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Regulating data centers

Planning-related options

AHJs that want to bring data centers to their region can start by identifying strategic locations. Municipalities should perform comprehensive analyses to determine suitable areas, based on power availability, infrastructure, and environmental impact.

Ideally, more than one area should be designated for potential development—as with the process for industrial parks—to provide flexibility and attract varied investments.

● Option 1: Create an overlay district

One option for guiding the development of data centers is to incorporate an overlay district. An overlay district is mapped to certain areas of the jurisdiction's zoning map without necessarily changing the underlying zoning district and what is allowed therein.

A historic overlay district is a common application of this tool. It typically provides for certain additional standards—an expansion of the uses that might be permitted in that district, a limitation of them, or some mix of the two.

A data center overlay district can allow for the development of data centers and prescribe that such development meet certain standards or requirements. An overlay district clearly indicates where and under what circumstances data centers are permitted and provides additional direction to any data center developer seeking to develop in that jurisdiction.

● Option 2: Create a planned innovation, research, and technology (PIRT) district

PIRTs—and their regional equivalents, which include innovation zones, technology corridors, and research and technology parks—offer municipalities a flexible approach to land use that goes beyond traditional industrial or commercial zoning.

This designation allows for a mix of uses and can adapt to the specific requirements of data centers without necessitating a rezoning. Data centers in a PIRT district can integrate seamlessly with adjacent research facilities or tech hubs, fostering synergistic growth and innovation. Examples of successful PIRT districts include Palo Alto's Stanford Research Park.²²

When data centers are sited clearly as being a by-right use, data center developers are more likely to consider the location for investment because they have the required certainty that the land they acquire won't struggle or be delayed in the approvals process. In the appendix, we explore how Elk Grove Village did so successfully.

● Option 3: Note preferred data center locations in the comprehensive plan and invite owner- or hyperscaler-initiated rezoning applications

AHJs can identify preferred locations for data center development in their comprehensive plans and invite rezoning applications in those areas.

Municipalities and data center companies can agree on development conditions—sometimes called proffers, development agreements, or conditional zoning—which are voluntary commitments made by developers in return for allowed zoning. They outline specific conditions or promises agreed upon to mitigate the impact of proposed developments or to otherwise benefit the municipality's residents.

Development conditions may include infrastructure improvements, restrictions on use, environmental protections, community benefits, and other strictures. They are flexible enough to apply to various zoning categories, including PIRTs.

● Option 4: Implement a specific data center zoning district defined by ordinance

Creating a data center-specific zoning district is a solution that's more detailed and restrictive than the previous three. We recommend it as a best practice in many jurisdictions because it establishes clear guidance on where data centers are permitted by right and eliminates the possibility that high-stakes decisions are made by exception. The ordinance should define data centers and outline general standards for building them, such as building size thresholds, height limits, and floor area ratio (FAR) requirements.

The zoning ordinance should include specific use standards for data centers, such as parking, setbacks, buffering, plumbing fixture counts, equipment screening requirements, and operational sound limits. The next chapter consists of a model ordinance that AHJs can adopt.

22 "About Stanford Research Park," Stanford Research Park, <https://stanfordresearchpark.com/about/>.