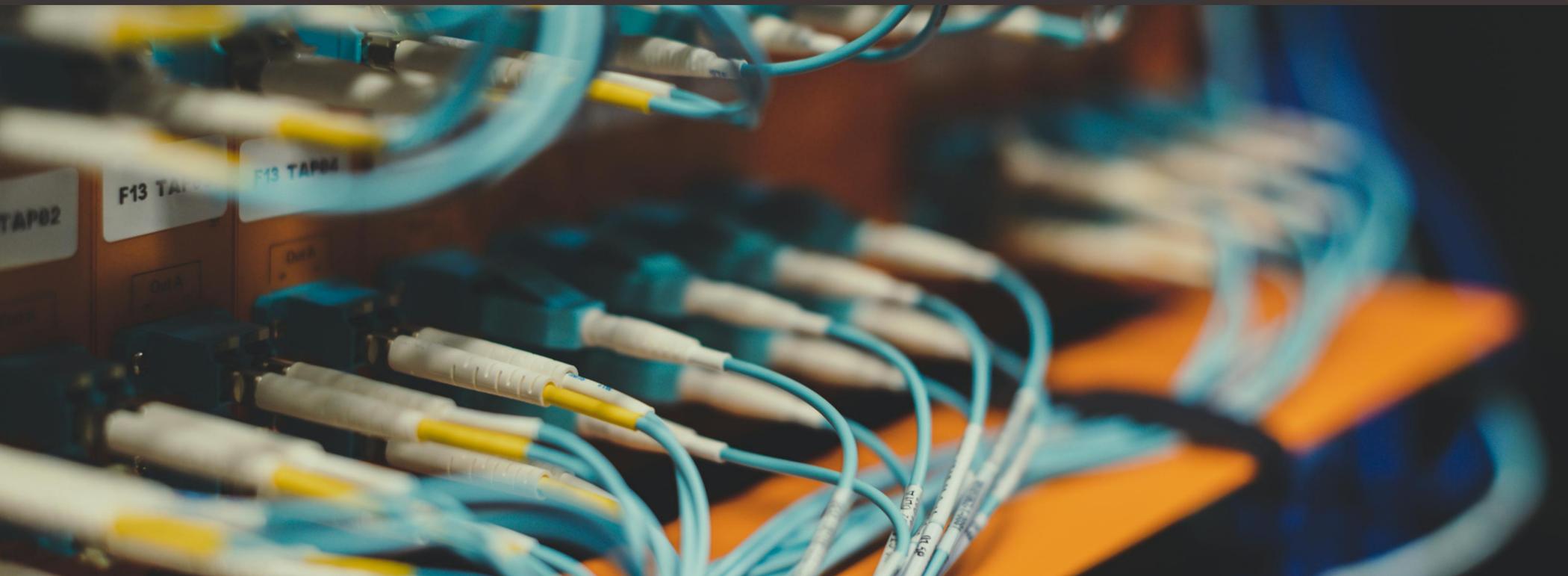# Data Centers in Sedgwick County:
Designing the Future We Choose

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Summary

This report examines the long-term implications of hyperscale data centers in Sedgwick County. Their arrival is not a routine zoning matter; it represents a structural shift in how our community uses land, manages resources, and maintains control over its future trajectory.

Objectives

- **Provide a Strategy-Based Framework:** Moving beyond zoning to evaluate long-range preparedness.
- **Recenter the Conversation:** Shifting focus from short-term tax incentives to permanent community impact.
- **Ensure Aligned Growth:** Guaranteeing technological expansion protects human-centered planning and environmental stability.

Perspective

As a strategic foresight practitioner, my goal is to ensure our progress is sustainable. While I recognize and acknowledge the appeal of and need for revenue to meet immediate funding needs, my perspective is guided by **systemic resilience and intergenerational stewardship.** My goal is to evaluate how today's infrastructure commitments either expand or contract the options available to Sedgwick County residents in the decades to come.
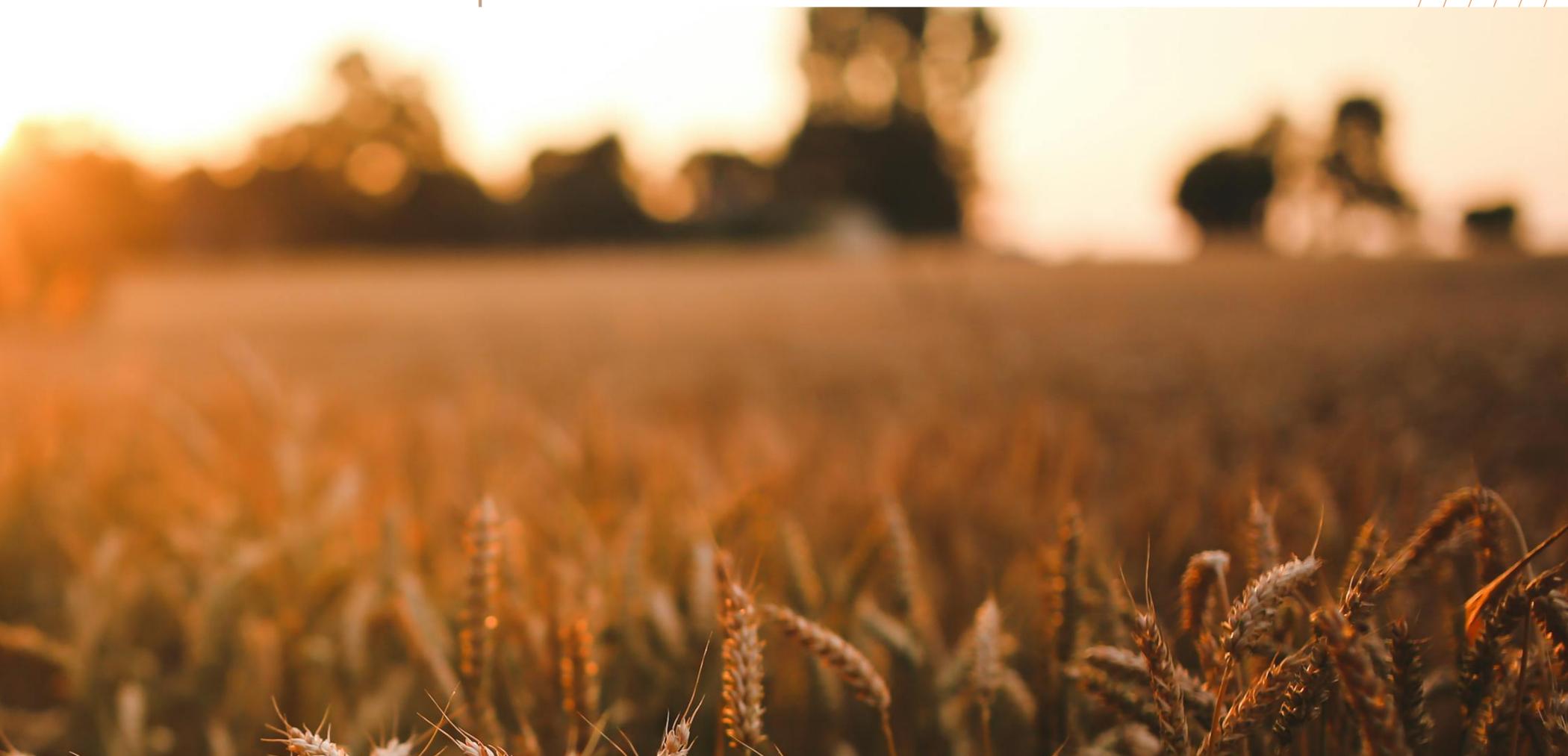
Navigating the Transition

The County Commission has indicated the arrival of hyperscale data centers is driven by market forces and private land rights. This report accepts that "Expected Future" and asks:

"If this is the future we are choosing, are we ready for it?"

The Landscape of Strategic Growth

In 2024, this Commission acted decisively to protect "Urban Growth Areas." We must now apply that same rigor to our Rural Growth Areas. The current moratorium (extended to June 11, 2026) is not a delay; it is an opportunity to move strategically to Stewardship-Based Planning.

Expected Future

An expected future describes the most plausible scenario based on current evidence. It serves only as a reference point for this report to clearly examine impacts should this scenario become the actual future. This does not assume other outcomes are impossible or preferable,

Stewardship-Based Planning

Stewardship-based planning is a strategic, community-driven approach to governance and development that prioritizes the long-term holistic health, resource integrity, and resiliency of the community.

Rural & Urban Growth Areas

The term Urban Growth Area in the 2024 solar zoning code refers to the anticipated long-term growth patterns for cities within Sedgwick County. Similarly, rural growth should be evaluated in cases where a rural area's future development potential is limited by a single industry.

What This Future Requires

The Water-Energy Nexus

Sedgwick County's is in a drought-prone region. This "Expected Future" assumes zoning regulation will mandate **"Closed-Loop"** cooling as a requirement to protect regional water supply. While this addresses some of the water concerns, the physics of cooling dictate a trade-off: **Decreasing on-site water use drives up energy demand.**

The Physics

By eliminating on-site evaporation, facilities offload the resource need. Instead electricity to replaces water's natural heat capacity.
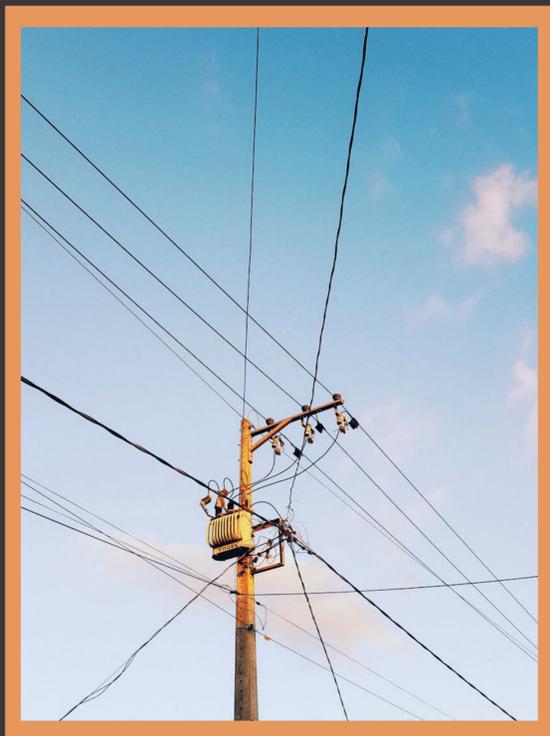
Is our grid ready today? How long will it take to be data center ready?

Grid Strain

A typical 100MW campus consumes as much energy as 80,000 homes. A single data center could limit ability to grow Sedgwick County.

Are we ready to tradeoff population growth for data center growth?

The Resource Vacuum

If the rural water table or the energy capacity of the county is depleted by industrial use, the urban growth the Commission has fought to protect will have no resources to sustain it.

Urban growth cannot exist without rural resource stability.

Data center zoning has the potential to make urban growth and high-impact industry competing for resources.

What This Future Assumes

There are many known unknowns surrounding data centers, it is assumed the work with Berkley Group will result in some standard recommendations. Rather than position this report selling the tactical options, this report assumes you will receive and accept these baseline standards from their upcoming white paper.

Closed-Loop Cooling - Sedgwick County is in a **drought-prone region**. This report assumes zoning regulation will mandate closed-loop cooling to protect the finite and **limited regional water supply**.

PFAS Safety: While some data centers use PFAS (also called "**forever chemicals**"), PFAS-free options exist, and are assumed to be required to avoid costly cleanup and health liabilities.

Setbacks & Safety: It is assumed zoning will mandate appropriate (not minimum) setbacks to protect nearby residents from both **dBA and dBC sound and the risk of "thermal runaway."**

Ratepayer Insulation: It assumes that the multi-billion dollar cost of new substations and transmission lines **won't be socialized across the monthly bills of local families**.

dBA and dBC Sound

dBA and dBC are, respectively, sound you hear and sound you feel (low-frequency, structural, and generator hum). dBC is linked to chronic health implications.

Thermal Runaway

A self-sustaining fire that is very difficult to extinguish with water. These fires release a "toxic cocktail" of gases, which can travel miles downwind.

What This Future Risks

Industrial Island
Impacts rural-residential character

A data center creates an "industrial island." A state-of-the-art building mixed in with rural property. It fundamentally changes the rural-residential character for every neighbor, likely permanently.

This not only affects current generations-old family farms, but the buyer pool as well.

Stranded Asset
The building becomes a liability

If energy costs rise, water becomes restricted, or the technology evolves enough the data center is simply no longer needed, the developer may move prior to the end of contract.

Will early exit fees cover the forecasted revenues? Who manages the abandoned site and buildings?

Decomissioning
Restoring land for agriculture use

Decommissioning a data center is not just removing a building; it is the **total restoration of the land, both above and below ground.** If the soil is compacted or the underground infrastructure remains, that land is permanently lost to agriculture.

When data centers leave, land should be restored.

Rural Residents Market Shield - Equity Risk Mitigation

Rural Sedgwick County residents should not bear the cost of lost property value. Generations of family wealth are tied to our farmland and rural communities, and anyone living within the impact zone of a data center deserves a **developer-funded Property Value Guarantee**.

Under this guarantee, if a resident sells within 10 years and receives an offer below their inflation-adjusted, county-average-adjusted **Pre-Data Center Baseline,** the developer must pay the difference. Residents who choose to sell after zoning approval should be compensated at the same land-sale rate as their neighbors.

The Skeptical Lens

A responsible futurist looks beyond possibility and asks who benefits, who bears the cost, and whether promises of innovation align with real community needs. In an era dominated by trillion-dollar companies and billionaire-led ventures shaping land, water, and infrastructure, caveat emptor becomes basic due diligence.

Corporate partnerships often arrive packaged as progress: jobs, investment, modernization. Yet history shows these relationships are frequently uneven. Major tech firms prioritize shareholders and margins, not long-term stewardship or local equity. When corporate interests conflict with community interests, the public rarely comes out ahead.

Wealth-concentrated entities extract value, not share it.

Billionaires and the companies they control are structurally incentivized to take as much as possible while giving as little as necessary. Human impact, local stability, and generational land equity are secondary to profit and speed.

Example 1:
Google's maneuver in Iowa

Linn County, Iowa spent months working with Google to develop zoning, water-use, and economic standards for a proposed data center. Once those requirements were finalized, Google shifted course and pursued annexation into a small city within the county that would offer fewer obligations.

The moment a more favorable deal appeared, Google abandoned the commitments county officials believed were made in good faith. The partnership collapsed, raising serious doubts about whether collaboration was ever the true intent and highlighting how difficult it is to rely on corporations whose priority is maximizing margin rather than honoring community agreements.

Example 2:
xAI rogue data centers in Mississippi and Tennessee

Elon Musk's xAI data centers show how quickly things can go wrong when projects move forward without strong rules.

In Southaven and Memphis, the company installed gas turbines without full permits, creating nonstop noise, air pollution, and health concerns for nearby residents. The rapid, unregulated expansion left communities scrambling to respond.

It's a reminder that without clear regulations and firm agreements, companies can go rogue, and residents pay the price.

Perpetual Endowment Fund

Because data centers provide the **lowest jobs-per-acre ratio** of any major industry, they create a permanent "economic delta." To offset this, the developer should seed a **Restricted Permanent Fund**.

The Principal

Each data center pays a one-time Impact Fee (e.g., $10 Million per 100MW) prior to certificate of occupancy.

By law, the principal can **never be touched** by the County Commission or any third-party. It is not part of the General Fund and cannot be reallocated.

Recurring Royalty

After the one-time Impact Fee is paid, the developer pays a smaller annual **Resource Consumption Fee** (for example, a set dollar amount per MW of peak or average energy demand).

This recurring payment is added to the principal and grows the fund over time.

Participatory Budget

Interest is allocated through a direct vote of Sedgwick County residents, used for community well-being.

Examples might include vocational training or county-sponsored community spaces. Funds can be directed across either 2-year or 4-year election cycles.

Community-Led Stewardship

A decision as complex as a data center cannot be left solely to standard zoning boards or recruitment-focused partnerships. While groups like GWP or REAP prioritize economic attraction, Sedgwick County also needs a body focused on long-term impact and community well-being.

A Stewardship Planning Committee can act as a necessary "check and balance" in the development process:

- **Objective Independence:** This committee acts as a counter-balance to partnerships that operate alongside data center developers. Its loyalty is to the long-term viability of the county assets, not the successful closure of a deal.
- **A Civic Brain Trust:** Comprised of local experts who live and work here and possess no vested interest in the data center industry or economic development partner represented.
- **The Mission:** To move beyond the legalities of zoning and pressure-test industrial proposals against our community's well-being standards before a single shovel hits the dirt.

A stewardship-based model recognizes that community members are collaborators, not adversaries. By integrating independent local expertise, the Commission ensures that growth is never synonymous with extraction.

Further Exploration Needed

These points outline areas where additional transparency and explanation are still needed to fully understand the implications of data-center zoning. With this extended pause, it's an ideal time to clarify these issues and ensure the community has a complete picture.

Holistic Quality of Life - I have not found a single county that has integrated data centers without degrading overall quality of life. This decision must consider more than short-term financial gains.

NDAs - It is unclear whether any commissioners or planning committee members have signed NDAs with data center developers or law firms. This partnership should be shared transparently.

Landowners' Rights: Landowners' right risks have been mentioned. While landowners have a right to sell, owners are not entitled to rezoning. And surrounding landowners likewise have rights.

Zoning Role: Commissioners have suggested they are not deciding whether to allow data centers. Zoning authority directly determines whether rural-residential areas are mixed with heavy industrial uses.

Property Tax: While the state has already determined sales tax, property tax is often a negotiation tactic with data centers. Out of state data centers should pay full property tax, like residents.

Public Support: It has been suggested public support outweighs criticism. The sentiment I've observed does not reflect this. Businesses and institutions do not represent public citizen opinion.

The Final Word

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The times are urgent; let's slow down.

A futurist's job is not to predict the future but to help communities shape it with intention. This report is not a warning against growth; it is a reminder that growth without guardrails becomes extraction. When we design systems that protect people, land, and long-term value, we ensure the future is something we build together, not something done to us.

The choices we make about land use, resource allocation, and industrial partnership will define not only the character of our communities today but the possibilities available to those who inherit them. Stewardship is not resistance to progress; it is the discipline that ensures progress does not narrow the future.

I do not envy the position the Sedgwick County Commissioners are in. You are being asked not only whether to allow data centers, but how to govern their interaction with our water, our grid, our land, and the residents who will live with the consequences for generations. At this pivotal inflection point, I urge you to draw on the expertise, passion, and lived experience of the many residents reaching out to help.

Research shows that while proximity shapes early reactions to data centers, long-term concerns become universal. People want to know whether growth is transparent, whether resource consumption is sustainable, whether the grid will remain reliable, and whether our water supply will endure.

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