But it prevents suspicion from filling the gaps.

WHAT THE INDUSTRY IS LEARNING—THE HARD WAY

The digital infrastructure sector is discovering a hard truth:

Compliance is necessary.
Consent is earned.

Permits may authorize construction, but only trust sustains operation.

Communities don't oppose data centers because they dislike technology. They oppose being surprised, excluded, or dismissed.

When projects fail today, they rarely fail on engineering.

They fail on process.

THE NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR THE CLOUD

The cloud no longer lives somewhere else (regardless of what farmers in Wisconsin tell you).

It has neighbors now.

A new social contract is emerging, one that recognizes digital infrastructure as both global and local, both technical and human. In that contract:

- Communities are informed early, not late
- Infrastructure strengthens shared systems, not just private balance sheets
- Operators design for longevity, not just speed
- And history is treated as a dataset, not a footnote

Because ignoring history doesn't make it disappear.

It just ships the same bug into production.

CLOSING THE LOOP

NIMBY is not a rejection of progress.

It is a signal.

And like all meaningful signals, it becomes valuable only when it is heard, understood, and acted upon. The industry is changing. The technology is improving. The conversation is evolving.

The next chapter of digital infrastructure will not be written solely in megawatts or rack density, but in trust, partnership, and shared responsibility.

That is what “good” looks like now.

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DATA CENTER REVIEWS

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All Research Insights presented throughout are synthesized conclusions drawn from multiple peer-reviewed studies, regulatory filings, and independent analyses listed above.

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