

From Opposition to Opportunity

*Brownfield Redevelopment, Data Centers,
and the Development Agreement That Changes Everything*

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Why Hyperscale Data Centers Choose Farmland Over Urban Industrial

Understanding the mismatch is the first step to fixing it.

Power scale

100–500+ MW on a single campus — requires direct utility substation access or new transmission

Contiguous acreage

50–500 acres in a single parcel or assemblage — urban lots are too fragmented

Clean title / no remediation liability

Environmental indemnification risk makes brownfields a harder underwrite

Water for cooling

Millions of gallons/day for air-cooled systems — urban water infrastructure often undersized

Speed to commission

12–24 month timelines — brownfield cleanup adds 2–5 years before shovels move

Low land cost basis

Farmland at \$5–15K/acre vs. urban industrial at \$50–200K/acre plus remediation

What NW Indiana Urban Industrial Does Offer

- Existing heavy electrical infrastructure (steel heritage)
- Rail, interstate & port connectivity
- Proximity to Chicago/IN metro and university labor pools
- Opportunity Zone and tax increment financing eligibility
- Sites large enough for edge/enterprise-scale (not hyperscale) deployments
- Motivated municipalities & ready-to-negotiate economic development offices

The opportunity: position NW Indiana for the data center tier that actually fits.

Not All Data Centers Are the Same — Match the Type to the Site

Hyperscale

Low fit

Power: 100–500+ MW

Site: 100–500 ac

AWS, Google, Meta campus builds

Requires greenfield or large suburban/rural assemblages. Farmland preferred. NW Indiana urban sites rarely qualify.

Colocation (Large)

Possible fit

Power: 20–100 MW

Site: 20–80 ac

Equinix, Digital Realty, QTS

Requires significant power but smaller footprint. Former steel/manufacturing sites with existing substations are candidates.

Edge / Regional

Strong fit

Power: 1–20 MW

Site: 2–15 ac

Smaller colo operators, regional carriers

Designed to serve metro areas within low-latency range. Urban brownfields near fiber corridors are well-suited.

Enterprise / Micro

Ideal fit

Power: <5 MW

Site: <5 ac

Corporate owned, hospital systems, gov't

Fits into existing industrial buildings. Adaptive reuse of former warehouses or light industrial. High community compatibility.

Gary & NW Indiana's sweet spot: Edge, Regional, and select Colocation facilities on urban brownfield sites.

Defining "Good": Sustainable Data Center Standards

Key Certification Frameworks

Green Globes

Green Building Initiative (GBI)

Third-party verified; 1,000-point scale covering energy, water, materials, indoor environment & site. Strong commercial/industrial applicability. More flexible than LEED for industrial adaptive reuse.

LEED (Data Center)

U.S. Green Building Council

Widely recognized. Energy & atmosphere credits most impactful for data centers. Benchmarks against ENERGY STAR.

ENERGY STAR for Data Centers

U.S. EPA

Focuses on energy efficiency of IT and cooling systems. PUE (Power Usage Effectiveness) is the headline metric — top quartile facilities score ≤ 1.2 .

Measurable Attributes to Require

PUE ≤ 1.3

Power Usage Effectiveness — industry average is ~ 1.5 ; best-in-class ≤ 1.2

WUE target

Water Usage Effectiveness — closed-loop or adiabatic cooling vs. open evaporative towers

Renewable energy %

On-site generation or verified PPAs; 100% RE24 standard growing among operators

Heat reuse / rejection

Waste heat utilization for district heating, greenhouses, or adjacent industrial processes

Stormwater management

On-site retention, permeable surfaces; especially critical on former impervious industrial sites

Materials transparency

EPDs for structural materials; recycled content minimums in construction

Local hiring floor

Construction and operations hiring benchmarks for surrounding ZIP codes

What I learned— and What Model Cities Show

Community Engagement in NWI

What I observed:

- Opposition to development is real — and often well-founded.
- Fear centers on displacement, broken job promises, utility costs, worsening environmental conditions, opaque decision processes, and quality of life concerns.
- Residents can distinguish between 'engagement theater' and decisions where their input actually changes something.
- When communities understand the opportunities and have win-win options, opposition often becomes negotiation.
- Communities need to be supported in these negotiations with data, project evaluation tools, model agreements, and infrastructure planning.
- Trust building with local governments and developers requires transparency and sustained presence.

What Model Cities Did Differently

Columbus, OH

Proactive data center recruitment strategy with pre-negotiated utility commitments and a standard development agreement template — reduced deal time by 40%.

Prineville, OR

Worked with Crook County to embed water, utility, and emergency services infrastructure into the development agreement. Philanthropic dollars from operators were directed to community-prioritized public works projects — not discretionary spending.

Kansas City, MO

Brownfield-to-data-center conversion using EPA area-wide planning + TIF layering; community co-designed the reuse program, including workforce pipeline tied to local community college.

Reno, NV

Region overcame initial opposition by publishing clear site criteria and the development agreement template publicly — opposition shifted to competitive recruitment participation.

The Development Agreement: Where It All Hinges

A well-crafted development agreement makes a separate CBA unnecessary — it IS the community benefit instrument.

01

Sustainability Performance Standards

Specify PUE ceiling, WUE target, and renewable energy % — tied to certificate of occupancy, not promises. Reference Green Globes or LEED as certification pathway.

02

Local Hiring & Workforce Pipeline

Construction workforce % from defined ZIP codes; permanent operations hiring benchmarks; pre-apprenticeship partnership with Ivy Tech or local trades programs named in the agreement.

03

Environmental Monitoring & Reporting

Annual third-party reporting on water draw, stormwater, and energy sourcing; public dashboard required; city retains audit rights. Not self-reported.

04

Incentive Clawback Provisions

TIF, tax abatement, or fee waivers are conditional on meeting performance milestones at Year 2, 5, and 10. Failure triggers partial or full clawback — enforceable, not advisory.

05

Infrastructure & Utility Obligations

Clearly delineates who pays for substation upgrades, water main extensions, and road improvements — prevents ratepayer burden. Cap on city infrastructure contribution.

06

Community Investment Fund

Annual contribution (flat fee or % of assessed value) to a designated fund — controlled by a community board, not city hall. Funded from Year 1 of operations.

Stop Reacting — Start Planning: A Proactive Strategy for the Region

1

Define your site inventory - ongoing

Catalog brownfield sites with data center potential — power capacity, parcel size, fiber proximity, water access. Publish it. Let operators self-select.

2

Publish your standards first

Release your development agreement template and sustainability thresholds publicly before any RFP. Good operators will self-select in; extractive ones will self-select out.

3

Integrate into zoning & code

Amend data center use standards in your zoning code to include power, Water, and green building minimums as a condition of permitting — not negotiated case-by-case.

4

Target the right operators

Colocation, edge and micro-operators — not hyperscalers — are your audience. Attend data center industry events. Reach out to operators with existing Green Globes or LEED certifications.

NIRPC's Unique Potential Regional Role

- ✓ Coordinate a regional data center site inventory across member municipalities — no single city can do this alone
- ✓ Connect brownfield assessment data (EPA, IDEM) with data center site suitability mapping
 - Develop a model development agreement template that member communities can adopt — levels the playing field
 - Establish a shared sustainability baseline so operators know what to expect across the region.
 - Equip local planning boards with Green Globe and Sensible Tools planning guides to enable efficient deliberation on project proposals.

Communities that define the terms attract better projects. Communities that wait accept whatever shows up.

What I'm Asking This Committee to Consider

Commission a regional data center site suitability study - Ongoing

Overlay brownfield inventory, power infrastructure, fiber, and water data. Identify the sites worth recruiting to, the appropriate data center type that could fit, and their redevelopment readiness timelines.

Develop a model development agreement template

Include sustainability performance standards (Green Globes / LEED pathway, Sensible Planning Tools), local hiring benchmarks, incentive clawbacks, and a community investment fund. Provide regional support (legal, technical expertise) to local decision-makers in negotiations.

Integrate data center standards into municipal zoning codes

PUE, WUE, and green building minimums as use conditions — not negotiated one project at a time. Give communities confidence in standards that protect them, while giving developers consistency and clear guidelines.

Lead a proactive recruitment effort targeting sustainable operators

Use NIRPC's convening power to present the region to colocation and edge/micro - operators with a sustainability track record. You won't get better data centers if you're not asking for them.