

Learn local regulatory context

Key approvals for data centers begin at the local level. Municipal and county officials may have a different perspective regarding the zoning approval process than residents who are organizing to oppose data center projects. What was the “norm” for other development projects in the past? Is there anything abnormal or irregular about how the data center project is applying for zoning and permitting approvals? What specific state and local zoning laws can developers exploit to their advantage?

Lobbying can begin at the state or federal levels

The biggest data center projects often begin with confidential advanced coordination with state officials (examples: Pennsylvania, Georgia, and Louisiana). Even if a story is focused heavily on local impacts, an important step is figure out the timeline at the state level. When did a company first approach state officials about its project? Was the targeted community informed at that time? How did state officials react? Did they provide any advanced coordination or support? Did developers also lobby federal officials?

Target your FOIA requests

Either willfully or not, public agencies can quote prohibitively high fees to obtain public records by citing large amounts of time to review and redact documents. It can help to get on the phone with the relevant FOIA/public records officer to figure out how you can streamline your request for the most relevant information without missing key documents. One effective strategy is to ask for all communications between a public agency and an individual or organization (rather than using key words such as “data center”, “X project name”, “zoning amendment”). The resulting records will likely reveal other key individuals, meetings, or companies which you can then obtain in a follow-up request.

Local sources can have key records

Local opponents to data centers are filing their own public records requests, which may contain valuable information to a reporter arriving weeks or months after a data center development is announced. For example: two of my stories in my FIJ-supported investigation are heavily based on hundreds of documents obtained

from a local source through a public records request which saved me valuable time to deliver a timely and impactful publication.

Visual storytelling has impact

Infographics, maps, and photography are all components of an effective investigation. Especially since Facebook and other social media platforms are used extensively by grassroots opponents of data centers, a well-designed graphic can inform local readers and lead them to the deeper story. Investigative newsroom Floodlight has taken visual reporting a step further, using heat-sensing drones to detect dozens of unpermitted generators operating at data centers in New Jersey and Tennessee.

Put in the mileage

Effective storytelling gains depth and authority by getting to know how a community works: its history, politics, and culture. Being in the room at a decisive meeting or speaking to people over multiple visits is also often an irreplaceable way of getting valuable information and leads for a long-term investigation. Even if a data center project isn't under construction yet, or developers remain anonymous behind contracted intermediaries, it can already be causing very tangible impacts on the ground.

Understand the legal battlefield

Most local campaigns against data center projects are heading to court: either from opponents challenging zoning approvals, or developers challenging zoning denials. Figure out which law firms are representing a data center developer (often there are multiple: for lobbying and to handle zoning challenges). Do the local solicitors, who often work part-time for municipalities, have any potential conflicts of interest in their private practice? Is a developer threatening the municipal government with a lawsuit? How might a lawsuit escalate to higher courts?

Find the community's Erin Brockovich

There will absolutely be some amazing local loudmouth leading the boots on the ground efforts. That person will know everyone and will connect you to anyone. They will have a ton of enemies, which will be good for your story. They will also have a copy of nearly every single document you need. These people will make your data center reporting so much easier because they have put the time in to becoming true

experts. So use them as such. You don't need to agree with them, but you do have to respect their vigilance. And if you do, they'll do anything for you.

What data center story HASN'T been told yet?

There is no shortage of data center stories in local and national news right now. But there is a real dearth of data center stories that are new, novel and appeal to people who wouldn't natively be interested in the topic. So find those stories. Poke around for what's weird or upsetting or curious about the topic. Does it have to do with data centers and children's playgrounds, or data centers and security threats, or data centers and a rare nocturnal newt? Who knows! Data centers are impacting so many parts of our communities, which makes them a ripe topic for narrative and investigative exploration.

Resources...

Data center industry resources:

[Data Center Map](#)

[Data Center Frontier](#)

[Baxtel global data center map](#)

[Data Center Coalition](#)

[Data Center Knowledge](#)

[Data Center Dynamics](#)

Data center opponents:

[Data Center Proposal Tracker](#)

[Southern Environmental Law Center](#)

[Community & Environmental Defense Services](#)

[Media Justice](#)

[Data Center Watch](#)

[NAACP Environmental & Climate Justice](#)

[Stop Data Colonialism \(Honor The Earth\)](#)

[Stop Data Centers Coalition](#)