

Community Action Checklist & Strategy Guide for Fighting AI Data Centers

by EDRA of MI, 11.25

Start by finding answers to these questions:

1) What stage is the project in right now?

- How is the land currently zoned?
- Who currently owns the land?
- Has the developer applied for permits?
- Is it being funded by any grants or subsidies? (this is typically the case for out-of-state developers, less so with state utilities)

2) What do your township & county master plans say about “Data Warehousing” activities?

Find your township and county master plans, and familiarize yourself with its goals and terms of land usage.

- What types of industrial zoning are allowable? Light, heavy, or both?
- What types of activities are defined under industrial zoning—and do they describe data centers?
- Would the development of a data center require your municipality to change its zoning codes to allow it?

3) What details of the project can you gather?

- What is the land currently—farmland? Wetlands? Forest? (Use [USFW's Wetlands Mapper](#) tool)

- Who are the site's neighbors?
- Are there any vulnerable human populations or habitats that will be affected?
- Use the [EPA's Environmental Justice Screening Tool](#) to find out if your community is classified as “vulnerable”.
- Is there a site plan?
- Is there an Environmental Assessment (EA)?
- Is there an Environmental Impact Study (EIS)?

4) What other information can you document about the project and its impacts?

- Solicit the opinion of experts—**realtors, fire chiefs, city planners, medical doctors, biologists, geologists**—anyone who can speak with authority to specific impacts of the project.
- What are some examples of comparable energy developments? How have they impacted the community and environment?
- Dig into the developer's history. What's their ownership? What is their history of environmental (non)compliance? Financial (non)compliance?



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Strategies for fighting data centers

1. Lobby local officials to deny zoning

If the land requires rezoning, work with your local township or county to prevent its zoning being approved. The project may require your township to make changes to its master plan, or to its zoning—this alone is ample ground to deny the project's zoning.

Heavy and light industrial zoning are very different things, and the activities AI data centers perform meet most municipalities' definition of heavy industrial. This is an important distinction, when working with local zoning ordinances.

Does the project conflict with the intended use of a PUD, or an overlay? Does it match with the stated goals and land use objectives of the master plan?

If your community isn't already battling an AI data center, speak with township officials about shoring up your master plan and ordinances against AI data centers.

2. Ask the township or county to pass a moratorium on AI data center development

Although a temporary measure, a moratorium can give township officials, local leaders, and community

members time to properly investigate these projects and their implications.

A six to twelve month moratorium can also pause projects that have been fast tracked and slow down developers who are on the clock to find suitable sites.

3. Referendum rezoning approval

If you think your local board is going to approve rezoning for the project, you can referendum the rezoning. That means: you put it to a vote in your local community.

To referendum, you must gather formal petition signatures from 10% of your voter base. Learn more about running a Zoning Ordinance Referendum on a Rezoning [from the Michigan Townships Association](#).

4. Recall local officials as needed

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Strategies for preventing data centers

1. Pass a policy memorandum against data centers

Townships and local municipalities can pass a memorandum which takes a firm policy stance on data center development. Memorandums are critical tools which townships can use to communicate



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and to make recommendations to other local government departments and officials. Through memorandums, local governments can set clear expectations on certain topics for planning and zoning commissions, county water commissioners, health departments, fire departments, and other local officers.

Ask your local municipality to adopt a policy memorandum warning against the risks of AI data centers, and equipping local departments with the resources they need to prepare. Washtenaw County adopted a good example of this in October 2025.

2. Draft and adopt ordinances to protect against data centers

While it is true that Michigan's Zoning Enabling Act generally prevents townships from directly, unilaterally prohibiting specific land uses, this does NOT mean that local boards cannot use zoning to protect themselves. It is, after all, the township's job to determine local land use.

Townships can, for example, **define data centers as heavy industrial developments, then carefully limit which districts in the township are zoned for heavy industry.** Data centers could be required to obtain a **special use permit, which would place strict restrictions** on setbacks to

waterways, residential districts, and energy and water limitations.

Zoning ordinances should compliment and reinforce land uses outlined by the Master Plan.

3. Shore up Master Plan and Zoning Ordinances against data centers

The Master Plan's goals and intended land uses should reflect the kinds of agricultural, residential, commercial, and manufacturing activities which you want to allow—and it should exclude those you don't.

A master plan that is protective against hyperscale data centers should 1) clearly separate light industrial from heavy industrial uses, 2) disallow or severely limit heavy industrial zoning, and 3) define data warehousing and data centers as heavy industrial. Master plans should also work to discourage land use for energy production and storage (such as BESS sites), as these go hand-in-hand- with data centers.

For the purposes of zoning, "Data Warehouses" can be defined as: *A warehouse-style building or buildings that store computer and networking systems, servers, and related equipment within a climate-controlled environment, as well as office support facilities,*



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utility structures and equipment, all of which serve the purpose of storing, managing, processing, and transmitting digital data.

This is only an option for communities that have no existing data centers.

Learn more about [Procedures to Adopt or Amend a Master Plan from Michigan Township Association](#).

Talking points: why say no to AI data centers?

You can use these talking points when expressing your concern to neighbors, local officials, legislators, and the media.

- **Water:** they're water hogs, consuming millions of gallons per week, or even day (neighbors of Meta's data center in Georgia have said they "can't drink the water").
- **Energy:** they're energy hogs which will strain the grid and prioritize energy to data centers over residential and small business.
- **Little long-term economic benefit:** these sites produce only a few dozen long term jobs, while their long-term impacts on the environment and community are costly.
- **No environmental reporting:** These projects are being done without environmental impact

studies (EIS), and often without even environmental assessments (EA).

- **Subsidies:** federal CHIPS and state tax break laws are subsidizing these developments, at the expense of programs and services for local communities.
- **Job killers:** many of these data centers are intended to run programs which will replace human jobs.
- **Mental health problems:** use of AI chatbots has been linked to psychosis, and even suicides—especially among teens.
- **Government surveillance:** many of these AI companies have contracted with US intelligence agencies to collect data—to spy on—US citizens.
- **Scambots:** a large amount of these data centers' processing is being used to power scambots which steal peoples' identity and money.

For detailed reporting and primary research on AI data centers, their environmental impacts, and their economic impacts, visit our [AI Data Centers page at edraofi.org/ai-data-centers](https://edraofi.org/ai-data-centers).



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A checklist for local organizing:

Here are some steps we recommend:

- ☐ Form a dedicated Facebook group, if you haven't already. Keep it public, if you can.
- ☐ Form Instagram and TikTok accounts; enlist a Zoomer who can gain a following.
- ☐ Meet with local township officials to gauge their involvement, and to express your concerns.
- ☐ Write & design a one-page flyer (PDF) about the project: what it is, how large, about the developer, major concerns, and specific actions local community members can take.
- ☐ Distribute the flyer across social media; print out flyers and hang them up on public bulletin boards, hand them out to local businesses.
- ☐ Reach out and share your concerns with the leaders of your local public services fire, police, schools, and health and human services.
- ☐ Reach out and share your concerns with your local EGLE district supervisors for Air and Water.
- ☐ Find out what EGLE and EPA permits have been applied for, or will be required.
- ☐ Fill your social media accounts/web pages with good info and resources.
- ☐ Connect with other community groups facing the same problem.
- ☐ Host town hall-style meetings with your neighbors in living rooms, barns, or rented halls.
- ☐ Bring in expert speakers to your town hall meetings.
- ☐ Regularly post and promote township board meetings, planning commission meetings, and any relevant public agency hearings.
- ☐ Consider creating a Change.org or other type of online petition, to show how many people are opposed to the project.
- ☐ Write a letter to the editor of your local paper, expressing your concerns (keep it under 500 words for print).
- ☐ Regularly contact your state and federal legislators through



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phone and email.

- ☐ Schedule one-on-one phone calls or meetings with your state legislators to discuss your community's dilemma.
- ☐ Share legislator contact info and key talking points with social media audiences.
- ☐ Submit an op-ed to us here at EDRA of MI; we'll publish it and send it out to our newsletter.
- ☐ Get your grassroots leaders involved in your local township and county boards.
- ☐ Encourage the right people (including yourself) to apply for local public service appointments (such as parks or planning commissions), or to run for township and county offices.
- ☐ Work with township and county officials to revise Master Plans to reflect the values of your community, and to discourage toxic, heavy industrial development.
- ☐ Does an official need to be recalled, or zoning need to be referendummed? Explore these options, if necessary.
- ☐ Encourage good local economic development by helping to revitalize parks, public spaces, local arts and culture, and the small business ecosystem.

The many faces of grassroots organizing

Local organizing is essential! The more people you have in your corner, the more legislators and regulators will pay attention to what you have to say. Showing solidarity and strength in numbers is important.

Different tactics work for different communities. Some communities have successfully held bi-weekly protests, for years. Others have built Change.org petitions that have gathered 100,000s of signatures. Many have formed a large presence on social media. Others have focused hard on lobbying, and have gained the attention of Lansing legislators.

You don't have to do all of these things to be successful. What's most important is that you focus on your community's strengths. In other words: what can you actually accomplish, together?

