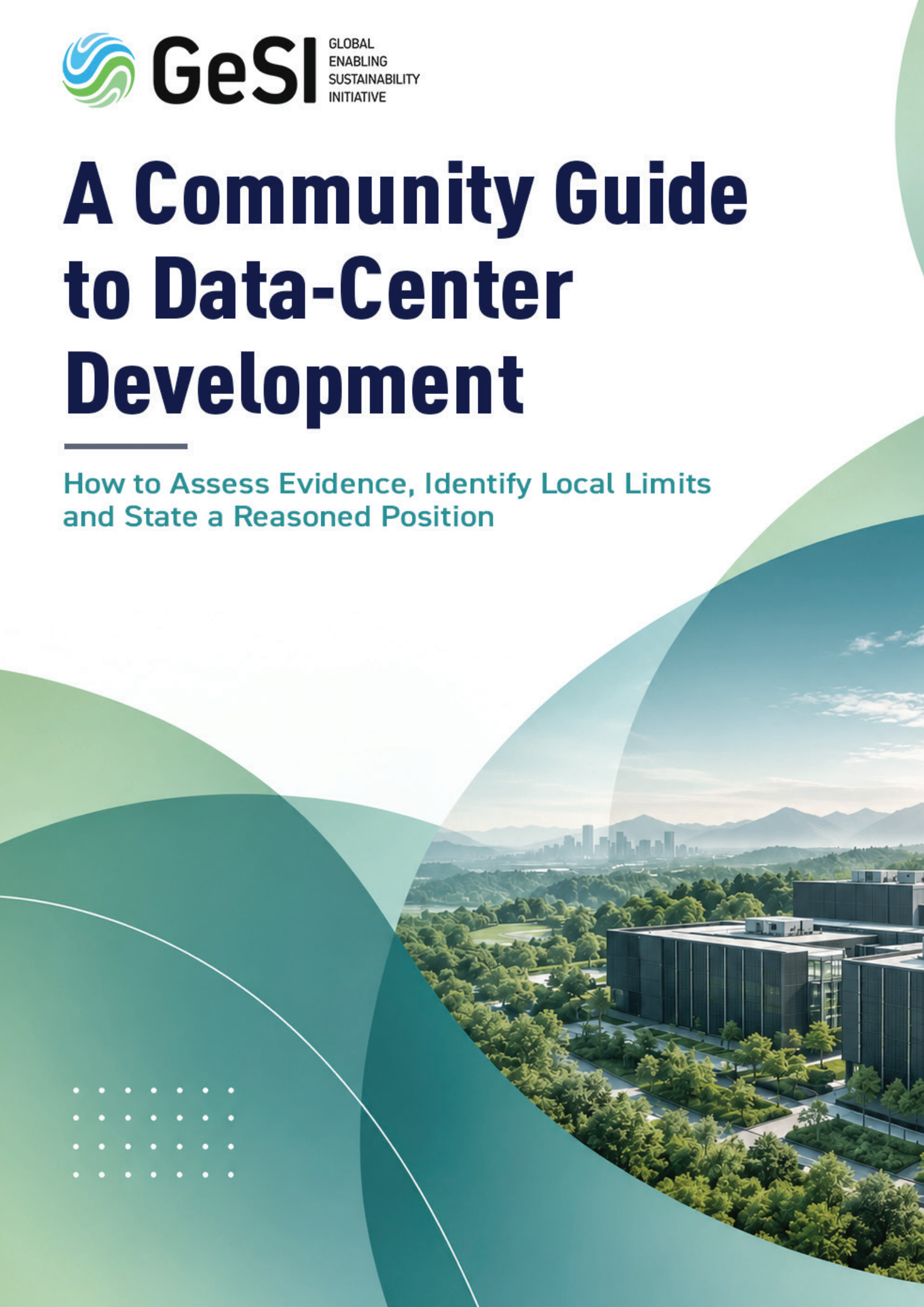
GeSI
GLOBAL ENABLING SUSTAINABILITY INITIATIVE

# A Community Guide to Data-Center Development

## How to Assess Evidence, Identify Local Limits and State a Reasoned Position



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## START WITH THE PROPOSAL, NOT THE ARGUMENTS AROUND IT

Data centers support services that communities use every day and may depend on during emergencies, including communications, public services, finance, healthcare, research and cloud-based systems. Yet proposed facilities are increasingly encountering opposition as residents learn more about their electricity demand, water use, land requirements, infrastructure costs and limited local employment. These positions are not necessarily contradictory. A community may value digital services while questioning whether a particular project, at a particular scale and location, is necessary, fairly governed or compatible with local limits. This guide provides a practical method for examining that distinction.

Community concern should not be dismissed as resistance to technology, and developer claims should not be accepted simply because they are technically presented. The parties do not usually enter the discussion with equal resources: proponents may have specialist advisers, established relationships with authorities, control over project information and a strong commercial interest in approval, while residents may have limited time, expertise and access to independent evidence. A fair process must therefore do more than invite both sides to speak. It must give communities the information, technical support, time and procedural standing needed to test claims and influence consequential decisions.

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*The useful question is not "Are data centers good or bad?" It is "Can this proposal operate within local limits, on fair terms, with credible evidence and enforceable conditions?"*

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# 01 | WHAT THE COMMUNITY SHOULD KNOW

Before consultation begins, the proponent and relevant public authorities should provide a concise, accessible body of evidence. It should make clear what is proposed, what is known, what is forecast and what has been promised.

Debate is easily polarised when support for a project is presented as support for innovation and opposition is presented as opposition to AI or digital services. The relevant choices are more specific. A community can recognise the importance of mission-critical and socially valuable digital services while asking whether the proposed facility will host those services, whether its scale is proportionate to demonstrated need, whether another location or design would reduce burdens, and whether less critical or flexible workloads should have the same claim on constrained local resources. Support for digital services does not require unconditional support for every facility proposed to provide them. At a minimum, any potential development should include the following publicly available information:

## THE PROPOSAL

- The site, ownership and intended use of the facility.
- Initial scale, full build-out, development phases and expected operating life.
- Land, transmission, water, road and public-service infrastructure required.
- Alternatives considered, including different sites, designs, cooling systems and development scales.

## ELECTRICITY, WATER AND COOLING

- Current and planned electricity demand, including peak demand and coincidence with local system peaks.
- Proposed generation, storage, grid reinforcement, backup power and demand-response arrangements.
- Water sources and consumption under normal, drought, heatwave and emergency conditions.
- Cooling technology and the trade-offs it creates among electricity use, water use, heat rejection and resilience.
- Cumulative effects alongside existing and proposed facilities in the same grid zone, watershed or development area.

## COSTS, BENEFITS AND UNCERTAINTY

- Who will pay for grid, water, road and public-service upgrades, and whether costs could be transferred to households or other users.
- Expected employment, tax revenue, local procurement, skills, heat provision and other community benefits, with assumptions and timeframes.
- Principal uncertainties, including demand growth, tenant commitments, infrastructure delivery and future resource conditions.
- Mitigation commitments, who is responsible for them, how they will be verified and what happens if they are delayed or not delivered.



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Legitimate security or commercial sensitivity does not justify an evidence vacuum. Where detailed data cannot be published, an independent body should verify them and provide a public conclusion detailed enough for the community to understand the basis of the decision.

The community should not be expected to disprove promotional claims or independently reconstruct information held by the developer, utility or public authority. The party seeking approval should provide evidence proportionate to the scale and duration of the requested resource commitment. Public authorities should identify missing information, commission independent analysis where necessary and explain whether the evidence is sufficient for the decision being made. Unresolved uncertainty should be treated explicitly through phasing, conditions, monitoring or deferral rather than converted automatically into an assumption favourable to development.



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# 02 | HOW TO TEST THE CONVERSATION

Public debate becomes confused when measured conditions, uncertain projections, promises and political choices are treated as the same kind of claim. Communities can improve the discussion by separating them.

| Type of claim | What to ask |
|---|---|
| **Fact** | Is this measured or independently documented? What is the source, date and applicable system boundary? |
| **Forecast** | What assumptions drive the result? Is it presented as a range? What changes under high, low and delayed growth scenarios? |
| **Commitment** | Who is responsible, by what date, using what funding, with what verification and what consequence for non-performance? |
| **Value judgement** | Whose priorities are reflected? Which benefits and burdens are considered acceptable, and who has authority to decide? |

Technical evidence cannot decide every question. A model can estimate electricity demand or water availability; it cannot determine by itself whether a claimed share is fair, whether the benefits justify the risks or whether one use should take priority over another. Those are legitimate public decisions, but they should be made with the factual basis visible.

Claims that a facility is essential or supports mission-critical services should be examined with the same discipline as environmental and economic claims. The assessment should identify which services are expected to depend on the facility, what level of capacity and resilience those services require, which workloads are discretionary or flexible, and whether the proposed scale is necessary to meet the stated public-interest need. Where tenant or workload information cannot be disclosed, an authorised independent body should verify the claim and report its conclusion in terms that allow the community to understand how much of the project's resource demand is justified by critical-service requirements.



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# 03 | TURN CONCERNS INTO TESTABLE CONDITIONS

A threshold is a documented limit, capacity or trigger. An allocation is the share of that available capacity proposed for a facility or cluster. Together, they allow a community to move beyond generalized support or opposition and state what local systems can accommodate.

Depolarising the debate does not mean asking communities to moderate legitimate concerns or treating approval as the preferred outcome. It means replacing identity-based positions and generalized claims with specific propositions that can be examined: what service need is being met, what resource envelope is being claimed, what alternatives exist, which impacts can be mitigated, which constraints cannot be negotiated away and who has authority to decide. The goal is not consensus at any cost. It is a process in which support, conditions, deferral and opposition can each be reasoned outcomes.

## EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY CONDITIONS

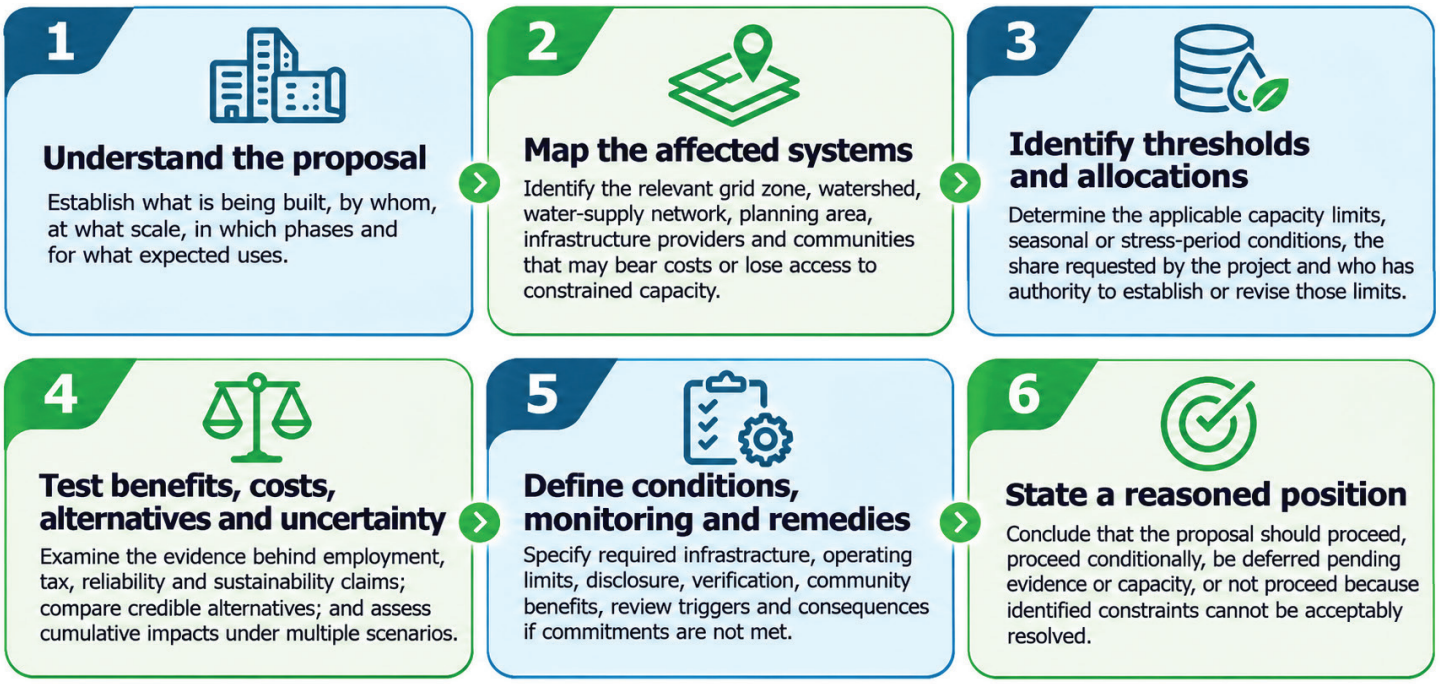
- **Electricity**: Development may proceed within a defined connection and peak-demand envelope, with later phases tied to delivered renewable generation, storage or network capacity.
- **Water**: Normal operations must remain within an agreed supply allocation, with lower drought-period limits and a verified operating response when those limits are approached.
- **Costs**: Infrastructure upgrades required primarily for the project must not be shifted unfairly to households, small businesses or public budgets.
- **Cumulative development**: Assessment must include existing and proposed facilities, not only the current application in isolation.
- **Phasing**: Construction or energisation of later phases pauses if promised enabling infrastructure is delayed or agreed thresholds are exceeded.
- **Transparency**: Aggregate performance, stress events and progress on commitments must be reported publicly, with sensitive evidence independently verified.
- **Review**: Approval conditions must be reconsidered when the project expands, system conditions materially change or forecasts prove inaccurate.

Some thresholds are substantially external, such as drought-driven water availability or ecological-flow needs. Others may be increased through additional generation, storage, grid reinforcement, water reuse or shared heat infrastructure. A promised investment may not be counted as available capacity until it is delivered, additional, usable by the affected system and governed so that costs and risks are not transferred unfairly.



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# 04 | A SIX-STEP COMMUNITY DECISION PATHWAY




The assessment should be revisited if the project expands, system conditions change, promised enabling investments are delayed or performance differs materially from the assumptions underlying approval.



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# 05 | WHAT MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION LOOKS LIKE

Participation is meaningful only when it can affect consequential choices. Communities should be involved early enough to influence the issues assessed, alternatives considered, information disclosed and conditions attached to approval—not only invited to comment after the main design and commercial decisions are fixed.

Empowerment requires resources as well as formal access. For major or technically complex proposals, the process should provide funding or other support for independent technical advice selected with community participation; accessible explanations of grid, water, fiscal and planning evidence; sufficient time to review new information; translation and disability access where needed; and protection against engagement being limited to organisations chosen by the proponent. Support should be designed so that receiving it does not restrict a participant's ability to criticise, condition or oppose the project.

A credible process should state:

- Which decisions remain open and which are governed by law, regulators, utilities or system operators.
- How community evidence and local knowledge will be considered.
- How technical assistance or independent expertise will be made accessible.
- How disagreements will be recorded and answered.
- Who has authority to modify the proposal or impose conditions.
- How participation continues during construction, operation and expansion.
- How cross-boundary impacts will be addressed where the relevant grid, watershed or infrastructure system extends beyond one municipality.

Consultation does not require every participant to agree. It requires a process in which evidence can be tested, values can be stated openly, reasons for decisions are documented and commitments remain enforceable after approval.



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# 06 | COMMUNITY POSITION TEMPLATE

A reasoned community position can be organized around five findings.

A community position should create a corresponding duty to respond. The developer and decision-making authority should address each material finding, state whether they accept or dispute it, identify the evidence relied upon and explain how the issue affects the proposal or approval conditions. Where a community-requested condition is rejected, the authority should give reasons and identify the legal, technical or policy basis for that decision. This prevents engagement from becoming an exercise in collecting comments without demonstrating their effect.

### 1. THE PROPOSAL

Describe the project, applicant, location, scale, phases, intended use and decision currently before the authority.

### 2. THE SYSTEMS AND PUBLIC INTERESTS AFFECTED

Identify the relevant electricity, water, land, infrastructure, fiscal, environmental and community conditions, including cumulative effects with other development.

### 3. THE MATERIAL THRESHOLDS, ALLOCATIONS AND UNCERTAINTIES

State the limits or trigger conditions the community considers relevant, the share of capacity requested, the evidence base and the uncertainties that could change the result.

### 4. THE COMMUNITY'S FINDINGS

Explain which claims are supported, which remain uncertain, which costs and benefits are material, which alternatives are credible and which values or priorities inform the position.

### 5. THE POSITION AND REQUIRED CONDITIONS

State whether the community supports, conditionally supports, seeks to defer or opposes the proposal. Set out any conditions relating to scale and phasing, infrastructure delivery, peak or drought operations, water sourcing, cost allocation, cumulative-impact limits, reporting, verification, community benefits, review triggers and remedies.

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***A community does not need to choose between an unqualified yes and an undifferentiated no. It can say "yes if…", "not yet because…", or "no unless…" and require a point-by-point response grounded in evidence.***

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# 07 | CONCLUSION

Data-center development is becoming harder to discuss rationally because the public debate often begins only after large commercial, infrastructure and political commitments have already formed. Communities then encounter ambitious claims about innovation, competitiveness and essential digital services alongside incomplete information about electricity, water, costs and cumulative development. As residents learn more, concern may deepen rather than recede—not because they necessarily want fewer digital services, but because they have not been shown why a particular project, scale, location and allocation of public resources are justified. A credible process must confront that gap directly rather than treating opposition primarily as a communications problem.

The threshold-and-allocation approach provides a basis for changing that relationship. It enables proponents to demonstrate whether development fits within local capacity, which services justify the resources requested and whether additional investment can safely expand the system's operating space. It enables communities to obtain and challenge evidence, identify non-negotiable limits, compare alternatives, propose enforceable conditions and explain support, deferral or opposition in terms that authorities must answer. The result will not always be agreement, and it should not presume approval. Its value is to give communities greater power to shape decisions while giving responsible developers a credible route to demonstrate necessity, fairness and system fit.



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