

A COMMUNITY GUIDE TO

Learning About Data Centers in Spokane County

For county residents, West Plains communities, tribal members and neighbors of tribal or trust lands

What this guide is for

This guide is meant to help people understand a possible data center before all of the answers are known. It focuses on practical questions, public records, land use, water, power, environmental review and the different process that can apply when tribal or trust lands are involved.

The goal is not to assume the answer. The goal is to find the parcel, identify who has authority, ask for actual numbers, read the underlying records and understand what protections would apply before a project moves forward.

One important lesson from Spokane County research is that projects can leave a trail before a formal permit appears. Planning conversations, utility coordination, easements, road work, water discussions, environmental studies and early engineering can all be useful pieces of the picture.

START WITH THE LAND. FOLLOW THE INFRASTRUCTURE. ASK FOR THE NUMBERS.

1. Start by finding the exact site and who has authority

Before trying to understand every technical detail, find the parcel or likely area as closely as possible. The location tells you which government, Tribe, utility and review process may matter.

- If the site is in unincorporated Spokane County, begin with Spokane County Building and Planning, the County Public Records Office and the County GIS property tools.
- If the site is inside a city, that city may be the main local land use authority, although county, state, federal or utility approvals can still matter.
- If the site is on tribal trust land or restricted land, tribal and federal land processes may be central. County or city zoning should not be assumed to control the same way it would on ordinary fee land.
- Airway Heights includes trust lands connected to both the Kalispel Tribe of Indians and the Spokane Tribe of Indians. For any West Plains parcel, confirm the exact land status rather than relying only on the mailing address or city boundary.
- Write down the parcel number, legal owner, acreage, zoning, nearby roads, water systems, wells, substations, transmission lines, wetlands and other mapped critical areas.

Spokane County has a temporary pause right now

As of August 27, 2026, Spokane County has paused acceptance and processing of new land use and permit

applications for large load data centers through December 15, 2026. The County is using this period to work on permanent zoning language. Public hearings are expected through the Planning Commission and the County Commissioners. The pause is temporary, so this is an important time to read the draft language and submit specific comments.

A useful question to put in writing is: Has any application, preapplication request, permit inquiry or land use file for this parcel already been accepted or vested, and what record shows its status?

2. Ten simple steps that can help

1. Try to identify the parcel first. Project names, company names and development partners can change, but the land usually gives you a stable place to start.
2. Check the zoning, nearby land uses and critical areas in Spokane County SCOUT and other County maps.
3. Check notices of application, technical review, Planning Commission agendas and Hearing Examiner records.
4. Send important questions in writing and keep the replies. Written answers are much easier to compare later.
5. Ask for early records as well as final permits. Include preapplication meetings, planning notes, code questions, water discussions, utility coordination and engineering attachments.
6. Follow the infrastructure. Look at substations, transmission, fiber, roads, water, sewer, natural gas and utility easements connected to the area.
7. Look for SEPA records and ask which agency would be the lead agency for environmental review.
8. Ask who the actual developer, landowner, utility customer and end user are. They may not be the same company.
9. Keep estimates separate from written commitments, especially for jobs, local hiring, tax revenue, water use and community benefits.
10. Build one simple timeline with dates, names, parcel numbers, meeting notes, records requests and links to the original documents.

3. Ask for numbers, not just descriptions

Words such as efficient, closed loop, large load, sustainable and job creating can mean very different things from one project to another. The questions below help turn broad descriptions into information that can be checked.

Topic	Helpful questions to ask
Power	What is the initial electrical demand, the expected peak demand and the ultimate buildout demand in megawatts? What is the requested service voltage? What is the annual energy use in megawatt hours? What substation or transmission work would be needed, and who would pay for it?
Water	What water source would be used? How many gallons per day and per year are expected during construction and operation? What is the maximum demand? Is groundwater, municipal water or reclaimed water proposed? What happens during drought or supply restrictions?

Topic	Helpful questions to ask
Cooling	What exact cooling system is proposed? Does it use evaporation at any stage? How much water is needed for the first fill, replacement water and maintenance? Is there blowdown, discharge or wastewater?
Site	What parcels are included now and what adjacent parcels are part of future phases? What zoning applies? Would a conditional use permit, site plan, building permit or other land approval be required?
Emergency systems	How many backup generators are proposed and what fuel would they use? How often would they be tested? Are large battery systems, fuel tanks, chemicals or other hazardous materials planned? What fire district has reviewed the proposal?
Noise and vibration	What are the existing background levels? What would the predicted levels be at nearby homes and property lines? Will low frequency sound and vibration be measured as well as ordinary sound levels?
Jobs and benefits	How many construction and permanent jobs are projected? How many are guaranteed to be local? Are training, local hiring, tax revenue or community benefits written into an agreement, or are they estimates?
Expansion	What is the first phase, and what is the full master plan? Could the project add more buildings, power, water demand, generators or utility infrastructure later?
Ownership	Who owns the land, who is developing the project, who would operate the data center and who would be the large electrical customer? Ask for affiliated company names and any project specific limited liability companies.

4. Public records can show what happened before a permit

Spokane County is subject to the Washington Public Records Act. A useful request is specific enough to identify the records but broad enough to capture the different names a project may have used.

- Use the parcel number, property owner, developer names, utility customer names, consultant names and nearby road names when you have them.
- Ask for communications and attachments, not just final reports. Maps, presentations, meeting notes and email attachments can contain important context.

- Request preapplication records, planning notes, code interpretations, permit inquiries, SEPA material, critical area reviews, water and sewer discussions, road and easement records, fire review and emergency planning.
- If a project involves several governments, compare what each agency produced. Different agencies may hold different parts of the same conversation.
- If you receive no responsive record, treat that as one piece of information. It does not by itself prove that no conversation or project exists anywhere else.

A simple request you can adapt

Please provide all existing records concerning a proposed data center, large electrical customer or related industrial development on or near parcel [parcel number] from [date] to present. Please include preapplication records, planning notes, land use and building permit inquiries, SEPA records, code interpretations, environmental or engineering studies, water and sewer discussions, utility coordination, road or easement records, fire and emergency review, and communications with the property owner, applicant, developer, consultants or utilities, including attachments and maps.

A note about utilities: A private utility is not automatically subject to the County public records process. If a state or federal regulator is involved, records may also exist with agencies such as the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission, Bonneville Power Administration or Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

5. Look at the whole site, not only the server buildings

Environmental review is most useful when the whole proposal is considered together. That can include utility lines, substations, roads, grading, stormwater, generators, water systems and future phases, not only the main building footprint.

- Spokane County regulates critical areas including wetlands, fish and wildlife habitat, geologically hazardous areas and critical aquifer recharge areas. The County is also updating its Critical Areas Ordinance in 2026.
- Washington SEPA can require agencies to identify probable environmental impacts, alternatives and mitigation. Ask what the total proposal includes and whether connected infrastructure is being reviewed with the project.
- For a critical aquifer recharge area, ask how groundwater quality and supply will be protected, especially where excavation, chemical storage, large impervious areas or significant water use are proposed.
- Ask for baseline information before construction when possible. That can include groundwater levels, water quality, wetlands, noise, traffic and habitat conditions.
- Ask how compliance will be checked after construction. A requirement is stronger when it has a measurable standard, reporting schedule and clear enforcement path.

West Plains water deserves careful attention

Washington Ecology is actively working on PFAS contamination in West Plains groundwater. Ecology reports that PFAS contamination in the northeast West Plains is associated primarily with Fairchild Air Force Base, Spokane International Airport and Spokane County Fire Station 10 5. This does not mean every West Plains parcel has the same conditions, but it is a good reason to ask where project water would come from, whether groundwater would be moved or pumped, and what existing water quality information applies to the site.

6. When reading a data center ordinance, look for the words that control the outcome

A strong ordinance is easier to understand when the important requirements are measurable. Read the definitions, thresholds, exceptions and enforcement sections as closely as the main policy statements.

- **Definition:** What size or electrical demand makes a facility subject to the rule? Could a project be divided into phases or buildings to fall outside the definition?
- **Location:** Is the use limited to specific zoning, and are there clear setbacks from homes, schools, water resources or other sensitive places?
- **Water:** Does the rule require actual limits, metering, reporting and proof of supply, or only a general plan?
- **Power:** Does the applicant have to disclose initial and future electrical demand and the infrastructure needed to serve it?
- **Noise:** Are there measurable limits, monitoring locations, low frequency considerations and a way to address violations after operation begins?
- **Emergency response:** Is review by the responsible fire district required before approval? Are generators, batteries, fuels and hazardous materials addressed?
- **Expansion:** Does the rule cover future phases and related buildings, or only the first application?
- **Enforcement:** Who receives monitoring reports, how often are they required, what happens when a standard is exceeded and can approval be suspended or corrected?

Conditional approval is not the same as a clear standard

A conditional use permit can add project specific conditions, but residents can still ask which protections are written directly into the code and which are left to later discretion. Clear definitions and measurable standards make it easier for applicants, neighbors and enforcement staff to understand the rules.

7. Helpful lessons from following Spokane County records

Follow infrastructure as well as company names. Electrical lines, substations, fiber routes, roads, water systems and easements can create records under names that never use the words data center.

Ask what prompted an infrastructure project. A transmission or substation project can serve general system needs, a specific customer or several purposes. The useful question is what planning record explains why the project was added and what load assumptions were used.

Ask for the full power buildout. An initial phase can be much smaller than the ultimate project. Ask for the first phase, each planned increase and the ultimate electrical demand.

Closed loop does not answer every water question. Even a system described as closed loop can still involve first fill water, replacement water, construction water, wastewater, stormwater, groundwater movement or other site water issues.

Keep estimates separate from commitments. A job estimate, projected tax benefit or hoped for local hiring level is different from a written requirement in a permit, agreement or contract.

Ask about vesting directly. If the rules are changing, ask the responsible government whether any application has already vested, what date it vested and which file or legal determination supports that answer.

Gaps between agencies are worth checking carefully. If one agency has a record that another did not produce, compare the request wording, date range, custodians and attachments before deciding what the difference means.

Stay precise about what the records prove. A document can show a discussion, request or plan without proving that a final project has been approved. Careful wording makes community research more credible.

8. If tribal or trust lands are involved

Tribal lands are not simply another zoning district. Federally recognized Tribes are sovereign governments, and trust or restricted land can involve tribal law, federal trust responsibilities and different approval processes. The first step is to identify the exact parcel and land status.

- Ask which Tribe has jurisdiction or ownership interest and whether the land is tribal trust land, individually owned trust land, restricted land or fee land. The answer can change which approvals apply.
- In the West Plains, both the Kalispel Tribe of Indians and the Spokane Tribe of Indians have trust land in Airway Heights. Do not assume two nearby tribal parcels follow the same process.
- Ask whether a business lease, utility easement or right of way is required. Bureau of Indian Affairs processes can apply to leases and rights of way on trust or restricted lands, depending on the land and the Tribe's approved leasing authority.
- BIA rights of way can cover electric transmission and distribution, water lines, sewer, roads, pipelines, telecommunications and fiber. These infrastructure approvals can be just as important as the building site itself.
- When BIA or another federal agency must fund, permit or approve an action, NEPA environmental review may apply. Ask which federal action creates the review and what level of NEPA documentation is expected.
- If a federal undertaking may affect historic properties important to a Tribe, Section 106 can require federal consultation with the affected Tribe. This can matter on tribal land and also for culturally significant places away from current reservation boundaries.
- Washington public records law should not simply be assumed to apply to tribal government records. County and city records can be requested under state law, while federal agency records may be available through federal FOIA, subject to exemptions.

For tribal members, some useful places to begin

- For the Spokane Tribe of Indians, the Planning and Economic Development Department works on land use policy, infrastructure and economic development. The Department of Natural Resources works on long term protection and management of natural resources, and the Preservation Program works with cultural sites and heritage resources.
- For the Kalispel Tribe of Indians, Community Planning and the Natural Resources Department are useful starting points for land use, planning, habitat and resource questions. The Natural Resources Department also works beyond Reservation boundaries within the Tribe's broader area of interest.
- Ask whether Tribal Council, planning staff, natural resources staff, cultural resources staff, emergency services or Tribal Realty have reviewed the proposal.
- Ask what community meeting, committee, council process or environmental review gives tribal members a place to submit questions or comments.

- If you are uncomfortable being publicly identified, decide what information can be shared before giving documents or details to another person. Someone can help research public information without naming you as the source.

What tribal members can do

- Ask Tribal Council or the appropriate Tribal department what is known about the proposal, what decisions have already been made, and what decisions are still open. Asking early can matter because a project may move through land, utility, lease, environmental and infrastructure reviews at different times.
- Put important questions in writing and keep the response. A short written record can help members compare what they are told over time and can make it easier to follow up when new information appears.
- Spokane Tribal members can ask their Tribal Council how to raise the issue through General Membership. The Spokane Tribal Council reports to the General Membership, and the Tribe holds Spring and Fall General Council meetings. Members can ask whether the topic can be discussed at a General Council meeting, another member meeting, or through the appropriate Tribal department.
- Ask Tribal Planning, Natural Resources and Preservation staff to look at the full project area, not only the main building site. Power lines, substations, water lines, roads, fiber, pipelines and other supporting infrastructure may affect land, water, habitat or cultural resources beyond the parcel itself.
- If BIA approval may be needed, contact the BIA Spokane Agency and ask whether a lease, right of way, easement or other federal action has been proposed for the project. Ask whether NEPA review has started, what documents exist, and whether there will be an opportunity for members or the public to provide information or comments.
- A Tribal member can also contact BIA about NEPA review. BIA guidance states that a NEPA compliance review request may come from a Tribal government, an individual Tribal member, another government agency, or a private person. It helps to provide the project location, land status, maps and any information already available about the proposal.
- If you want federal records, you can make a Freedom of Information Act request to BIA for BIA records about the project. This is different from requesting records from the Tribal government. Federal FOIA applies to federal agency records, and some information may still be protected from disclosure.
- If a federal agency is involved and historic or culturally important places could be affected, ask whether Section 106 review has started. The Tribe participates through its official government structure. Individual members can still provide information as members of the public, and in some situations a person with a demonstrated interest may ask the federal agency to consider them for consulting party participation.
- If you personally own an interest in allotted, trust or restricted land that could be crossed or used by a lease or right of way, contact Tribal Realty or the BIA realty office before signing or agreeing to anything. BIA provides assistance to individual Indian landowners with leasing concerns, and rights of way can affect electric lines, water lines, roads, pipelines, telecommunications and other infrastructure.
- Ask for the entire project footprint and the ultimate buildout. A smaller first phase may not show the full power demand, water demand, utility corridor or land disturbance that could come later.
- If you are concerned about being publicly identified, you can still ask questions privately, provide information to a trusted researcher, or ask a Tribal department how member concerns can be submitted. Be especially careful with cultural site information. Exact locations of sacred, archaeological or traditional cultural places should not be publicly posted simply to prove that a concern exists.

Questions tribal members may want answered

- What is the exact land status and who has authority to approve the land use?
- Is a tribal lease, BIA approval, right of way, easement or federal permit required?
- Has an environmental review started, and what opportunities will members have to read or comment on it?
- Which Tribal departments have reviewed water, habitat, air, cultural resources, traffic, fire response and utilities?
- What are the initial and ultimate power and water needs, and what new infrastructure would cross or serve tribal land?
- What protections are proposed for cultural resources, traditional use areas, water, fish, wildlife and nearby homes?
- What jobs, training, revenue or other benefits are written commitments, and what parts are only projections?
- Who will monitor the project after construction and where will monitoring results be available to members?

For nontribal neighbors

It is appropriate to ask how a project could affect shared water, roads, power, air, emergency services or nearby property. It is also important to respect tribal sovereignty. Ask how the Tribe wants the public to participate rather than assuming county procedures or state records laws apply to Tribal government.

9. A county project can still have tribal interests

A project does not have to sit on tribal land for Tribal consultation or Tribal resource concerns to matter. Water, wildlife, fisheries, ancestral places and cultural properties do not stop at modern jurisdictional boundaries.

- If there is a federal permit, federal funding, federal land approval or federal transmission action, ask whether Section 106 consultation with affected Tribes has started.
- Ask whether the environmental review identifies cultural resources and whether appropriate Tribal Historic Preservation or cultural resource offices were invited to participate.
- Ask whether project water use, discharge, road work or utility corridors could affect waterways, habitat or places with cultural importance beyond the project parcel.
- Do not ask a Tribe to publicly identify confidential cultural site locations. Cultural resource information can be sensitive, and federal law allows some information to be protected from public disclosure.

10. A simple way for a community group to share the work

A small group can make steady progress by dividing the research into manageable pieces. No one person needs to master every technical subject.

- **Parcel and land status:** Find the site, ownership, zoning, trust status, acreage and nearby uses.
- **Records:** Send and track county, city, state and federal records requests and save the responses.
- **Power:** Track electrical demand, substations, transmission, interconnection and who is expected to pay.
- **Water:** Track water source, quantity, aquifer conditions, wastewater, stormwater and drought planning.
- **Environment:** Watch SEPA, NEPA, critical areas, PFAS information, wetlands, habitat and cultural resource review.
- **Meetings:** Watch agendas, take notes and submit short written questions tied to specific ordinance language.
- **Timeline:** Keep one shared chronology with dates and links to the original evidence.

A good standard for community research

Try to separate three things: what is confirmed by a document, what someone has said but has not documented, and what is still an open question. That simple habit makes it much easier to explain the issue to neighbors, reporters and public officials.

Useful resources and sources

These links are good starting points for checking current information. Meeting schedules, draft ordinances and contact information can change, so confirm current details when a deadline matters.

1. **Spokane County Public Records Office:** [Official page](#)
2. **Spokane County Building and Planning land use information:** [Official page](#)
3. **Spokane County GIS and SCOUT property tools:** [Official page](#)
4. **Spokane County Critical Areas Ordinance and 2026 update materials:** [Official page](#)
5. **Spokane County Planning Commission agendas:** [Official page](#)
6. **Spokane County agenda center:** [Official page](#)
7. **Washington Public Records Act, Chapter 42.56 RCW:** [Official page](#)
8. **Washington Department of Ecology, SEPA overview:** [Official page](#)
9. **Washington Department of Ecology, critical aquifer recharge areas:** [Official page](#)
10. **Washington Department of Ecology, West Plains PFAS:** [Official page](#)
11. **City of Airway Heights Comprehensive Plan land use chapter, including tribal holdings:** [Official page](#)
12. **Spokane Tribe of Indians, Planning and Economic Development Department:** [Official page](#)
13. **Spokane Tribe of Indians, Department of Natural Resources:** [Official page](#)
14. **Spokane Tribe of Indians, Preservation Program:** [Official page](#)
15. **Kalispel Tribe of Indians, Community Planning:** [Official page](#)
16. **Kalispel Tribe of Indians, Natural Resources Department:** [Official page](#)
17. **Bureau of Indian Affairs, business leases on tribal and individual Indian lands:** [Official page](#)
18. **Bureau of Indian Affairs, rights of way on tribal and individual Indian lands:** [Official page](#)
19. **Bureau of Indian Affairs, NEPA compliance:** [Official page](#)
20. **Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, infrastructure and Tribal consultation under Section 106:** [Official page](#)
21. **Spokane Public Radio, August 19, 2026 report on the Spokane County data center pause:** [Source page](#)
22. **Spokane Tribe of Indians, Tribal Council:** [Official page](#)
23. **Bureau of Indian Affairs, Spokane Agency:** [Official page](#)
24. **Bureau of Indian Affairs, Freedom of Information Act:** [Official page](#)

One final thought

You do not need to know every answer before asking a careful question. The strongest community research is specific, patient and well documented. Keep the original records, stay clear about what they prove, and update your understanding when better information becomes available.