

OPINION > OPINION COLUMNISTS

Column: Understanding data centers means recognizing their real effects



Meta's Stanton Springs Data Center is visible Jan. 13 in Newton County, Ga. (Mike Stewart/AP File)



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Data centers have become one of the most important economic development and land use issues facing Chesapeake. They raise important questions about infrastructure, power, water, environmental impact, tax revenue and long-term competitiveness. These questions deserve thoughtful discussion, especially within our business community.

That is why the Chesapeake Alliance, a non-partisan organization of Chesapeake business leaders and executives, recently hosted “Understanding Data Centers.” The educational forum was designed to help business leaders and community stakeholders better understand this fast-growing sector. Our goal was not to promote any single project, but to encourage a fact-based conversation about how Chesapeake can evaluate data centers responsibly.

Data centers are essential infrastructure for today’s economy. Cloud computing, online banking, medical records, logistics, cybersecurity, remote work, artificial intelligence and countless daily business operations all depend on physical facilities. The cloud is not actually in the clouds; it exists in buildings that require land, power, fiber, cooling, security and local oversight.

The Chesapeake Alliance supports responsible data center development. As outlined in our adopted position statement, thoughtfully planned facilities can operate efficiently, use resources responsibly, generate significant tax revenue, and place relatively limited demand on city services such as schools, emergency services and transportation infrastructure.



During our forum, an official from Mecklenburg County shared how responsible land-use policies and high development standards helped attract significant private investment. That investment has funded five new schools while helping maintain one of Virginia's lowest real estate tax rates. Mecklenburg County demonstrates how careful planning can strengthen public services, improve infrastructure and reduce the tax burden on residents.

Responsible growth also requires careful attention to environmental concerns.

One of the most valuable discussions centered on water, power and natural resources. These are legitimate issues. Chesapeake's rivers, wetlands, forests, farms and neighborhoods deserve thoughtful protection, and every major project should be evaluated for impacts to stormwater, habitat, tree canopy, nearby properties and surrounding land uses.

What we heard from industry experts was both encouraging and informative. Modern data centers can often be designed to significantly reduce many of these impacts.

Water use, for example, depends largely on the cooling technology selected. Many newer facilities utilize closed-loop or air-cooled systems that dramatically reduce water consumption. That doesn't eliminate the need for oversight; it reinforces the importance of asking the right technical questions and requiring clear answers before projects move forward.

Reliable electric service is equally important. Data centers require substantial power, making coordination with utilities, capacity planning and energy efficiency critical components of responsible development.

Wildlife and environmental resources must remain central to the review process. Appropriate site selection, buffering, stormwater management, noise mitigation, tree preservation and protection of environmentally sensitive areas all help minimize impacts and build public confidence.

Not every site is appropriate. Location matters. Design matters. Standards matter.

The alliance believes Chesapeake should thoughtfully evaluate data center

The business community has an important role in this conversation. Data centers represent both critical infrastructure and significant economic opportunity. When planned responsibly, they can strengthen Chesapeake's tax base, support modern commerce and position our city for long-term success.

Good planning begins with good information. Our "Understanding Data Centers" forum demonstrated that many legitimate concerns surrounding water, power, wildlife and land use can be addressed through thoughtful planning, clear expectations and informed decision-making.

Chesapeake's future should be shaped by facts, responsible planning and policies that promote both economic prosperity and environmental stewardship. I encourage you to watch the "Understanding Data Centers" forum on the Chesapeake Alliance website and form your own informed opinion.

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David Ropp is chairman of the Chesapeake Alliance, a non-partisan organization of Chesapeake business leaders dedicated to advancing responsible economic development and community engagement. Under his leadership, the alliance convened the "Understanding Data Centers" educational forum, bringing together national, state and local experts to examine the opportunities and challenges of data center development.

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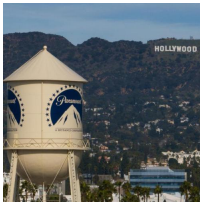
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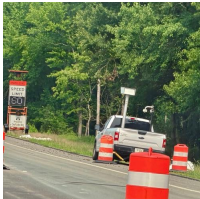
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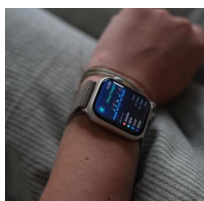
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