

Ogeechee Riverkeeper Policy Position: Data Center Development



Our Mission: To protect, preserve, and improve the water quality of the Ogeechee River basin

Our Goal: To promote responsible development that balances the economic needs of the communities in our basin with the capacity of our shared natural resources and quality of life. We believe this can be achieved by supporting specific policies and development practices that center people and treasured places. This policy position is not intended to be an exhaustive list of every eventuality or potential issue. Rather, it seeks to address common concerns and aspects to consider when evaluating a proposed data center.

The Challenge: The explosion of data centers across the state to support the growing artificial intelligence (AI) industry. Georgia is among the leading states in the nation when it comes to the proliferation of AI data centers. While these facilities might seem like “necessary evils” in an increasingly tech-oriented society, they are not without very real costs and risks to the communities in which they are built. This includes threats to water resources, strains on utility infrastructure, and negative impacts to quality of life in the surrounding community.

ORK supports:

- Protecting water resources by requiring comprehensive impact studies which include assessment of the hydrological impacts of large-scale land clearing, sedimentation, groundwater withdrawals, and surface water utilization
- Requiring pretreatment or direct discharge permits that ensure the health of our waterways through protective limits on pollutants and temperature
- Requiring comprehensive stormwater mitigation plans that demonstrate that onsite retention structures and landscaping can absorb sufficient rainfall to avoid overwhelming local stormwater systems and washing pollutants into wetlands and streams
- Insisting on transparency during the review process by requiring conditional or special use permits voted on by local governments after public comment, and by prohibiting nondisclosure agreements that seek to hide vital information, such as the full scope of water and energy usage; transparency on jobs numbers (new vs hire within, timeline)
- Requiring negotiated and signed community benefit agreements that layout both the cost and reward for area residents
- Prohibiting evaporative cooling technologies that do not prioritize minimal draw from local waterbodies and/or aquifers; minimum requirement of reused water or closed-loop water system
- Mandating restrictions on noise and light pollution to minimize impacts on residents and wildlife
- Insulating residential ratepayers and small businesses from utility price increases related to the expansion of energy infrastructure and capacity to meet the needs of high-use customers
- Promoting fiscal responsibility by removing tax incentives that amount to giveaways to projects that would be built anyway
- Enacting moratoriums to allow local governments to take time to thoughtfully update their zoning codes appropriately