

Every time someone streams a video, sends a message, or does a Google search, that action depends on a data center. Indiana has become one of the country's most attractive locations for these facilities. Billions of dollars in investments from companies like Meta and Google have been drawn in because of the opportunity. Along with all the money to be made, there are plenty of people who disagree with these developments. Communities across Indiana are concerned about noise, power costs, land use, and environmental impacts. As of summer 2025, at least \$64 billion worth of data center projects have been blocked or delayed due to local opposition. Lawmakers in many states are considering a temporary prohibition of activity. Indiana is included in all this drama. The push for data centers in Indiana requires proactive steps. If policymakers, developers, and unions commit to community engagement and transparency, development can be carried out responsibly.

It's no secret that the construction of data centers can bring in many jobs in the building trades. Meta's \$10 billion campus in Indiana is expected to support more than 4,000 jobs at peak construction. Once the facility is completed appropriately 300 permanent high-wage jobs will become available. Projects of this scale provide significant work for electricians, ironworkers, pipefitters, etc., who depend on large commercial construction to sustain their careers. For the union workforce in Indiana, a single data center project can provide lots of steady work. Jon Hooker, president and executive director of the Central Indiana Building Trades Council, made it clear that the approval in Decatur Township was a win for construction workers. His reaction reflects that, for Indiana's unionized building trades, data centers are one of the most consequential opportunities in a generation. The challenge is achieving community buy-in for large-scale data center projects.

Residents living around proposed data centers are raising concerns that go well beyond conceptual policy. In Starke County, community members attended public meetings and asked questions about noise levels, water use, and whether large industrial facilities belong in a rural environment. In the two-hour meeting, no one spoke in favor of data centers. This is a huge signal that developers failed to build any meaningful public support before the formal approval process began. Several other counties around Indiana have imposed their own moratoriums. That level of resistance reflects a genuine question about who bears the cost and who receives the benefits when a massive facility moves into a neighborhood. Dismissing that opposition without addressing its substance has already started costing developers time and money. Stemming from the question of who bears the cost, one specific concern is utility costs. The Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission approved a structure designed to ensure existing ratepayers are not stuck with the cost of adding a new data center load. This suggests that regulators recognize this as a real risk worth managing. Whether that is sufficient and whether it will be replicated remains a question for communities with impending large-scale data centers.

There are three possible steps to achieve responsible development of these data centers: project labor agreements, early and genuine community engagement, and strong environmental standards and transparency. Project labor agreements establish the terms and conditions of work before a single hire is made. This includes setting wages and benefits, procedures for resolving disputes, and including targeted local hiring requirements to ensure a share of the workforce comes from the surrounding community. For data centers projects, PLAs are one of the most direct ways to guarantee that construction jobs reach union workers who live in the state. Without them, a developer can fulfill its public commitment to “create thousands of jobs” by importing labor from other markets. This leaves Indiana workers on the sideline. Community

engagement can't be treated as just another box to check during the permitting process. In cases like Decatur Township and Starke County, opposition hardened partly because residents felt that decisions had already been made before they were consulted. It can't just be a public relations presentation. A developer that can hold genuine listening sessions before filing for rezoning is far more likely to identify concerns early and address them in the project design. This approach costs less and appeases the community thus stopping potential delays and legal challenges that follow an approval battle.

The demand for data centers is not slowing down, and the state has advantages in attracting investment. The path forward requires all parties to move past their default positions. Developers need to treat community engagement as a cost of doing business. Policymakers need to attach conditions to incentives that go beyond just job count projections. Indiana's union construction workforce deserves enforceable agreements that guarantee the work reaches the people who helped build this state's infrastructure. If done right, data centers can be a foundation for shared prosperity. If done carelessly, it's just another target for community backlash.