John Imes: 400 residents showed up to talk data centers. Wisconsin should listen

Posted on Monday, Mar 16, 2026

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Something unusual happened this week in rural Wisconsin.

More than 400 people packed a community town hall in Juneau to discuss something most communities rarely talk about until decisions are already made: the rapid expansion of AI data centers and the infrastructure required to power them.

The event featured Wisconsin comedian and journalist Charlie Berens alongside energy experts, local residents and community leaders. What stood out most was not opposition to development.

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It was something simpler.

People are frustrated by rising electricity bills that are driving up the cost of living. Many want to know their monthly utility bills will not climb even higher so mega-tech companies and utilities can continue posting record profits.

Residents want transparency, information and a meaningful voice before major infrastructure decisions reshape their communities and household budgets.

Across the U.S., AI and cloud computing are driving a surge in electricity demand. Hyperscale data centers require enormous amounts of power and water, along with major infrastructure investments.

Those decisions reach far beyond local zoning boards. They influence utility investments, power plants, transmission lines, water systems, farmland use and ultimately the electricity costs paid by households and businesses.

What happens in communities like Beaver Dam does not stay there. It affects energy planning across Wisconsin.

The potential impact is significant.

Two proposed data center projects in southeastern Wisconsin alone have requested nearly four gigawatts of electricity. That is more power than all Wisconsin households currently use.

Meeting that demand would require major investments in power plants, substations, transmission lines and other infrastructure. Under the traditional utility model, those costs do not fall solely on the companies driving the demand. They can be spread across all customers through future rate cases.

In other words, families, farms and small businesses could end up paying for infrastructure built to power billion-dollar technology companies.

That is why the conversation happening in communities like Beaver Dam matters.

Residents are not anti-development. They understand technology investment can bring jobs and economic opportunity. What they are asking for is fairness, transparency and responsible planning.

Wisconsin has the opportunity to get this right.

The Clean Economy Coalition of Wisconsin recently released a Data Center Accountability Framework outlining practical principles for managing rapid data center expansion while protecting communities and ratepayers.

The framework calls for data center developers to pay the full cost of the energy infrastructure needed to serve their facilities. It also prioritizes clean energy solutions that lower long-term costs and avoid locking customers into decades of fossil fuel investments. Communities should have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting land use, water and utility costs, and projects of this scale should include community benefit agreements so local residents share in the economic gains.

These principles are not about stopping innovation. They are about ensuring growth happens responsibly and transparently.

Clean energy will play an important role. Wind, solar, battery storage and demand-response programs can meet growing electricity demand faster and often more affordably than building new fossil fuel plants while protecting customers from fuel price volatility.

Just as important, communities must have access to information before decisions are finalized.

Too often residents learn about major infrastructure projects only after permits are issued and construction begins. That erodes trust and creates conflicts that could have been avoided through earlier engagement.

The Juneau town hall offered a different model.

The event was organized through Building Community Power from the Frontlines, a statewide initiative led by organizer Sarah Zarling that helps residents understand how energy decisions affect their communities and how they can engage constructively around energy affordability, utility accountability and healthy homes.

Wisconsin has long shown that practical solutions can bridge political differences. Families want affordable energy bills. Businesses want reliable power. Communities want clean water and sustainable growth.

Those goals are not in conflict.

But achieving them requires transparency, thoughtful planning and meaningful public participation.

Data centers are coming. The question is whether Wisconsin communities will help shape that future or be left paying the costs after decisions have already been made.

The turnout in Juneau suggests something encouraging. When communities are invited into the conversation early, they are ready to participate constructively.

That may be Wisconsin's greatest advantage as we navigate the next chapter of our energy future.

Learn more about the Clean Economy Coalition of Wisconsin's Data Center Accountability Framework:
https://cleaneconomywi.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/CECW-Data-Center-Accountability-Framework.pdf

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