

County orders two-year halt on data centers

Environmental impact studies to be required before future projects could proceed here

By SAM ADAMS

Responding to concerns raised by residents over a proposed natural gas-fired power plant intended to attract artificial intelligence data centers, the Letcher Fiscal Court voted unanimously Monday to place a two-year moratorium on the construction of new data centers in the county and to require environmental impact studies before any future projects could move forward.

The action came after nearly two hours of public comments, during which residents expressed concerns about water use, noise, pollution, wildlife, tourism and the potential impact on nearby neighborhoods if a power plant and data centers are eventually built at the Gateway Regional Business Park near Jenkins.

Although the court approved the moratorium unanimously, officials acknowledged that many details surrounding the proposal remain unknown.

Judge/Executive Terry Adams said county officials learned about the proposal only after documents became public through an Open Records Act request.

“You found out about the proposal at the same time we did,” Adams told those attending the meeting. “It was not disclosed to any of the mayors, myself, or any of the other judges.”

Adams explained that the Appalachian Industrial Authority, which owns the Gateway Regional Business Park, is governed by representatives appointed by the county judges of Letcher, Knott, Floyd and Pike counties. He said those board members frequently sign confidentiality agreements while negotiating with prospective industries and that neither he nor other elected officials had prior knowledge of the proposed power plant or its connection to data centers.

The proposal became public last week after the citizens group Creeks Don’t Rise obtained documents through the Kentucky Open Records Act showing that Diversified Energy and its partners requested an option on approximately 100 acres within the Gateway Regional Business Park through One East Kentucky, a regional economic development organization. According to those documents, the proposed natural gas-fired power plant would be built specifically to attract artificial intelligence data centers.

Exactly how the county’s moratorium will be implemented remains unclear. Letcher County has no zoning ordinance, comprehensive plan or countywide building permit system, although it does regulate development in floodplain areas.

Residents voice concerns

Nine citizens addressed the Fiscal Court. Eight opposed the proposed data center development, while one spoke in favor.

Elaine Tanner urged county officials to appoint representatives who would keep local leaders informed about major industrial proposals. She also cited reports involving Diversified Energy gas wells in West Virginia and questioned whether similar issues could occur here.

“We don’t want that here,” she said.

Tanner also argued that data centers would create relatively few jobs while producing enough noise and other impacts to affect nearby residents, including those in the Grand View subdivision now under construction.

Dr. Gary Wein, a retired university professor, told the court that water consumption could become one of the project’s greatest challenges.

Wein said even a relatively small data center can require approximately 18,000 gallons of water per day for cooling, while larger facilities may use hundreds of thousands of gallons daily. He questioned whether the Jenkins water system could meet that demand and expressed concern about water discharged from cooling systems.

He also questioned how emergency responders would handle a fire involving diesel fuel or lithium batteries.

“Who’s going to put it out?” Wein asked.

Retired college professor Beverly Collins expressed concerns about noise, light pollution, water quality and heat generated by large industrial facilities.

She said such projects can create “heat islands,” raise surrounding temperatures and negatively affect tourism, particularly with a resort planned atop Pine Mountain overlooking the proposed site.

Collins also said the low-frequency sound produced by data centers can travel long distances and drive wildlife away from the area.

Wesley Briant compared the proposed development to the early coal boom, arguing that eastern Kentucky should avoid another industry that extracts resources while providing relatively little long-term benefit to local residents.

“I don’t want our county to become a giant utility park for outside corporations while our people struggle to find affordable housing,” Briant said.

Independent congressional candidate Mikel Wein emphasized that the purpose of the meeting was not to criticize county officials but to encourage additional study before any decisions are made.

“The goal here is for us to come together as a community and find the best way to move forward,” he said, asking the court to adopt a two-year moratorium similar to one approved in Bell County.

Gary Johnson, a Pike County native and Louisiana State University linguistics professor who is developing a vineyard near the proposed site, expressed

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