

Isaiah Ness: Wisconsin's unfolding energy crisis — data centers, AI, and who really pays

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Data centers, artificial intelligence, and fossil fuels dominated headlines in 2025. Across the United States, more than \$350 billion was invested in AI and data-center infrastructure, with tens of billions of dollars proposed in Wisconsin. Investment and economic development are often framed as unequivocal wins, but energy infrastructure is different. If built without foresight, the consequences will reshape the future.

Growth is certain; however the balance between positive and negative growth is yet to be determined.

I have worked in Wisconsin's energy sector since 2019, beginning in residential and commercial solar. Over the years, I've seen energy debates around renewable energy become increasingly politicized, even as their original purpose remains unchanged: to produce reliable electricity, reduce dependence on fragile infrastructure, and give communities more control over their energy supply. Yet, the existing industry stakeholders have blocked deployment and ownership for everyone but themselves. While homeowners, farmers, Tribal Nations, and small businesses face mounting restrictions on deploying their own power systems, the state has moved quickly to approve massive new energy loads for data centers. These agreements are also accompanied by preferential rate structures, infrastructure guarantees, and the ability to negotiate.

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That contradiction should concern all of us.

Wisconsin residents have grown accustomed to electric rate increases justified by grid maintenance, system upgrades, and long-term reliability. According to federal energy data, Wisconsin already ranks among the top 15 states for electricity costs, and utilities have signaled additional increases in the years ahead. At the same time, power reliability has deteriorated in both rural and urban areas.

In parts of Milwaukee, aging poles lean precariously, and low-hanging lines form tangled webs that look untouched for decades. In rural Wisconsin, the impacts are more similar. Tribal Nations such as the Sokaogon Chippewa and the Menominee Nation have experienced long-duration outages lasting days or even weeks, disrupting healthcare, food systems, and economic activity. These are not isolated incidents; they are symptoms of an overstretched and unevenly maintained grid.

Against this backdrop, Wisconsin is welcoming some of the most energy-intensive facilities on the planet. A single large data center can consume as much electricity as a small city, operating around the clock, every day of the year. The rise of AI only accelerates this demand. Unlike the rest of the state, these facilities do not proceed without firm assurances of power availability, reliability, transmission access, and cost certainty.

Data centers operate under a different set of rules.

Utilities and regulators are willing to negotiate specialized rate structures, accelerate infrastructure investments, and prioritize reliability. Meanwhile, everyday ratepayers, who collectively use far less power and have far less leverage, are asked to shoulder rising costs and accept declining service quality.

This is not a free market. Wisconsin's energy industry has become an unregulated monopoly. Large utilities control generation, transmission, and distribution, and they largely determine who is allowed to produce power and under what terms. While utilities have invested heavily in renewable energy they own, they continue to restrict external ownership and community-scale generation knowing that distributed energy can reduce peak demand, improve resilience, and lower long-term system costs.

If utilities can justify new power plants, substations, and transmission lines for data centers, they must also explain why a similar urgency does not apply to grid

reliability, ownership opportunities for distributed energy systems, and lower rates for Wisconsin residents. Why is Wisconsin able to deliver gigawatts of electricity to data centers, yet unable to address persistent grid failures in communities that have been struggling for decades?

This moment calls for accountability, not ideology. Wisconsin deserves transparency into how data center energy deals are structured, who bears the costs of new infrastructure, and how reliability risks are distributed. Ratepayers deserve to know why the largest electricity users receive the greatest assurances, while households, businesses, and communities are told to accept less for more. Economic growth should not come at the expense of affordability, resilience, or fairness. If Wisconsin is going to power the future of AI and digital infrastructure, it must also protect the people and communities that power Wisconsin itself.

This energy crisis is not inevitable. It is the result of choices. And those choices will determine whether Wisconsin's energy future delivers reliable power for all, or a system defined by higher costs, more frequent outages, and growing divides between communities.

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