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Cars drive past data centers that house computer servers and hardware required to support modern internet use, such as artificial intelligence, in Ashburn, Virginia, July 16, 2023. (AP Photo/Ted Shaffrey)

TECHNOLOGY

One of Texas' oldest research teams helps to ease data center tensions

BY BRIAN SCOTT | TEXAS

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TEXAS — The growth of data centers in Texas means an economic boom for aspects of the state's future, but it is also responsible for ongoing tensions between the massive facilities and their neighbors.

One thing is abundantly clear: there are a lot more of these centers coming.

The University of Texas at Austin's Bureau of Economic Geology has launched

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center developers.

Chief economist and COMPASS principal investigator Dr. Ning Lin says that science will help to ease the tension between these data centers and the people who surround them.

"Our goal is to bring all the players to the table. We will help everyone achieve a validated, robust level of knowledge and insights through data-driven research across the value chain." Lin said.

If an economic geology department seems like a strange place to take on the task, Lin said it actually fits in well with their more than century long mission. Some of the largest needs for the facilities, needs that have created growing pains with residents living near proposed sites, are land, energy and water. Lin said the facilities require large amounts of power, so much so that they mirror the "large load" challenges the state has long faced with oil, gas, refining and manufacturing projects.

"We have done this with oil and gas. We have done this with chemicals. We have done it with a lot of different sectors sharing the same energy system — the water, the land, and the community." Lin said.

COMPASS will feature economists and geologists working with the companies, communities and lawmakers touched by this new data and AI boom. It will work on things like keeping the industry's massive water needs from leaving residents thirsty, balancing power needs, putting the centers in the right places and even how these facilities affect neighbors nearby.

COMPASS will also engage with residents in communities where new centers are proposed.

There have already been **significant issues and tensions** between local communities and data centers that have set up nearby. Some have led to noise problems and concerns about environmental impacts and the massive water use the facilities require in a state where water is already a limited commodity.

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them? What we're hoping is we're providing that knowledge, guided by science."

While so much of this is fresh territory, Lin's institute has seen repeatedly that the issues are only beginning. The state comptroller says that there are nearly 300 data centers in Texas already, and Lin says that more will come.

"The most important thing is communication. The most important thing is everybody share the right data, the right knowledge," Lin said.

The team hopes to find a balance in the next unstoppable industry filled with promise and risk.

"Then we can work together to figure out a solution," Lin said.

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