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Model zoning ordinance guidelines

AHJs that want balanced and transparent zoning standards that mitigate unwanted impacts while encouraging the many potential benefits of data center development can take this zoning ordinance off the page and adapt it.

No two jurisdictions are the same. Each needs to layer in its own considerations.

Our intention, however, is to offer a strong foundation upon which AHJs can build zoning districts for data centers defined by ordinance. Note that the language provided below is to be included in the zoning ordinance and there may be other provisions that govern development, such as in the building code as it pertains to plumbing fixtures, that may need to be adjusted.

For example:

- Rural counties can consider additional guidelines and requirements when a data center is adjacent to certain agricultural uses or other sensitive uses.
- Urban municipalities can consider additional guidelines and requirements when a data center is adjacent to transit hubs or to prioritize pedestrian activity.

Zoning categories

Broadly, zoning districts in which data centers have specific considerations fall into four categories:

Residential: Because data centers are ultimately an industrial use, we believe that data centers are not appropriate in residential districts.

Industrial: Given the nature of data centers, they should be permitted in all industrial categories, from light industrial to heavier industrial. In such areas, data centers should be permitted as any other industrial use would be allowed, including following the same height, setback and landscaping requirements.

Rural/agricultural: In rural areas, data centers should be permitted to the extent that industrial uses would be permitted in such areas, provided that the same conditions are applied that would be applied to permissible industrial uses on such land. If another industrial use would require a certain setback, landscaping treatment or other mitigation on rural or agricultural land, our recommendation is that the same conditions be applied for a data center on such land.

Commercial: Data centers in commercial areas can be appropriate, provided they comply with certain use standards as set forth below. For the purpose of this section, commercial districts are defined as ones that permit a diversity of nonresidential uses, such as office and retail.

Use standards for commercial areas

Data centers shall be permitted by right in commercial districts if the following criteria are met:

1. To provide screening and reduce noise levels, all equipment for cooling, ventilation, or otherwise operating the facility—including generators or other power supply equipment—must be fully enclosed, except when determined by the [zoning administrator] not to be mechanically feasible. If the zoning administrator determines that full enclosure is not mechanically feasible, all equipment for cooling, ventilation, or power generation must be screened by a wall or similar barrier. In addition, any accessory electrical substation must be screened from adjacent nonindustrial properties or public streets by a wall or similar barrier. This standard does not apply to solar panels.
2. A data center building must include a main entrance feature that is differentiated from the remainder of the building façade by a change in building material, pattern, texture, color, or accent material. The entrance feature must also either project or recess from the adjoining building plane.
3. The primary façades of data centers must include either:
 - a. A change in the primary facade surface for every approximately 150 horizontal feet of at least one of the following: building material, pattern, texture, color, or accent material; or