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FARMLAND PRIME FOR DATA CENTERS, BUT AT WHAT COST?

By Lauren Jessop,
The Center Square Contributor

Data center developers are increasingly targeting agricultural land for new projects, and residents in affected communities are mounting opposition, concerned about the industrialization of their farmland.

At the same time, Gov. Josh Shapiro's administration is pursuing two priorities that can be difficult to balance: attracting data center investment while preserving Pennsylvania farmland. This creates a push-pull between the economic promise of data centers and concerns about farmland loss, local resource demands, and long-term community stability.

The question is whether both objectives can be met without compromising the agriculture industry or the rural character of the communities being asked to host these projects.

During Shapiro's budget address in February, he announced GRID – the Governor's Responsible Infrastructure Development standards – a policy framework that sets strict standards for large-scale infrastructure projects like data centers.

He stated, "If companies adhere to these principles, they will unlock benefits from the Commonwealth, including speed and certainty in permitting and available tax credits."

The standards are intended to reassure communities that economic development will not come at the expense of local resources – a concern especially acute in a state where agriculture contributes billions to the state's economy.

Pennsylvania leads the nation in preserved farms, Shannon Powers, press secretary for the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, told The Center Square.

Since voters approved the state's Farmland Preservation Program in 1988, Powers said, Pennsylvania has protected 6,704 farms and 665,585 acres in 58 counties from future development, investing more than \$1.84 billion in state, county, and local funds.

She noted the administration has continued that commitment, investing nearly \$164 million to preserve 555 farms and 46,178 prime acres of farmland across the state – and that Pennsylvania agriculture supports over 48,800 farms, nearly 600,000 jobs, and contributes \$132.5 billion annually to the state's economy.

Powers said Shapiro recognizes agriculture as both part of Pennsylvania's heritage and essential to its economic future, naming it one of five key industries in his 10-year economic development strategy – the first of its kind in over two decades.

"Over the years, the Shapiro Administration has made meaningful investments to help support business expansion and transition planning, soil and water conservation, and strengthening the workforce and infrastructure on those farms and in the food processing and other businesses that rely on, and in turn, support those farms."

Those investments underscore the importance of preserving agriculture's long-term viability as new economic pressures create competition for the same resources farms depend on.

The American Farm Bureau Federation says this current trend creates a dual reality of opportunity and risk – agriculture depends on data centers for innovation and efficiency, and data centers increasingly compete with agriculture for access to land, water, and energy.

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FARMLAND PRIME FOR DATA CENTERS

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Farmland is often cleared, flat, and available in large parcels, making it attractive to developers seeking sites near power grids, fiber routes, and favorable tax or regulatory environments. As more agricultural land is considered for rezoning, even unconverted farmland can gain speculative development value, raising land prices and rental costs for farmers.

The concern is that once farmland is converted to industrial use, it is rarely returned to production. In high-demand areas, data center development can drive land prices sharply higher, and tools like the use of Section 1031 of the tax code may further spread those price pressures as sellers reinvest proceeds into farmland elsewhere.

There are currently no comprehensive state regulations specific to data centers, and while communities like Lower Mount Bethel Township organize to keep hundreds of acres of farmland from being industrially zoned, local and state lawmakers are actively debating legislation to put guardrails in place.

Sen. Katie Muth, D-Royersford, has proposed legislation that would

impose a statewide three-year moratorium on hyperscale data center development.

In Muth's co-sponsorship memo, she said Pennsylvania cannot afford to repeat past mistakes of approving large-scale industrial development first and confronting the consequences later.

A moratorium would be a necessary step in protecting public health, safety, fiscal stability, and environmental integrity while ensuring decisions are informed, coordinated, and equitable, she said.

"In his budget address, the Governor said that we can play a leading role in winning the battle for AI supremacy—but we have to do it in a way that puts the good people of Pennsylvania first," Muth said. "If state government officials truly want to put the people of Pennsylvania first, they will enact this moratorium to allow local governments a chance to protect their residents. The moratorium will also allow state regulators to use this thoughtful pause as an opportunity to update policies and regulations to protect our Commonwealth."

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