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1. Data centers owe public clear answers on water

Data centers owe public clear answers on water

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Byline: Tony Quesada

Highlight: 1) PHOTO: Assistant City Editor Tony Quesada is pictured in the San Antonio Express-News newsroom in San Antonio, Texas, on Feb. 22, 2023. 2) PHOTO: Texans opposing data centers rally outside the state Capitol in February. Opposition to such centers is growing, and operators would be wise to share the information Texans seek. (Mikala Compton/Austin American-Statesman)

Body

Texans who live in communities where operators want to build data centers have become increasingly wary -- and vocal in their angst -- of how much water such industrial buildings use.

As those voices grow in number and volume, state lawmakers and other officials who ignore them do so at their political peril. State Rep. Trent Ashby, R-Lufkin, who is running for the Texas Senate, said voters' priorities have changed from before the March 3 primary elections, when they were clamoring loudest for property tax relief.

"Since then," he said, "all I've heard about is data center relief."

Ashby's ears are consistent with a poll conducted in June by the University of Texas/Texas Politics Project, which found that 56% of those surveyed -- 1,200 self-reported registered voters -- oppose building data centers in their communities. Opposition was strongest among rural residents, at 62%, and suburban residents, at 60%.

Such apprehension is rational, considering the public has been told much about how Texas, with at least 248 planned data center projects identified by a Texas Tribune analysis, is poised to become the epicenter of such construction but little about how that would affect the state's supply of water -- its most vulnerable natural resource.

Among the critical elements Texas needs to manage the proliferation of data centers is transparency, particularly as it pertains to water. And in this regard, unfortunately, the industry is failing.

Last year, the Texas Water Development Board sent a survey to data center operators seeking information to help it understand the scope of their water use, among other things. But of the 341 data centers operating in Texas, only 17% responded, the agency's water supply planning director recently told members of the Texas House Committee on Natural Resources.

That didn't sit well -- and rightly so -- with the House committee chair, state Rep. Cody Harris, R-Palestine, who suggested the attorney general's office look into nonresponders.

"Transparency of utilization of resources shouldn't be optional," Harris said.

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More than 900 comments regarding agency oversight and the Texas Water Development Board were submitted to the Natural Resources Committee for its June 23 hearing, and they overwhelmingly called for statewide policies and regulations to prevent data centers from overburdening water and electricity supplies.

They were also critical of tax breaks for data centers, and many called for a statewide moratorium, which Susan Korbel, chair of the North East Bexar County Democrats, suggested remaining in place "until statewide infrastructure demands can be accurately assessed and reported to the public."

The public understands that data centers need water to cool their powerful computer equipment, but most are unfamiliar with the actual scope.

It's not just that the number of proposed data centers has exploded. It's also that the heat produced for the same footprint, and therefore the required cooling capacity, has swelled as ever-increasing chip capacity comes with greater thermal density.

Moreover, even many lawmakers and policymakers are learning about the many ways data centers can be cooled and how widely those methods range as to how much water, electricity, space and money they require to build and operate.

A report titled "Water use requirements for data centers in Texas," released this month by the **Bureau of Economic Geology** at the University of Texas, takes an initial pass at parsing such issues. In doing so, it acknowledges that efforts to get a handle on water use by data centers will require more and better information.

"The accelerating expansion of data centers in Texas deepens the urgent need for greater transparency and systematic communication among key stakeholders," the report concludes, "including data center operators, utilities, municipalities, state agencies, and private developers."

One of the principal concerns the report highlights is that without such communication, private investment and public stewardship of resources may not align. For example, the report notes that several "large-load facilities are sited in regions projected to face significant water shortages."

"A strategic policy response requires integrated planning tools that combine hydrologic projections, grid development schedules, and permitting timelines into a unified siting framework," the report states. "Targeted investment in resilient regions, paired with coordinated upgrades to transmission, water conveyance, and regulatory processes, can shift development toward areas better aligned with long-term resource security."

In other words, Texas may yet be able to accommodate the industry's needs, but not necessarily where it proposes and not without much better coordination.

Unfortunately, so far the industry appears more intent on doing things its way and minimizing the public's concerns.

When Dan Diorio, vice president of state policy for the Data Center Coalition, represented the industry association at the House Natural Resources Committee hearing, he bristled at the idea of the state regulating data center cooling systems. But while he said no single cooling method is appropriate for all data centers, state Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Salado, warned that the industry can only blame itself if the state imposes one.

"I can't think of a better way to get a one-size-fits-all approach than not reporting your water usage," Buckley said, adding that the industry's noncompliance is "leaving us blind in terms of building policy."

Meanwhile, other data center advocates seem content to scare Texans into accepting data centers.

Recently, a newly launched organization called the Texas National Security Council declared that it seeks to counter efforts to foment opposition to data center projects among local communities who don't understand what they are or why they are vital.

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The group's director, Steve McCraw, a polarizing figure when he led the Texas Department of Public Safety, appears intent on shifting the blame for Texans' apprehension regarding data centers to China, accusing it, without citing specific evidence, of pushing misinformation on social media to exacerbate worries regarding water and energy consumption.

We'll see how Texans respond to that.

It the meantime, the industry might want to read the room and share the information Texans want to know.

tony.guesada@express-news.net

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