

# RESISTING DATA CENTRE DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA



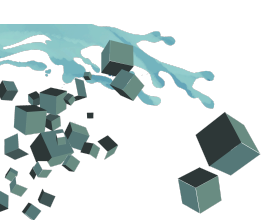
Microsoft data centre in Etobicoke. Source: Patrick Morrell/CBC



Source: Canada Construct Connect



Source: SaskToday

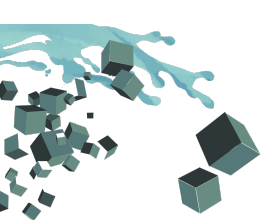


## Written and reviewed by

Simon Enoch, Janna Frenzel, Anne Pasek, Kayla Piccinin, Ushnish Sengupta, Nick Tsergas, and Jeff Doctor.

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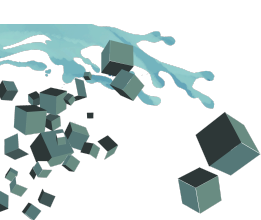
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## Introduction

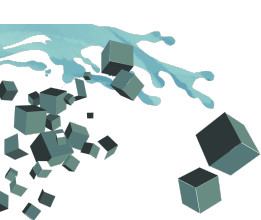
Welcome! We're glad you found this toolkit. Perhaps you've just heard about a suspicious land purchase in your community, with vague promises for economic development coming from a weird shell company. Alternatively, maybe you're in the middle of a fight with a data centre project that's already moving forward, or has been in your town for a while and is looking to expand. Maybe you just want to get ahead of such possibilities and inoculate your community against the industry's bad actors.

Whatever the case, this guide is here to support your efforts to build community power and ensure that everyday people in your region get to have a fair say on important decisions about data centre development. It was written by organizers and academics from across Canada and it highlights some of the struggles and tactics on the ground in communities like yours.

Local organizing is tough but its impacts can be profound. Data centres often make bad neighbours, and we're in the middle of a rush to build more and more projects at larger and larger scales. Nevertheless, community groups have prevailed over billion dollar companies and compromised politicians, pushing out projects that would take too much from local lands and waters. Wherever and whenever people come together we can build grassroots power.

These struggles are coalitional ones. People will have a whole bunch of different reasons to say "no" to data centre development. We don't presume that you, or the allies you make along the way, necessarily have a united opinion on whether or not AI is good for society as a whole or whether digital sovereignty should be a national priority (*though, we bet you'll meet plenty of people with a range of views on these topics along the way*). We do, however, trust that you have a grounded sense of what's right for your community and a justified suspicion about the promises you might hear from the data centre developers knocking at your door.

Resisting a data centre might look like rejecting a proposal outright or building contracts and compromises that ensure key environmental, economic, and public health outcomes are guaranteed. By engaging in consultation processes, building political



pressure, and making demands, you can defend your community from the industry's worst impulses and all the impacts they can have on local water, air, and energy bills.

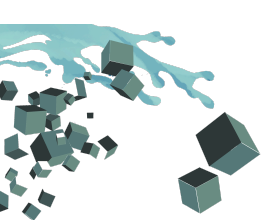
Read on for explanations, strategies, and true stories from the field. Remember: you're not alone. A nation-wide movement is building and a future of unchecked data centre development is far from guaranteed.

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**Is there something that you think is missing?** This is the first version of a living document, and if you have capacity and expertise to lend to iterations, that would be very welcome. This guide is stronger with a plurality of voices behind it.

**This toolkit is just one piece of a larger effort to build civil society engagement around AI, data centres, and emerging technologies.** The Civil Society Hub on Tech Justice is an intersectional coalition that meets monthly in on-going inquiry, strategy, and working groups that take on specific tactics to build power and counter the narrative of “inevitability” in this era of AI-driven empire-building.

You can learn more about the Hub's work at [www.aicivilsociety.ca](http://www.aicivilsociety.ca). Reach out to [jcheung@canadians.org](mailto:jcheung@canadians.org) to get involved!



# Data Centres 101

## The Basics

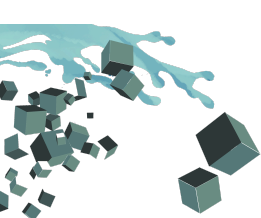
A data centre is anything that stores or processes data for people to access and use elsewhere. An old computer sitting in a basement that hosts a website could technically count as one, but that sort of thing probably isn't why you're reading this. We've seen a rapid expansion of industrial-scale data centres over the past decade, and an even faster sprint to build special-purpose AI facilities in the last few years. These facilities are getting bigger and bigger, requiring large industrial parks to power and cool the computer chips housed inside.

Once a data centre passes the 50 megawatt mark (enough energy to power about 37,500 homes) it gets classed as a 'hyperscale' facility. Canada currently has 5 in operation, which compared to other nations is pretty small. There are, however, at least 96 hyperscale projects currently in development, with more on the way. For better or worse, Canada appears set to have its big data centre moment.

It looks like that moment will be defined by a few megaprojects. In the past year we've seen proposals at unprecedented scales, ranging from 500 to 5,000+ megawatts of energy (enough to power whole cities). Almost every part of Canada isn't ready to meet that kind of electrical or water demand elegantly. As a result, a lot of new data centre projects come with additional new fossil gas-powered plants included in the project. All of this is a pretty far step away from that computer in the basement.

## What Does AI Have to Do With It?

Industrial-scale data centres have always had their share of problems, but now that we're building data centres specifically to service AI tools, these problems have grown exponentially. Part of this comes down to the hardware people use to train AI models or handle the back and forth queries to them afterwards: graphical processing units (GPUs) are standard, rather than basic silicon chips. GPUs can do many mathematical calculations in parallel, simultaneously, but at the cost of requiring a lot more electricity. For example, Google's AI summary feature uses [up to 30x the energy](#) as its regular search.

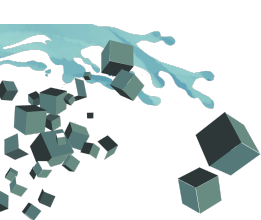


This different class of chips, and their much more demanding energy requirements, is driving the build out of new facilities at record speed. Large tech companies see AI model development as a scaling race; they are competing to throw as many chips—and thus as much energy—as possible at their models in hopes that they’ll make a breakthrough (or at least make it impossible for smaller companies to compete). This means that tech giants are willing to spend unprecedented amounts of money and to compromise on their environmental performance. Past pledges around green energy and water conservation are being left behind as foreign [companies scramble](#) to build as much as possible, as quickly as possible. As they run out of cheap land, water, and energy at home, companies increasingly look to other countries, like Canada.

The overall environmental impacts of AI are clearly negative. Tech CEOs and AI boosters assert, without evidence, that AI models may eventually produce a net benefit to the climate. This is a hopeful thought, but not a likely one. To date, the kinds of AI model development that are driving the massive expansion of data centres (large language models and generative transformer algorithms) are pretty different from the kinds of machine learning techniques that are most useful to scientists. To claim that all forms of AI development are necessary or helpful to the environment is simply [greenwashing](#). It also ignores all the ways that climate change today is really more of a political problem than a technological one; we need the political will to get off fossil fuels more than we need new inventions.

As for the more-than-environmental impacts of AI, there’s almost too much to discuss. Many voices are speaking out on large language models’ current and potential impacts on job security (and quality), disinformation, use in harassment and abuse, violations of copyright, and detrimental cognitive effects in schools. All these social issues are being pushed to the side, along with the material impacts of data centres, in the rush to promote AI.

While most of the proposed new data centres in Canada are purportedly going to be used for AI applications, there are other uses of data centres. Cryptocurrency production, for example, is another high-intensity compute application (including but not limited to [Bitcoin](#)) and cryptocurrency corporations are clients of data centres or act as both developer and user. Some data centre corporations that used to focus primarily on cryptocurrency production are now [pivoting to include “AI services” in their portfolio](#). Cloud computing is another, more longstanding use of data centres. All issues outlined in this toolkit are equally relevant for data centres regardless of their ends.



## Impacts on the Environment

### Water

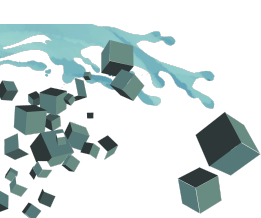
Water is a big concern. In order to prevent the chips inside a data centre from overheating (and melting!) they must be consistently cooled. The most inexpensive and common way to do this is to pipe water through the facility to gather heat and then evaporate it off. To prevent these pipes from breaking down quickly, this water needs to be clean, high quality drinking water.

This places our drinking water into competition with water for data centres. Once evaporated, water from a data centre may float off to a different watershed. Alternatively, in dry areas of the world, data centres may tap into underground aquifers. In both cases, once water is removed from the watershed, it represents a loss to the region. This is especially acute in drought-stressed areas of the world and around hyperscale facilities, which can churn through more than a million gallons of water a day. Evaporative systems can also [increase the concentration of existing pollutants](#) in local waters, worsening public health risks. There are ecosystem impacts to these withdrawals too.

“We promise we won’t use all that water!” Data centre developers may say that they’re only going to use a certain amount of water, and then end up going way past that amount. In the Netherlands, Microsoft was revealed to be using [up to four times as much water as they said they’d need](#).

### Noise

Noise pollution from data centres represents a different environmental problem. The constant hum of cooling fans, or the intermittent use of back up diesel generators, are so loud that staff need to wear hearing protection in the facility. Outside, these sounds can often be heard kilometers away, impacting wildlife and people. Residents that live in the neighbourhood of data centres may find the constant noise to be [extremely stressful](#), impacting sleep and causing headaches. [Wildlife may also exhibit signs of stress](#), leave a region, or depart from their normal behaviours.



## Energy

Electricity is another area of concern. Provincial electrical grids in most parts of Canada [include a lot of fossil gas already](#) and [we're lagging](#) when it comes to building new renewable energy resources. It's also the case that when we add new load to the grid, we prevent additional solar and wind projects from decarbonizing our energy system overall—we're only compensating for new projects, rather than cleaning up the existing energy system that powers the rest of us. AI data centre demand is also being used to support the [creation of new fossil fuel power plants](#) and the [delayed retirement](#) of old ones. This is probably why [AI companies and fossil fuel companies](#) are forming [deeper and deeper partnerships](#).

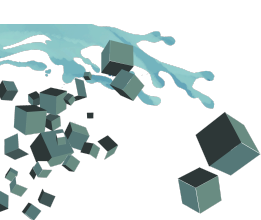
These energy impacts don't even account for the methane gas plants a lot of data centre developers are including in their megaproject plans. Companies may claim that these are temporary measures, but no one has ever built a power plant, used it for a couple of years, and then let it collect dust. [These facilities are bad for both the climate \(methane is a fossil fuel\) and air pollution \(burning gas produces nitrogen oxides and tiny particles that harm our respiratory and cardiac health\)](#). Gas plants themselves are also quite noisy and may require additional water and gas pipelines to be laid. This, again, is another way data centres disrupt ecosystems and traditional ways of living with the land.

## Land Use

A new hyperscale data centre often implies shifts in land use. This could mean cutting down forests or draining wetlands to build the facility, or impacting the likelihood of floods and heat island effects because of all the concrete surfaces these hyperscale projects entail. Farmers are concerned about the potential loss of fertile soils to these facilities, while wildlife areas are threatened by their advances. Projects that top out at thousands of square meters will also shape the future growth of nearby communities because no one wants to live next to a giant, noisy industrial park.

## **Impacts on Affordability**

One impact of data centres might come on your [power bill](#). Unless special provisions have been made by the data centre developer or your provincial or city regulator, the costs associated with building new grid facilities to service a new data centre are shared by everyone who is a customer on that grid. In the USA, in markets with heavy data



centre growth, some customers saw their [monthly bills go up by double digits](#). Data centres are a big part of that story.

Additional expenses for ordinary energy consumers come from new powerlines and substations running to the facility, or the aggregate push to build a new plant down the line. It can be complicated to fully assess and attribute these costs. This way of sharing the expense of upgrading and expanding the grid makes a certain kind of sense when those upgrades benefit the resilience and capacities of the utility as a whole. When a single big player is responsible for those upgrades, however, it looks a lot more like a free lunch for a private company.

Reacting to negative press, some companies have promised to be responsible for these added expenses, shielding customers from higher rates, at least within the United States. Few have made similar pledges to international customers. Absent regulations and contracts, additionally, there's little consequence if companies simply break their promises (or go bankrupt).

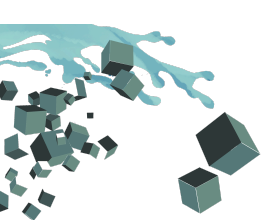
### What About Sustainable Data Centre Development?

All data centres come with a physical cost. Communities that do want to attract a data centre project to their region may want to bargain for mitigation measures, but they should be wary that promises on these fronts are only partial at best, and obscuring at worst.

#### Noise

Noise abatement measures can include baffles, set backs, landscaping, and placing particularly worrisome facilities like back up generators between buildings and downwind of residents. **A comprehensive noise study is key to identifying where these measures are necessary and ensuring that they get integrated into a developer's plan.** These don't always happen unless there's public pressure.

Turn it down!: Residents in Olds, Alberta, were alarmed when a data centre developer submitted a proposal that would pump out 62 dB of noise on average—way too loud for a facility that would sit right next to residents' homes. After facing public scrutiny, they came back to the table with a plan that [cut that noise almost in half](#). This would not have happened if residents didn't speak out for their right to peace and quiet.



### Green Energy

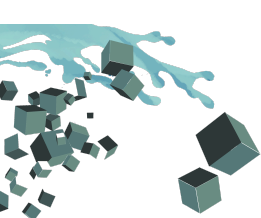
Some developers will claim that their data centres run on 100% renewable energy, or that they are helping to finance the creation of new clean power sources to offset the demand from their facility. For these claims to be credible companies have to prove that the green energy that they're financing is 'additional,' which is to say, these energy projects wouldn't have otherwise got off the ground if tech companies hadn't chipped in the extra money. This is difficult to prove in a growing grid. What's more, **if green energy production and data centre energy consumption don't align in time and space, it's not a credible claim.** If the data centre draws grid power 24 hours a day, but a solar farm only generates energy during the daylight, then the overall impacts from a climate perspective are still negative. This is even more obvious when data centres build new methane gas plants on site—that plant is clearly creating new climate emissions that wouldn't have occurred if the data centre didn't get built.

### Water

Some new facilities will brag about their use of advanced cooling systems, which can decrease (but not eliminate) the water usage of a data centre project. There are two main kinds. 'Closed loop' systems still use water inside pipes, but these pipes exchange heat from one loop to another using compression, like an air conditioner or a fridge. However, hot water in a closed system is bound to encourage bacteria to grow, and it can't be used indefinitely. [Biocides and antifreeze](#) are often added to the system, but even so the pipes eventually risk getting clogged. These systems need to be regularly discharged and refilled, with the waste water treated or tanked offsite so it ideally doesn't enter our waterways. This means that the data centre still needs to take in enormous quantities of water to keep its chips from melting; it just does so less frequently than a conventional system. It also uses more energy to do so.

The other alternative for data centre cooling cuts water out of the system altogether and uses synthetic chemicals to manage heat. These liquids include a lot of ['forever chemicals' like PFAS](#), which have been linked to reproductive health harms. This approach is not widely used yet, in part because of the significant risks that come from adopting these chemicals. These systems also add to the cost and energy demand of a project. For these reasons, [traditional evaporative cooling remains common](#) in contemporary data centre project proposals; it is by no means an artifact of the past.

Some developers with particular concern for public perceptions and public pledges may offer to 'offset' water, or propose a 'water positive' project that 'adds,' rather than subtracts, from local water resources. This kind of math is predicated on the company



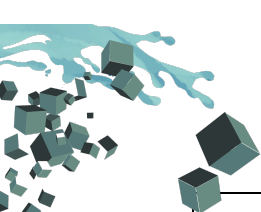
making improvements to existing water infrastructures, fixing leaky pipes or open bodies of water where water otherwise escapes. **For these kinds of actions to be credible, they need to be rigorously measured and localized; watch out for [vague math and fixes in a different region](#) which won't help with local water shortages.** It's also the case that, on the whole, [these companies don't seem to be able to keep up](#) with their overall water consumption rates as they sprint to build more and more AI data centres.

"We promise we'll build it!" At the development stage of a project, companies will often make promises around mitigation measures. They don't always follow through on them. Take xAI, Elon Musk's company that's building a sprawling data centre complex in Memphis. To compensate for the pressure on the local water system, [xAI promised to build a water recycling plant... eventually](#). Two years after the data centre project kicked off, the company both hasn't finished the water plant, and has 'paused' construction towards it (so it could focus on building another data centre instead). It's unclear whether or not the water plant will ever be completed. This serves as a reminder: if you don't get companies to put their promises into legally binding contracts, they'll drop them when it's convenient.

### Heat recuperation

Sometimes data centre developers will promote their project by claiming their facilities will be more sustainable if they re-use the heat that the computers inside the data centre generate. They usually do so by connecting—or promising to connect—a data centre to a facility with a completely different purpose (["industrial symbiosis"](#)). For instance, waste heat for data centres has been used to heat [swimming pools](#), some [residential areas](#), [factories](#) or [buildings on university campuses](#). While heat capture in and by itself may be useful, developers propose these "solutions" because it helps them recuperate some of the costs associated with managing excess heat, selling a municipal government on such "sustainability benefits", and painting a better picture of themselves for potential investors, including governments.

Greens from 'Green' Data? In Lévis, Quebec, the data centre company QScale received a [\\$90 million loan](#) from the provincial government to build a 140 megawatt data centre, with the province also acting as shareholder. One of QScale's selling points was their announcement to [pair the new data centre with greenhouses](#), where food would be grown year-round by using waste heat from the data centre. This announcement aligned their project with food sovereignty concerns, specifically the provincial government's plans to double the volume of greenhouse food production by



2025. The data centre project was announced in 2021 with development slated to take place over 7 years. While construction on the data centre has started, it is [unclear](#) whether the proposed greenhouses are also actually being built and when they might become operational.

In other words: the headline-grabbing sustainability angle is the easy part to announce — whether it ever gets built remains to be seen.

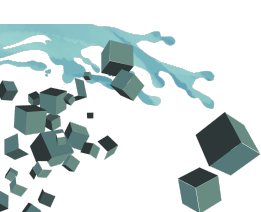
## What About the Economic Benefits?

When developers propose a data centre to a community, it inevitably comes with the [promise](#) of substantial economic benefits: new jobs, local economic spin-offs and abundant tax revenues filling the coffers of cash-strapped governments. How much stock should we put in such promises and to what extent have they been realized in communities that have welcomed data centres?

While data centre developers often tout local job creation benefits, the reality is that data centres often provide only [limited](#) and ‘front-loaded’ employment. The vast majority of jobs created are during the construction phase (which can last anywhere from twelve to eighteen months). Once operational, data centres support relatively few permanent jobs, with estimates of between 20 to 100 employees depending on the size of the facility. Moreover, up to [half](#) of these jobs are usually low-wage contractors brought in for cleaning and/or security.

Similarly, investment in local suppliers usually ends once the data centre is operational. This has a lot to do with the nature of the data centre itself: its primary input is energy and its primary output is data. It doesn't require the kind of local [supply chain](#) that would grow up around an input-intensive facility like an automobile manufacturing plant. Moreover, the highly [specialized](#) IT equipment housed within the facility are rarely sourced from local or even national suppliers. Canada doesn't make computer chips, for one. This means that the largest expenditures of data centres will flow away from local business and workers.

Tax revenue from data centres can be substantial, but communities are often denied their full share due to [concessions](#) and subsidies made by governments to attract the data centre to the region in the first place. Sales tax exemptions are often used to encourage data centres to locate in specific regions. These can be substantial. For example, Ohio's 100 percent sales tax [exemption](#) on data centre construction and



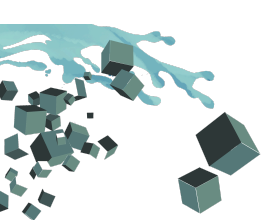
equipment cost the state \$1.6 billion in 2025 alone. The deals developers strike with governments can also affect the distribution of tax revenues.

The Alberta Advantage? Alberta, which does not collect a provincial sales tax, has set a 2% [levy](#) on computer hardware on data centres 75 MW or greater that rely on the provincial grid. Rural municipalities in Alberta will only be [permitted](#) to assess and tax data centre land and buildings, not computer hardware, despite that hardware having the highest assessable value. This drastically reduces the potential revenue local governments can expect from these projects in Alberta, which will no doubt factor into community deliberations. There have been promises that the province will redistribute some of this tax downwards, but this remains speculative.

The [evidence](#) suggests that data centres, by default, provide limited economic benefits to the communities that host them overall. This can be altered through Community Benefit Agreements ([CBAs](#)) or Project Labour Agreements ([PLAs](#)) struck between the developer and the community. Basically, you can create a contract to ensure that data centre companies pay into the region, whether through cash payments to local government, or through specific hiring or charitable giving targets. Other contracts may bind developers to building out or paying for additional infrastructure that will benefit citizens, or at least prevent them from subsidizing the costs of the data centre's operations indirectly.

These potential benefits should be considered against potential harms and costs. Communities should also debate whether or not those costs and benefits will be equally shared. For example, if a data centre harms the availability and quality of water resources across the watershed, but tax payments are only made only to an urban region and not to farmers, is that a fair deal? A further issue: if the CBA's details are secret, can you even have that debate? Sometimes details in these agreements are kept secret by nondisclosure agreements (NDAs), or other clauses that prevent signatories from exercising their own political speech on the matter.

- **Weigh the promise of benefits carefully.** Be skeptical about the promise of jobs and detail-oriented about tax revenues. Building a [large coalition](#) will help you assess whether or not benefits are fairly distributed or substantial. Don't trust things that aren't spelled out in writing (and eventually in legal contracts). Push your representatives to keep details public, and not to sign NDAs that would keep key details secret.



## The Case For (and Limits of) Data Sovereignty in Canada

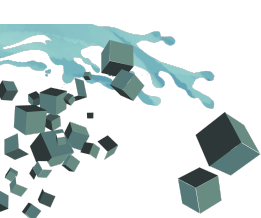
Ensuring Canadians' 'data sovereignty' is quickly becoming the go-to [justification](#) for data centre build-out, by both government and the private sector. The federal government's "[Enabling large-scale sovereign AI data centres](#)" initiative is specifically designed to facilitate the build-out of 'sovereign' AI data centres in collaboration with the private sector. Bell Canada [describes](#) its planned series of data centres as part of a "sovereign AI fabric," while Telus [deems](#) its Rimouski, Quebec data centre as "Canada's first sovereign AI factory."

Despite the ubiquity of the "sovereignty" label, the extent to which these proposals actually ensure data sovereignty is rarely questioned. At its root, Canadian data sovereignty means that Canadian institutions, not foreign legislatures, agencies or courts, decide who may or may not access Canadian's sensitive data.

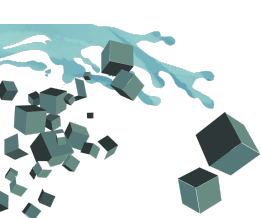
The often unspoken but primary threat to data sovereignty is the U.S. federal government's CLOUD Act which can [compel](#) U.S. companies to disclose data they control, including data stored abroad. This means that Canadian-based data centres that host Canadian data on U.S.-based platforms like Microsoft or Google could be compelled to share that data with the Trump administration, even if those data centres are located in Canada. "Data sovereignty" is quickly becoming a meaningless marketing [term](#), exploiting concerns over data privacy to justify the build-out of AI infrastructure.

Just because it's on Canadian soil doesn't mean it's 'sovereign.' Bell's proposed AI Fabric data centre in Regina has been [described](#) by the provincial government as positioning "Saskatchewan as a national leader in sovereign AI infrastructure." However, the facility's two identified [tenants](#) and owners of the facility's means of compute are U.S. based CoreWeave and Cerebras, both of whom would be subject to the CLOUD Act.

The further along the network stack we go, the more the sovereignty claim breaks down. Because of the ways Internet cables have been laid and network protocols are written, [data traffic in and from Canada routinely passes through the USA](#). Data packets from Montreal will transit through NYC on their way to Toronto or Paris. There are also no Canadian companies supplying the chips that are so crucial to AI development, or even regular data centre workloads. A robustly national digital system is just not possible.



A final point: all this talk about Canadian data sovereignty can be [pretty annoying](#) to Indigenous people. It generally ignores the complexities of nationhood and land rights in a country built through a patchwork of treaties (not to mention the parts of Canada where there are no treaties at all). Any given piece of 'Canadian soil' under consideration for data centre development isn't just Canadian; it is almost certainly also the [site](#) of the intersecting legal rights and traditional practices of many Indigenous, First Nations, Métis and/or Inuit governments. If settlers resisting unchecked data centre development ignore that part of the Canadian context, they'll risk alienating potential allies. (This goes double for talk of 'digital colonialism').



## How a Data Centre Gets Built (or Stopped!)

Has a new data centre project been announced in your community? Wait—would you necessarily know if one was underway? The lifecycle of a data centre can be a bit mysterious as project reviews are sometimes rushed, sidestepped, or hidden behind NDAs. Contemporary developer practices are characterized by a real ‘[democratic gap](#).’ Still, everyday citizens and rights holders can intervene in permitting and regulatory processes when projects aim to secure key permissions to operate. Knowing which meetings to attend, and which politicians to pressure, is extremely helpful to building an effective resistance movement.

### A Typical Project Development Process

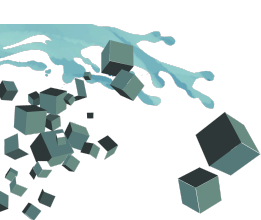
Data centres start with someone looking to make a buck. It sounds simple, but in the early phases of a project it can be hard to know exactly who that is and how they plan on doing so. The developer could be a well-established digital infrastructure company like Microsoft, Google, or Equinix, or it could be an unseasoned entrepreneur trying to ride the wave of the current AI boom. In both cases, that company might show up under the guise of a shell company and stay pretty quiet about their project being a data centre in the first place.

Some jurisdictions may have economic development officers looking to attract developers and negotiate on their behalf with intermediaries like land holders or power companies, adding additional players to the mix. Finally, for extra chaos, some developers are locked into a specific place (maybe they already own the property) while others try their luck with many applications in multiple jurisdictions at the same time, hoping that one will eventually stick.

- **Set a news alert for “your city/town” + “data centre”.** You never know when a data centre might come to town... or where discussions about it might pop up.

### Securing the Design

In either case, details at the start can be very sketchy. It’s common for developers to change the size of the project and its energy and water requirements. During this time, engineers draw up a lot of site plans, assess the costs and performance of different configurations, and these proposals get swapped around between corporate players, consultants, and planners for comment. Utility, provincial, and municipal representatives



(as well as First Nations band councils) may also discuss terms around tax rebates, subsidized utility rates, and economic benefit agreements.

During these early talks, NDAs might be signed with public representatives, preventing these people from discussing certain details publicly, or talking with the press or their constituents about the project altogether. It's an excuse, but companies will claim that this kind of information is proprietary, and might give a competitor an advantage if it became widely known. This is all to say: democratic gaps can start early.

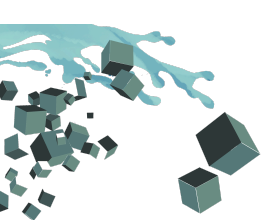
- **Ask specific questions.** Press for numbers. If people are evasive, ask if there are legal reasons why they can't tell you, or if they just don't know themselves.
- **Use access to information requests** to pull emails from public officials and private developers. It's good to know what's happening behind closed doors! All citizens are entitled to file these requests; you don't need to be a journalist. Searching for 'freedom of information request' + the name of your jurisdiction should get you started. Keep in mind that it can take many, many weeks for these requests to get processed. Your chances of getting usable information faster will increase if you can be specific. There's a [good guide to getting started here](#). You may have to pay a fee to process your request.

### Securing Capital

These facilities can cost hundreds of millions—or sometimes billions—of dollars to build. Very few entrepreneurs have that amount of cash lying around. Instead, that money tends to come from someone else's pockets. Even large tech companies have started issuing bonds to finance their AI data centre ambitions.

The capital side of projects rarely has a lot of public insight, but it can be an important part of understanding the incentives and pressures of everyone at play in your local data centre fight. Who has a stake in this thing coming through? Does the developer need to tie things up quickly before their funder gets spooked? Or is there a patient war chest in the picture? Getting answers to these questions can be difficult, but illuminating.

- **Who's Behind the Mask?** If you are dealing with a weird company that doesn't have much of an online footprint, it might be something created to disguise the real identity of a big investor or American tech company. [There are ways to deduce the corp behind the mask](#), however...



## Securing Power

Access to energy is crucial to the feasibility of a project. While more and more data centre projects are exploring behind-the-meter gas generators (generators that power the facility directly, without drawing from the public electricity grid), almost all would prefer to get at least some of their electricity from the grid, where possible. Our electric utilities are still the cheapest and most reliable way to power a data centre, and cheapness and reliability are king when it comes to these facilities.

Getting grid access typically requires conducting a feasibility assessment. The grid operator will look at the power load requests, its own projections, and risk modelling. This can take some time.

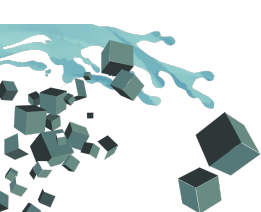
If gas plants are in the mix, developers will usually contract out that part out to a dedicated company. This might be a familiar fossil fuel giant, like Chevron or Enbridge, or a relatively new entity (more and more of these are popping up). The addition of pipelines and generators may trigger additional environmental reviews and add to the geography of properties directly impacted by the development project.

Watch out for greenwashing! Adding methane gas generators, for 100s of MW of capacity, is obviously bad for the climate. Developers will waste your time with talk of 'efficiency' measures, or the potential to eventually integrate carbon capture technologies down the road, or a miniscule amount of clean power like geothermal or solar on the side. Wonder Valley, Kevin O'Leary's project set for lands outside of Grand Prairie, is a good example of all these tactics. The main energy story here is gas generation—and large amounts of it. If it's ever built, it could produce up to 30 megatonnes of carbon emissions. These climate impacts will effectively [undo the gains of Alberta's transition off coal](#).

## The Gauntlet of Approvals Processes:

Eventually, data centre development plans will have to go through some sort of government approvals process. What kinds of approvals are needed, from different committees and council bodies, will vary depending on the jurisdiction or project details. Unfortunately, these windows for comment may not be open very long.

Generally, provincial utilities will need to vet proposals that involve large power loads or the creation of new transmission lines, substations, and grid connections. (Developers may be able to get around this requirement by occupying old factories and other sites that had large power loads available to previous industrial users).



Provincial governments, to start, may have environmental regulatory requirements or water licensing agreements that a developer will need to secure.

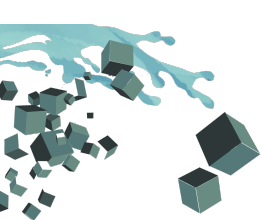
For example, if new power generation facilities are being built, or pipelines being laid, this can trigger an environmental impact assessment (EIA).

- **Always read the EIA.** These documents are great because they are a (nominally independent) expert account of potential concerns in a project (and possible avenues for mitigation). It's often only at this stage that these details become public. When an EIA highlights an issue, you should probably press on it. However, you don't have to agree with the report's authors on whether or not a given mitigation measure is the right one for your community, or even a sufficient one.

Read the EIA with critical eyes. Sometimes assessors do sloppy work. In Lorneville, an early EIA for the proposed industrial park said that the forest to be cleared was of "[relatively low ecological value](#)." Residents were skeptical. Working with scientists from Mount Allison University, they found old growth trees on the site, including red spruce that was more than 400 years old. The Acadia Forest Dendrochronology lab estimated one of the tree stands to be New Brunswick's third oldest known forest. A second EIA confirmed that going forward with the project would destroy some of the old-growth forest in a "[long-term, irreversible, adverse effect](#)." The data centre would also impact ~27ha of wetlands, resulting in large-scale modification of the local watershed and loss of ecological functions for the downstream community, water wells, and coastal salt marshes. That's not a low-value loss!

City governments can play a large role in these deliberations. They are in charge of the zoning regulations that determine how data centre projects are classified, and if their type of classification is approved to be built in a particular area of town. They also issue building permits and may play a role in laying new water infrastructure or roads to a site. Sometimes land has to be re-zoned for industrial use before data centre development can go ahead. Such re-zoning can result in the [loss of agricultural land](#), for example.

Whenever there are public bodies deliberating on such permitting questions, there are usually opportunities for public consultations. Decision makers ideally take public perceptions into consideration when weighing the merits of a permitting decision. They are also often asked to weigh the balance of economic and environmental impacts that a project might bring, and should be open to evidence on both questions. It's typical for decision makers to view environmental impacts as outcomes to be mitigated, rather than avoided entirely, so arguments that stress the inadequacy of mitigation measures



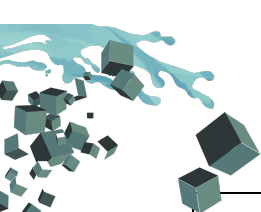
relative to the aggregate scale of impacts will carry more weight than a simple call to save the trees.

- **Go to every consultation meeting**, in person if you can. It's not hard to pack these rooms, and having a chorus of local voices (plus maybe a few distant experts too) sharing their concerns can often be key to convincing disengaged committee members that the community cares about the issue. This is probably one of the most impactful things you may be able to do as a private citizen.
- **Sign up for meeting alerts** from your city council/other relevant regulators. It's a good way to keep in the loop.

Getting into these rooms and navigating them may involve some effort. You should keep an eye on the websites where hearings and surveys are announced for your city, electrical utility, and water regulator (for example: [https://www.auc.ab.ca/regulatory\\_documents/recent-updates/](https://www.auc.ab.ca/regulatory_documents/recent-updates/)). Depending on your local laws and meeting rules, you may need to register in advance to speak. Coordinating with your neighbours to ensure that a breadth of concerns are shared is a smart idea. You want to find a good balance of facts and feelings to bring forward. If you're intimidated, remember that you have authority and expertise just by virtue of living in a region and having a stake in its environmental and economic future. Start there, and add a few facts and figures to back up your argument.

- **Organize a rally before a committee meeting or key vote**, if you have the numbers to make a good showing. This can be a way of demonstrating the size of the constituency against a data centre and how much you all care. You might also encourage signs, stickers, and buttons outside of and in the meeting, but try to keep these messages PG and on topic.

There may be multiple committee meetings to attend while a regulatory body learns the details of a proposal and clarifies what kinds of recommendations it may want to make. It's highly unusual for a project to be defeated in a single meeting; more likely, proposals will iteratively adapt to the concerns of committee members and public interventions. One committee might vote down one aspect of a proposal, only for the developer to take a different route through the consultation process later. Patience, mutual support, and good vibes among your fellow organizers is key to running what may be more a marathon than a sprint.



Wait, we're talking here, but what's happening over there? Just because there's a public consultation process happening—maybe even a task force facilitated by city council to 'work out concerns'—doesn't mean that separate, closed door meetings aren't happening between developers and government at the same time. [Lorneville NB residents experienced this maneuver firsthand](#). The outcome: despite overwhelmingly negative public comments, council voted unanimously in favour of rezoning for a massive industrial park next to the Lorneville community, which will include the hyperscale data centre/gas plant development of Beacon Data centres and Voltagrid. Residents have filed for juridical review.

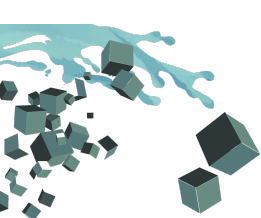
Rushing consultation processes can result in further delays: Synapse has been aiming to build Canada's first 1 GW data centre facility in Olds, Alberta. It hit a major roadblock in March 2026 when the The Alberta Utilities Commission denied its application, arguing that there were worrying gaps in the information provided and that a 2 week public consultation process was insufficient. This is a win for concerned residents in Olds (though Synapse aims to try a second time).

Developers themselves will also be proactive during these periods of time, offering their own 'listening sessions,' buying up ads, or suddenly becoming very interested in talking with the media. Think 'charm offensive.' They will stress the economic benefits of a project and minimize its harms—sometimes in very vague or obfuscatory terms.

- **It can be a good idea to engage with corporate events as well.** Call in to a radio show, show up at a townhall, and leave feedback on websites. Ask difficult questions. Call out misleading statements around jobs, sustainability, or the inevitability of this stuff. Bring friends along who can join the chorus. Be strident, but polite. Press for details that haven't been forthcoming. Focus your skepticism on the company, not on fellow citizens who might be speaking in favour of the project in vague terms. You're there to convince your undecided peers, not to defeat your neighbour.

### The Building Process

If a proposal gets through the approvals process of all the relevant jurisdictions and regulatory bodies, construction can begin. This process can take months and years depending on the scale and complexity of the project. A shortage of skilled workers and key components, or intermittent financing, can drag a project out and run up construction costs.



The build will likely involve a temporary rush of trades jobs. If your community doesn't already have a surplus of those, they will come from out of town. This can put [pressure on housing markets, road traffic, and road safety](#), especially if developers haven't taken these factors into account during the planning processes. Expect a lot of heavy vehicles traveling to and from the site, along with road closures and construction if new pipes or powerlines need to be run from the city to the future data centre.

Occasionally data centres are started but never finished. Financing may fall through, a more favourable tax regime is offered elsewhere, or business strategies suddenly change.

#### Operations:

Once a data centre opens, it runs as close to non-stop as staff can manage. That staff is usually pretty small, and focused on maintenance and security tasks. Diesel generators will typically be tested once a month. Water pipes need to be monitored and serviced. Above all else, the chips need to be kept cool and powered.

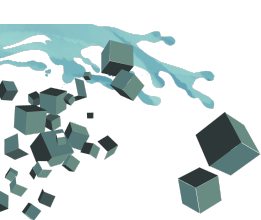
#### Expansion:

Data centre developers, especially large international tech companies, will frequently expand data centre sites over time. Some companies intentionally buy up 'empty' land around their campus to this end. [Expansions may even come annually](#) for a time. Other data centre operators grow by pulling out lower-capacity server racks and replacing them with new GPUs, such that the energy and water load may increase while the building envelope stays the same. Increasingly, there's speculation that some data centre developers use smaller projects as '[trojan horses](#)' to get through the initial wave of permits and public opposition, betting that there will be less of a fuss raised around further additions to a data centre site than there might be for the initial build.

In either case, if the change is big enough that it triggers a permit requirement or an EIA, you will have another chance to intervene at the regulatory body involved, returning to the processes detailed above.

#### End of Life:

All things eventually come to an end! Typical enterprise data centres will have an operational life of about 10 years, barring expensive renovations and equipment upgrades to keep the facility operating at the expected industry standard. If operators do



not continue to invest in their data centres, they typically close them and create a new one somewhere else.

Sometimes the end comes sooner than expected. In Vaudreil-Dorion a data centre was built by Ericsson as a greenfill development. It opened for 10 months at reduced capacity and then abruptly shut down, laying off 100 workers. It was eventually acquired by an American company, but it doesn't seem to be running at full capacity anymore. The exact reasons for the closure and sale are not publicly known, but they are, however, a public problem. Despite more than \$30 million dollars in incentives offered by both civic and provincial actors, the site is now what researchers call a "[cloud ruin](#)."

It's rare for old data centre buildings to be repurposed into other things; there are just not that many uses for windowless concrete boxes. Demolition is commonly needed before the site can serve other purposes.

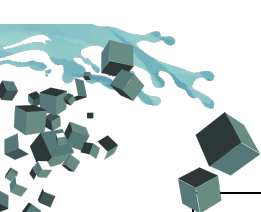
Remediating a site can be expensive, especially if PFAS, fossil fuels, and refrigerants have been improperly stored or used on the premises. If a company goes bankrupt, it may not be able to pay those expenses, leaving a site abandoned for the municipality to manage and remediate.

### Ways Data Centre Developers Can Game the System

All of the above assumes that data centre developers operate in good faith, honestly working through the rules of the system as we designed them. This, however, is not guaranteed. Sometimes developers may try to do a run around. Sometimes governments bend the rules around them.

#### What the heck is a Committee of Adjustments?

Chances are, neither you nor maybe even your city councilor, has a clear idea. It's the process through which a lot of municipalities process requests to rezone properties, like if you wanted to put an extra rental apartment on a housing lot. In Hamilton, however, developers used this committee to try to fast-track an AI data centre development. If passed, it would have precluded future opportunities for public engagement. Thankfully, Hamilton organizers rallied and got the city council to deny



the application. Beware of similar moves in your city (and read up on Section 53 of the Ontario Planning Act for details if you find yourself in similar circumstances).

Alberta has been rolling out the red carpet for data centre developers—not only offering a ‘concierge’ service to help developers find sites and gas pipelines, but also waiving normal requirements for [environmental impact assessments](#) (EIAs) for the massive Wonder Valley and Synapse projects. Because the province’s Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act doesn’t specifically name data centres (and also excludes methane gas power plants), provincial representatives can choose, at their discretion, to require or skip an EIA. They are, overwhelmingly, choosing to omit a process that would produce important information about the environmental and health risks of data centre development.

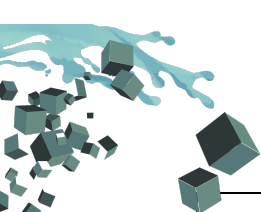
### What about Treaty/Inherent Rights?

The legal foundations of Canada are built on treaties signed between France, England, and the First Nations. These treaties are all generally based on principles of mutual stewardship between multiple nations, sharing the same territory. Rights to land, sovereignty, and culture were not extinguished by these treaties, even though the Crown has not always acted accordingly. In some instances, like much of BC, treaties were never signed in the first place.

This legal context gives Indigenous communities distinct rights that matter in how development happens in Canada. Inherent rights come from the fact that Indigenous polities have existed as governments and land stewards for millenia, long before the arrival of the English and French. Treaty rights extend specifically from the treaties signed by specific parties, concerning specific tracts of land.

Additionally, Canada has adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act (UNDRIP), which states that all Indigenous peoples, regardless of whether or not they have signed formal treaties, must be afforded “[free, prior, and informed consent](#)” concerning decisions that impact them. This consent cannot be coerced, assumed from a lack of proactive engagement on an issue, or sought after the fact.

Of course, this is also an international question. Indigenous communities around the world are impacted by the data centre boom in the global hunt for [clean water](#),



[metals](#), and [rare earth minerals](#) in their supply chains. UNDRIP principles are often not respected in these extractive projects, which can repeat and reinforce old colonial power relations.

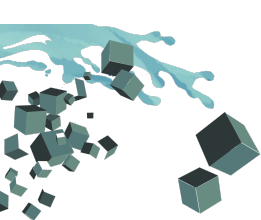
Canada plays a key role in these exchanges because a disproportionate number of international mining companies are headquartered here due to favourable (which is to say, lax!) legislation. These companies have been continuously linked to multiple cases of [human rights, labour law, and environmental violations](#). There's plenty of reasons to oppose unchecked data centre expansion across the whole supply chain.

This means that when someone wants to build a huge project like a hyperscale data centre, which stands to significantly disrupt the environment in a region, there must be a consultation process with relevant Indigenous rights holders and there must be consent before that project can go ahead.

Obviously, this doesn't always happen—not with a lot of industrial projects, and not with a lot of data centres. However, as data centres scale up and have ever-more obvious impacts on local lands and waters, the question of Indigenous consent will be harder and harder to ignore.

Indigenous groups can bring governments and developers to court when their treaty and inherent rights have been violated. This process can be very lengthy and expensive, but increasingly the Canadian courts are finding in favour of right holders. Aware of this fact, heavy industries will now often proactively reach out to Indigenous nations to offer community benefit agreements before projects move ahead. There are, however, still a lot of developers trying their luck on this front, or simply thinking that these laws could never apply to them.

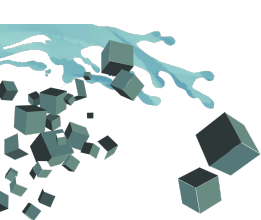
[Cease and Desist on Treaty 8](#): The largest proposed data centre project in Canada is Wonder Valley, a 7.5 GW data centre complex proposed by Kevin O'Leary just outside of Grand Prairie. This land is the traditional territory of the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, who were not consulted about any of this and certainly didn't consent to it. Chief Sheldon Sunshine issued a [cease and desist letter](#) to the province, and the Sturgeon Lake Cree have since hired lobbyists, lawyers, and consultants to conduct an independent environmental impact assessment, all at their own expense. Water is a central concern to the nation, as the project threatens the integrity of the Smokey River and thus large tracts of hunting grounds.



This is all to say that Indigenous rights holders have distinct claims and forms of leverage that matter in industrial development questions like hyperscale data centres. Settler Canadians would do well to engage with their Indigenous neighbours and explore the possibilities for a coalitional effort around shared concerns. You can find a [map of federally-recognized First Nations communities](#) here (though this is not the sum of all Indigenous rights holders).

- **Be respectful** when reaching out to potential Indigenous allies. Don't presume that a band council will automatically have the time and energy to join your fight, or that the way that you've been approaching it so far is necessarily the best way for them to do so. Frame your requests around developing mutual goals and strategy, rather than just recruiting them to play a role in the campaign you've established. It's good to work through people who have established relationships with the nation and have a read on how local politics works there.

Remember that Indigenous peoples do not speak with one voice on the subject of industrial development in general, let alone data centres as a specific case. Some individuals and nations have [created their own data centre projects](#), or are [partners](#) in settler developers' plans. These projects can represent valuable sources of revenue for nations that are negotiating centuries of dispossession and disinvestment from the Crown. Of course, Indigenous communities themselves can be divided on a project. So, if it turns out your group and a band council do have a difference in opinion about the benefits of a given data centre development, you can probably still find common cause with plenty of folks around ensuring the protection of lands and waters.



## Tactics for the Fight

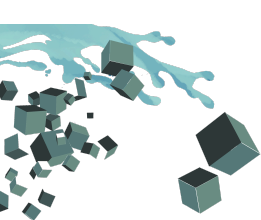
### Forming a Group

Don't go at it alone! Data centre opposition is a group sport. In order to take on these big companies and build the democratic power you need to ensure responsible development (or refusal!) you'll need a lot of friends. These are people that will help shoulder the load of organizing, who will activate community and political networks that you don't have by yourself, and who will be a source of comradery and support throughout the whole process. Whether debating strategy, collecting petition signatures, watching for news, or just swapping memes, data centre opposition is a social activity.

- **Getting started can be as simple as talking with one other person.** Have a neighbour over for tea, talk through your concerns, and make a plan to get a little hub going. Next, start a Facebook page, a Signal group, a petition, and/or a website. Make it easy for people to find you. Make a plan for how to hold their contact details responsibly, and keep them updated on ways they can contribute to your campaign.
- **Centralize Information.** One very helpful early step is to create a space where everyone who cares about the issue—whether that's folks who've been with you for day one, or someone who just found out, or a reporter across the country—can go for essential background on the project and your efforts to oppose it. It's common for this stuff to start on Facebook, but with the increasingly fragmented character of social media these days, it's probably best to use multiple platforms, and to try to point people to a single website when you can. It's nice, but not necessary, to have your own URL.

Organizers in Olds have made a really [stellar website](#). It collects important documents, media coverage, and events, as well as historical documents that stress that Olds is a *heritage town*, not a data centre frontier. By positioning itself as an advocate and archivist, the site addresses many audiences at once and shows how much residents care about their town. Their [Facebook page](#) also sees a lot of action.

- **Specialize!** Chances are someone in your group will be great at making posters, and another will be happy to put them up along their dogwalking route. Some will be weirdly skilled at parsing bylaws for procedural rules, others will be charismatic public speakers. There might be someone who has an in with the



local business improvement association, while another person can connect you with the local First Nation.

*Questions to ask:*

- What are some key civil society organizations that hold your community together? Who has influence as the voice of those organizations, and who in your group might have sway with those people?
- What's your watershed? What's your grid? What's your treaty? Whose traditional territory is this all happening on? Who knows people that aren't in the room with you in your discussions, but probably should be?

## Identifying Key Points

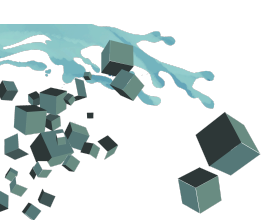
It's good to make a rough timeline of the different committees and councils the data centre project will have to navigate to get the permits and approvals they need to commence construction. You probably won't be able to map all these at once, and the timelines will likely shift, but an essential first task is to figure out where you and your neighbours can intervene in the process and share your concerns.

- **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** It can be very, very useful to ask city council staff, local elected representatives, and commissioners for assistance learning all this stuff. Civil servants are there to be impartial facilitators of the process; it's their job to guide you through it too.

Registering to participate can be a good show of force. Organizers in Olds have been rallying community members to register as Interveners with the Alberta Utilities Commission (the body that has authority over the creation of a new 1 GW data centre and 1.4 GW methane gas power plant in their municipality). They've hosted sign up sessions at their local library and feature an online how-to guide prominently on their website. The results: more than 1,000 intervener sign ups, perhaps the largest number the regulator's ever seen.

*Questions to ask:*

- What's the zoning where the data centre is set to be built? Does the data centre (or perhaps more importantly, any power generating facilities for the data centre) meet those zoning criteria, or will they have to apply for a change?
  - If a giant methane gas plant is being zoned as 'light industrial,' does that strain credulity to you? To a councillor?

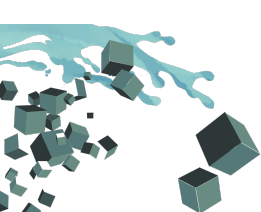


- What permits will the facility need to operate? What process will it have to undertake to get those permits?
- Has an environmental assessment been conducted? Will it need to be? Will it be public? What will be in and out of scope for that assessment?
- What economic benefits are your community being offered? Who will those benefits actually benefit? What's an iron-clad promise and what's a vague aspiration? How credulous are your representatives when it comes to distinguishing between the two?
- Is the developer an established player, a trend-chaser, or a total newcomer to the industry? How are they financing this project? Can you trust that they'll still be here in 5 years? Are they or their financiers at least moderately concerned about public perceptions on social or environmental responsibility?

### Intervening in Key Points

Once you have your important meetings and approvals mapped, you'll need to organize your community to turn out and participate!

- **Make it easy for people to speak.** Provide talking points, fact sheets, memes, signs, buttons, and cheerful company.
- **Tap into social networks** where you and your co-organizers already have deep ties (a union, a church, a PTA, a beloved neighbourhood hangout spot).
- **Don't be afraid to make 1:1 requests** to people you know, texting them or knocking on a door to ask them to come out to a council meeting or to submit a concern on an online portal. Dividing up the people you could plausibly contact among a group of core organizers, and working your way down the list, is methodical, time-consuming, and ultimately way way way more effective than just broadcasting hopes and calls to action online (though absolutely do that too).
- **Call your representatives.** Your aim here is not just to register a single opinion, a single time, but to be known as a strong community force they have to deal with. Call a lot. Organize other constituents to call too, ideally on the same day. Don't be afraid to ask for meetings and updates from closed-door processes. Let transparency and democratic process be your keywords. Try to avoid writing your representatives off as enemies in your fight and scoring rhetorical points by attacking their integrity; the work will be much easier if you can get them on your side (at least part of the time).
- **Host your own townhalls,** especially if the developer and local officials aren't doing this. Get the word out through posters, local radio, and your (online and offline) social networks. Use this opportunity to walk your neighbours through the



facts, the stakes, and the steps they can take to intervene. You can also do some inoculation against developer talking points.

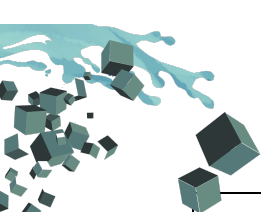
- **Avoid platforming misinformation.** Some voices in the data centre fight may spread false or inflated claims about health risks or environmental harms. There's plenty to worry about on that front, but sometimes the nuance can drop out of public discussions. Try to avoid or redirect away from more conspiracy-oriented or simply false beliefs about what data centres do. These assertions can hurt your campaign in the long run. For example, data centres do not:
  - Microwave or radiate the surrounding region (*though the research on infrasound and heat islands is evolving*),
  - Automatically make ground water toxic (*unless there's been a leak in a diesel fuel tank or advanced cooling system pipes, or already existing pollutants in the water system that are being concentrated by evaporative cooling*),
  - Necessarily lead to a surveillance state (*though there's plenty of AI tools that are cause for concern here*).

As you can see, [justifiable worries usually lie behind sometimes inaccurate claims](#). People who share misinformation still have valid political and health concerns and can be meaningful allies in your efforts. Try saying yes to the needs and values that are there between the lines, while defusing the specifics. For example, you might offer something like “actually, I’ve heard that it’s more of a question of noise pollution and heat islands than microwaves.”

However, if it ever crosses the line to hate speech, shut that down—you’ll be better off without those voices in your coalition.

Petitions are a means, not an end. One of the first things people often think to do when there’s a political issue at play is to launch a petition. [Change.org](#) makes that pretty easy to do, and your local government might have a similar tool. Pen and paper petitions at big community events or farmers’ markets can also be a hit. The sad news, however, is that as these things get easier and easier to do they hold less and less weight. A name on a list doesn’t tell a politician that everyone *deeply cares* and will create *political costs* for that politician if they don’t vote a certain way.

Still, petitions can be a nice way to bring people into your group and then move them up the ladder of engagement. Ask for emails on your petition, and use those emails to keep people updated. Offer opportunities to take bigger and bigger actions. Additionally, use your petitions as props when taking meetings with politicians, speaking before regulatory bodies, or marching on the street.



Petitions are ultimately a tool that you can put to work, but they won't do the work for you.

*Questions to ask:*

- Where does your community get their news? Who is a trusted source of commentary on that news?
- What frames would work well (or poorly) in your community? Are your neighbours climate-engaged or skeptical? Have you all lived through drought or power outages/brownouts recently? Is there a history of entrepreneurs coming from out of town and causing trouble? Do you have local environmental or heritage features that are particularly precious to the community?
- What constituencies are your elected representatives most concerned about? For example, would calls from teachers matter more than calls from local business owners, or vice versa?

## Election Trackers

Elections are an effective pressure-point we have.

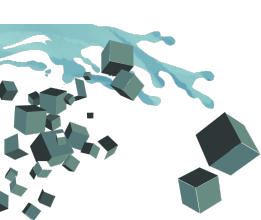
An election tracker records where candidates stand on data centre development and publishes those positions, non-exhaustively, in one place. Done well, it becomes a public reference for voters, journalists, and the candidates themselves.

Organizers in Hamilton [set one of these up](#) and found it immensely helpful. The materials below come straight from them.

Why this works:

**It's a simple, free way to change the incentives.** Without a tracker, candidates can dodge the elephant in the room. With a tracker, their continued silence becomes uncomfortable.

**It normalizes data centre opposition and scrutiny.** Candidates viewing the tracker can immediately see if their position is mainstream or an outlier. Risk-averse candidates are unlikely to take positions that appear isolated from their peers.



**It encourages depolarization.** If several credible candidates support strong rules or better public consultation, regardless of political leaning, others become more willing to do the same.

Materials:

### **Candidate outreach email and methodology**

This is lifted directly from the [public tracker webpage](#). Put it high up to establish transparency and credibility.

Candidate positions are documented using direct email correspondence, public statements, delegation records, motions, voting records, campaign materials, and other available evidence.

Candidates received the following email on June 8th, 2026. Those listed under 'Additional Mayoral Candidates' received the same email on June 10th.

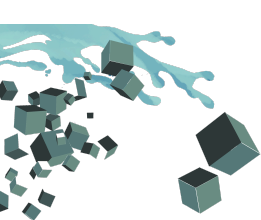
Hello,

We are documenting candidate positions on the proposed Steelport hyperscale datacentre project and on datacentre-regulation as a broader, longer-term issue.

Could you please provide a brief statement addressing:

1. Whether you support, oppose, or remain undecided on the Steelport datacentre proposal.
2. Whether you believe municipalities should have greater authority to regulate hyperscale datacentres and their impacts on local communities.

Your response may be published in whole or in part on our public election tracker at [StopTheDatacentre.ca](#).



## Press release (keep it short)

Subject: New election tracker documents candidate positions on Steelport datacentre

Hamilton voters are being asked to choose a mayor and council that could soon face major decisions involving hyperscale datacentres.

But many candidates have not publicly weighed in on the issue.

To help voters make informed decisions, StopTheDatacentre.ca has launched an [election tracker](#) documenting candidates' positions.

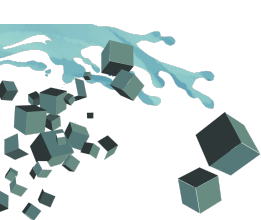
Candidates are being asked two simple questions:

1. Do you support, oppose or remain undecided on the Steelport proposal?
2. Should municipalities have greater authority to regulate hyperscale datacentres and their local impacts?

Responses are being documented and updated as new information becomes available.

*"Every candidate is being asked the same two questions,"* says Nick Tsergas, a Ward 3 resident who spoke at last week's Committee of Adjustment hearing.

*"If candidates want to support hyperscale datacentres, that's their choice. But voters deserve to know that before election day."*



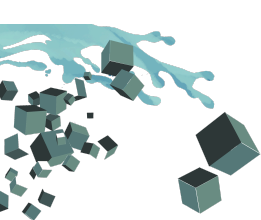
## How it looks:

*Example of a ward race in the tracker.*

WARD 15	
<p><b>Chase Alford</b>            chase4ward15@gmail.com            Delegated at Committee of Adjustment on June 4th. Onside.            ✓ Public statement ✓ Delegation</p>	✓
<p><b>Colleen Stewart</b>            ward15.colleenstewart@gmail.com  <u>Undecided</u>. "What do I think about Hamilton building a data center? I don't know yet."            ✓ Email response ✓ Public statement</p>	?!
<p><b>Zac Wrobel</b>            zacwrobelward15@gmail.com            Opposes the Steelport proposal. Wants municipal authority and regulation over hyperscale datacentres.            ✓ Email response ✓ Public statement</p>	✓
<p><b>Ted McMeekin</b>            ted.mcmeekin@hamilton.ca            Says he doesn't want to "enter a technological harms race." Plans to run for re-election.            ✓ Motion ✓ Public statement</p>	✓

*And the mayoral race.*

Note: Positions must be summarized briefly. Candidates are verbose. Don't give them the airtime even if you like them. The goal is to create a resource that provides the relevant information and nothing more.



MAYOR – MAJOR CANDIDATES	
<p><b>Andrea Horwath</b>  <a href="mailto:mayor@hamilton.ca">mayor@hamilton.ca</a>            Emailed June 8th. No position provided as of latest update.</p>	
<p><b>Keanin Loomis</b>  <a href="mailto:keanin.loomis@gmail.com">keanin.loomis@gmail.com</a>            Many public requests since May 16th. Email sent June 8th. No position provided as of latest update.</p>	
<p><b>Rob Cooper</b>  <a href="mailto:voterobcooper@gmail.com">voterobcooper@gmail.com</a>            His office declined to provide a public position. As did his mayoral campaign.            He left the June 16 Planning meeting early thus abstaining from voting on the proposed moratorium.  <small>✓ Email response</small></p>	
<p><b>Scarlett Gillespie</b>  <a href="mailto:scarlett4mayor@gmail.com">scarlett4mayor@gmail.com</a>            Delegated to Committee of Adjustment June 4th. Onside.  <small>✓ Public statement ✓ Delegation</small></p>	

The only way this works:

The tracker's language and tone must be tightly controlled. **It should read more like journalism than activism** to avoid polarizing the issue.

Candidate positions are summarized carefully and accurately. Get them over email or via dm so you **have a record to point to in the event of a dispute.**

## Whipping Votes

When an important vote approaches, one of the most valuable things an organizing team can do is estimate where each decision-maker stands.

A simple “whip” helps organizers distinguish between:

- Firm supporters
- Likely supporters
- Undecided and persuadable decision-makers
- Likely opponents

Hamilton organizers built a shared, login-only whip interface within their [campaign website](#), so trusted volunteers could update councillor profiles and coordinate outreach and communication strategies in realtime.

As the multi-week campaign evolved (and it’s still ongoing), having this tool made sure organizers across the city were operating from the same shared picture.

How it looks in practice:

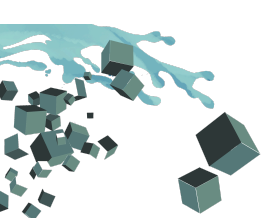
Hamilton used a private web interface, but this could just as easily be a google doc.

CURRENT COUNT		Needed: 9	
Support:	16	COMMS MANUAL	PRIORITIES
Oppose:	0		
Unknown:	0		

JUNE 24 COUNCIL VOTE			■ YES ■ NO ■ DDN'T KNOW
LOOPHOLE-RISK			
1	M Wilson	■	🕒
2	C Kroetsch	■	—
3	N Nann	■	—
4	T Hwang	■	🕒
5	M Francis	■	○
6	T Jackson	■	🕒
7	E Pauls	■	🕒
8	R Cooper	■	●

*Note: 'loophole-risk' flags councillors who might vote yes 'in principle' but try to quietly*



*carve out exceptions later — worth tracking separately so you're not caught off guard*

Don't overthink the medium, but do adopt this in some form. It will give you and others a map of where the fight actually *is* as the days turn to weeks and months.

A Horwath - NOTES
×

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CONFIDENCE

LOOPHOLE-RISK

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YOUR NOTE - NICK

**Multiple sources:** *"she will not move any amendments."*↑

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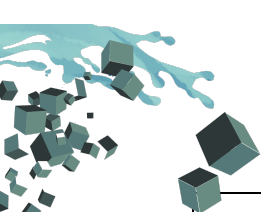
UPDATED BY NICK AT 4:08 PM

*Note: 'Confidence' just means how sure you are of that person's vote*

Questions to ask:

- When's the next election cycle? What will some of the key issues be, and can you connect these to your data centre fight?
- Where do candidates go to have public debates/speeches where you could show up at and ask questions?
- Which candidates are 'out in front' of the issue? Which have yet to commit?

If AI data centres become overwhelmingly unpopular, and it's clear that there are sharp political costs to supporting them, your opponents may switch sides. This seems to be the case in Manitoba, where Premier Wab Kinew had previously talked about the benefits of placing data centres in the province. Recently, however, the [Premier made headlines for rejecting a 350 acre data centre proposal](#), stating that



these projects were part of “surveillance capitalism” and that “most of the economic benefit probably leaves the province.”

That’s quite a reversal! How to account for it? The wider political fallout of unpopular data centres in other provinces probably helped, as did [13,500 signatures on a petition](#) and a coalition coming together through [Climate Action Team Manitoba](#). Additionally, it also helps that the province is due for another election in a year or so. Well done!

## Lawyering Up

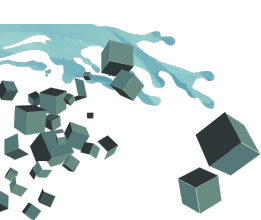
If you happen to know real estate or environmental lawyers, definitely ask for their advice, especially if you think the rules of the road aren’t being respected with your local regulators or city council. [Some groups](#) are pursuing legal remedies to faulty processes or incomplete reviews that have fast-tracked data centres or obscured key facts. This is a time- and resource-intensive path to tread, however. An NGO may be able to help you explore this option.

- **Keeping good records of key documents and a timeline of events** can help you pitch your case more effectively (and keep legal fees down).

Organizers in Spain are [suing the government](#) for facilitating irresponsible data centre development in a water-stressed area. They relied on [crowdfunding](#) and international solidarity efforts to raise the funds needed for their legal team.

*(You might not be ready to launch a similar challenge to your local regulars right now, but it might not hurt to mention that there are precedents for this kind of thing, and if decision making bodies are being a bit too cavalier with how to define public interest, they may be exposing themselves to legal risk).*

A less resource-intensive, and more proactive strategy would be to form a “Residents for Responsible Development” kind of group. This legal entity can be a helpful way of defining membership and accountability in your coalition and finding good ways to hold and raise funds for your work. A lawyer is likely a helpful resource in setting things up. Organizers in Olds have found this to be very useful.



### Questions to ask:

- If something seems fishy, do you know someone with legal expertise who'd be willing to do a gut check with you? Do you have an NGO partner with access to free or cheap legal advice?
- Do you have plans to raise money? If so, how will that money be stewarded accountably?

## Keeping Spirits High

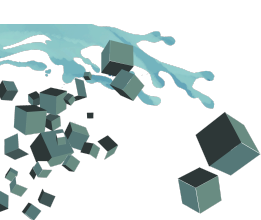
When it comes to long-term organizing projects, the vibes are critical. Morale will probably rise and fall as you encounter particularly validating shows of public support on the one hand, and setbacks and delays on the other. Take the mental health and time constraints of you and your fellow organizers seriously. The more people you have on hand to rotate through key roles, the more sustainable your efforts will be.

Maybe it's time to get a crowd together for a party or a promenade? [Le nuage était sous nos pieds](#), a data centre resistance group in France, has a practice of organizing 'festivals,' marches, and group bike rides around the sites where data centre development has been proposed. Zines, food, and childcare can add to the atmosphere. It's a good way of activating spaces and community members, keeping spirits up, and connecting with the people and places that fuel the struggle.

Alternatively, maybe it's time to dress up? In Ireland, organizers ran a [vampire themed protest](#), arguing that data centres act as 'energy vampires,' siphoning green electricity from the grid. The spectacle attracted a lot of press and made energy vampires into a media talking point for years afterwards. These kinds of tactics are probably not the best way to start out a campaign, but they can definitely add novelty and attract eyeballs in the intractable middle of a struggle.

### Questions to ask:

- What's your group's capacity? When will you know that it's time to recruit new core organizers?
- So you have a plan for people to climb up the [ladder of engagement](#) so that there's probably someone ready to take a leadership role when someone's ready to rotate off? Are you ensuring that people get the opportunities to build the skills they'll need to be ready for those roles?
- Where are the good meme accounts? Do you need to start one?



## Winning New Regulations

We ultimately need new regulatory regimes to help communities assess and control data centre development. This task probably involves all levels of government in Canada, along with an honest effort to live up to our treaty obligations. This task, therefore, is a big one. It will take a lot of time and a lot of pressure to achieve, and it will progress bit by bit (or perhaps election by election).

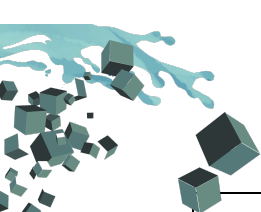
While folks around the country are putting their heads together on this, local organizers can play a large role building an environment where these larger shifts in law and policy are more possible and more urgent.

- **Pushing for a moratorium** can be a way to slow the pace and give policy makers a chance to catch up with the policy making they need to do on this issue. It means “no more data centres here” for a given period of time. It’s been a common organizing goal in jurisdictions where data centres have traditionally clustered, including Dublin, Singapore, and the Netherlands. Recently, many [counties and states](#) in the USA are introducing moratoria legislation, often scoped around a specific threshold size (i.e. ‘everything with more than 100 MW of load will be paused’) and times (i.e. ‘for two years’).

In the past, such moratoria have also been tied to the [type of client and the purpose of the data centre](#) as well as the type of power used, such as [fossil-fuel powered cryptocurrency production](#). This can be a good coalition-building demand because these measures don’t say no to all data centres in all circumstances forever; they just ask for time for heads to cool and clearer rules of the road to be written. (Although, if we are in an economic bubble when it comes to AI, maybe a pause is as good as a ban?).

It’s worth paying attention to the length of a proposed moratorium—six weeks will not accomplish much in terms of developing effective regulation for after the moratorium ends, and will only give data centre developers time to adjust their pitch and strategy. A few months or even years may be the better way to go.

Hamilton is leading the way in Canada. The city council’s planning committee approved a [motion for a 1 year moratorium](#) on June 16th 2026. The full city council will need to debate and vote on the motion later in the month. If passed, this motion



will call on city staff to develop an interim control bylaw for future data centre developments within the city's boundaries and prevent data centre development in the meantime.

To win this measure, you need a sympathetic council member who can put a motion forward. You'll then need to organize rallies, social media, and delegates to speak in support of the motion at the relevant meetings. You'll also need to whip votes on the council. It's a big effort, but so too are the potential gains.

- **You can bring draft policy to policy makers and ask them to consider adopting it.** You can find language to suggest from other jurisdictions that are further along in their data centre fights. The National Caucus of Environmental Legislators maintains a data centre [policy library and facts sheet](#). It's specific to the USA, but there's plenty to borrow/channel for inspiration.

Questions to ask:

- Are your local decision makers educated and equipped with the right regulations they need to fairly assess a project? Are they overwhelmed by suddenly polarized public opinions and calls from developers to move quickly?
- Are there obvious loopholes in how developers have navigated the approvals process in your region? What laws would need to be amended to prevent this from happening in the future?



## Further Resources

### Mapping Data Centres:

#### Canada:

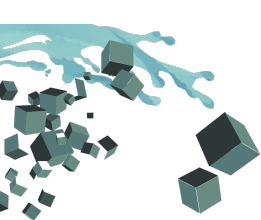
- Overview of many existing and planned data centres in Canada:  
<https://thelogic.co/news/the-big-read/data-centres-artificial-intelligence-canada-map/> (*requires sign up*)
- Ontario specific resources: <https://ontariodatacentres.ca/> ;  
<https://www.nationalobserver.com/2026/03/02/news/ontario-towns-cities-data-centres-mapped>
- Western Canada Data Centre Alliance:  
<https://www.datacentrewest.ca/project-tracker>
- Quebec data centre mapping/energy assessment initiative (*in progress*):  
<https://www.numerique-responsable.ca/initiative/a-la-recherche-des-centres-de-donnees-quebecois-projet-de-recherche/>
- A partial map that currently only covers AB + ON (but has helpful information on permitting and electrical capacity): <https://www.datacentre.fyi>
- More information on Wonder Valley (AB) in particular...from the Energy Mix:  
Hidden Wonder Valley: <https://www.theenergymix.com/hidden-wonder-valley/>

#### International:

- Global Data Centre Map: <https://www.datacentremap.com/>
- Data Centre Atlas: <https://district.myhamlet.com/atlas>
- Erin Brokovich's crowdsourced map: <https://www.brockovichdatacentre.com>

### Toolkits from other jurisdictions:

- Data centre Fight Guide (USA):  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/143tA8XVh7de9MD2GBiKQ3BcMFqeonlqx7Esoy\\_olfQ/edit?tab=t.0](https://docs.google.com/document/d/143tA8XVh7de9MD2GBiKQ3BcMFqeonlqx7Esoy_olfQ/edit?tab=t.0)
- Climate Mayors (USA): <https://www.climatemayors.org/data-centres>
- Food and Water Watch (USA):  
[https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/FOR-WEB-Toolkkit\\_-\\_Stop-the-Data-centre-Buildout-2.pdf](https://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/FOR-WEB-Toolkkit_-_Stop-the-Data-centre-Buildout-2.pdf)
- Powered By Who? (USA): <https://poweredbywho.com/toolkit>



- The People Say No: Resisting Data centres (USA):  
<https://mediajustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/MediaJustice-The-People-Say-No-Resisting-Data-centres-Toolkit.pdf>
- Algorithm Watch (EU): <https://algorithmwatch.org/en/a-guide-to-data-centres/>

### Other Resources:

- [Getting Into Fights With Data Centres](#): A zine about rethinking the environmental impacts of the tech sector by focusing on data centre resistance. (Also available in [French](#), [Spanish](#), and [Brazilian Portuguese](#)).
- Green Web Foundation's *State of the Fossil Free Internet Report (Dirty Data Centre Edition)*:  
<https://www.thegreenwebfoundation.org/publications/state-of-the-fossil-free-internet-2026/>
- Toronto & York Region Labour Council Campaign Planning Handbook (a great guide to campaign organizing 101, with sections on power mapping, leverage, and coalitions). Available in [English](#), [French](#), [Simplified Chinese](#), and [Traditional Chinese](#).

### Policy Libraries:

- The National Caucus of Environmental Legislators' data centre policy library and facts sheet (USA): <https://www.ncelenviro.org/issue/data-centres/>
- AI Now's North Star Data Centre Policy Toolkit (USA):  
<https://datacentres.ainowinstitute.org>
- AI Now's Data centre Policy in Practice Training Series (USA):  
<https://datacentres.ainowinstitute.org/trainings/>