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# Chesapeake Planning Commission recommends zoning changes for data centers



A recommended ordinance would require data center project approval on a case-by-case basis with a conditional use permit in Chesapeake. (Stephen M. Katz/The Virginian-Pilot)



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CHESAPEAKE — The Planning Commission on Wednesday unanimously recommended approval for a new set of zoning ordinances intended to create guardrails and give city leaders more say over future proposed data center projects.

The ordinance would require data center project approval on a case-by-case basis with a conditional use permit. Currently, no such approval is required, and the changes would limit data center development to only industrial zoning districts and the Fentress Airfield Overlay District.

“(If) we don’t do this, then a purchaser could purchase the land, build it, and just go about their merry way, and they could do it however they want,” planning commissioner Muriel Barefield said.

More than 20 residents spoke at Wednesday’s meeting, overwhelmingly calling for more time to amend the proposed changes. The commission ultimately approved the changes with amended language, including additional demands to prevent adverse impacts to residents and the environment by encouraging development in areas already primed with adequate infrastructure. The commission also recommended periodic review of such zoning policies.



The ordinance changes now head to City Council for approval. Chesapeake leaders [for weeks have been discussing](#) the changes as data centers are currently allowed by-right development under some existing zoning designations. [Leaders across the region](#) have also been discussing preparations.

Data centers are physical facilities that house computers, servers and other networking equipment to process and distribute data. Demand has heightened in recent years due to the rapid growth of cloud computing and artificial intelligence.

Most speakers at Wednesday's meeting expressed environmental and health concerns, including low-frequency noise, air pollution, and strains on energy, water and infrastructure resources.

Some speakers called for an outright ban or moratorium on data centers — [a position Virginia Beach](#) leaders support. But most asked the planning commission to delay a vote and rework some of the proposed ordinance. Residents called for more time for public input and additional setback distances, especially for nearby recreational, residential and agricultural properties. Residents said they want to see decommissioning standards added, and requirements for operators to be on the hook for necessary infrastructure and energy investments.

"Cities nationwide are being asked to devote substantial amounts of land, water, and power to support an industry that is expanding at an unprecedented pace, and who knows what purpose they ultimately serve," Chesapeake resident Jennifer Economy said. "We hear plenty about economic benefits, but far less about long-term impacts. For these reasons, please continue this matter so the ordinance can be strengthened with cumulative impact analysis, private well protection, decommissioning requirements, expanded public notice, and strong efforts for Chesapeake's rural communities. Ultimately, the citizens who will bear the long-term impacts deserve a stronger voice than the interests of those who stand to profit."

Only a few speakers expressed support, including David Ropp, who chairs the Chesapeake Alliance. Ropp credited the planning staff with a "thoughtful and transparent process." Ropp suggested the ordinance allow by-right development in some zoning districts, such as a new technology overlay

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“Balancing economic opportunity with neighborhood protections is no easy task,” Ropp said. “We believe it will become one of Virginia’s most thoughtful and balanced data center ordinances.”

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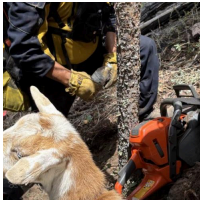
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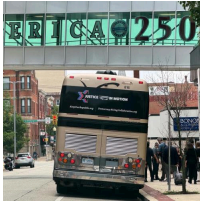


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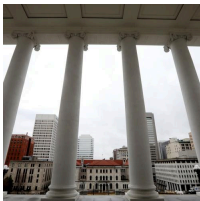
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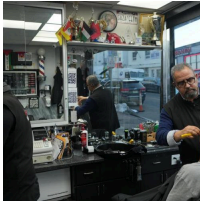


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