

Commentary: Data center debates expose truths about human nature

Data Centers Were Never the Story

Steven Streit/mayor, Lockport, Illinois May 2026

Data center development—and the AI economy it makes possible—has become one of the defining public policy questions of our time. Communities across the country are increasingly being asked to balance economic opportunity with energy demand, environmental stewardship, and the public interest. These are difficult challenges. But recent experience has led me to believe the greatest challenge may not be technological at all. It may be our ability to govern transformative technologies through open inquiry.

My community, Lockport, recently found itself at one of those decision points.

After completing an exploratory marketing agreement for a city-owned brownfield site, we were asked to move into a formal effort to attract data center developers. Rather than rush forward, we paused to ask a more fundamental question: Is this an industry our community should even consider, and if so, under what conditions?

We organized public workshops because we believed the more important conversation wasn't whether Lockport should host a data center. It was how communities should govern an industry rapidly becoming society's fifth utility, alongside electricity, water, natural gas, and telecommunications.

As mayor, I have spent fourteen years guiding discussions on difficult issues. Disagreement has never concerned me; it is a healthy part of democratic government. What surprised me was not opposition to data centers, but opposition to the conversation itself.

Our goal was to bring residents, utility experts, regional planners, educators, and environmental specialists together to examine questions about power, water, artificial intelligence, job training, and the safeguards communities should demand before making any decision.

Instead, many attendees arrived convinced the workshops existed to justify a decision that had already been made. For them, the very act of asking questions about the industry was evidence that the city intended to approve it. Efforts to gather additional information were viewed not as inquiry, but as an attempt to legitimize the compute industry.

One exchange captured the evening. A resident expressed concerns about artificial intelligence that largely mirrored my own. When I replied, “I agree with you,” he immediately answered, “I don’t want you to agree with me.” In that moment, I realized we were engaged in two entirely different conversations.

I believed we were discussing how to govern an emerging technology. Many in the audience believed we were debating whether to approve a data center. The real issue was not the topic itself, but our growing difficulty engaging with ideas that originate outside our own affiliation networks.

Over my time in public office, I have watched public meetings change. Residents once came hoping to persuade one another. Increasingly, they arrive convinced not only of the conclusions, but of the motives of anyone who disagrees. Social media did not create this tendency, but algorithms have accelerated it by surrounding us with information and communities that continually reinforce our existing beliefs.

Once information becomes intertwined with belonging, motives are questioned before arguments are examined. Identity is evaluated before evidence. The question quietly shifts from, “What is this person saying?” to “Which side is this person on?”

That distinction matters because our institutions were never designed to adjudicate affiliation. They were designed to examine questions. Universities, legislatures, courts, scientific institutions, and democratic governments all depend on the belief that competing ideas deserve to be tested honestly, even when they challenge our assumptions. Democracy determines who governs. Inquiry determines whether we govern wisely.

I increasingly see this same pattern surrounding housing, education, policing, energy policy, and public health. The issues change, but the dynamics remain remarkably consistent.

The irony is difficult to ignore. The compute infrastructure powering artificial intelligence has made information more abundant than at any point in history, yet it also strengthens the digital silos that make genuine inquiry more difficult. Data centers raise legitimate questions about power, water, and environmental impacts, and those deserve serious oversight. But the technologies they enable may also be amplifying something even more difficult to engineer around: human nature itself.

Good governance does not require consensus. It requires trust that difficult questions can be honestly examined. If communities are going to govern the AI economy wisely, we must recover the willingness to step outside our information tribes, hear ideas we dislike, and risk changing our minds.

That is not a weakness. It is the foundation of self-government.