

WALKER COUNTY

DATA CENTER DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS STUDY COMMITTEE

MEETING MINUTES

Date: August 27, 2026

Time: 3:00 p.m. – 4:48 p.m.

Location: Walker County Civic Center

CALL TO ORDER

Stephanie Watkins, Economic Development Director, called the meeting to order at 3:00 p.m.

Ms. Watkins reviewed the purpose and scope of the Data Center Development Standards Study Committee. The committee was established to study potential development standards and regulations applicable to data centers, including setbacks, noise, buffers, lighting, and other potential regulations.

Ms. Watkins stated that the goal of the committee is to engage in meaningful discussion and ultimately make recommendations to the Walker County Board of Commissioners. She emphasized that the committee is advisory in nature and that the Board of Commissioners will make all final decisions.

Members of the public were encouraged to submit comments, questions, and thoughts to **development@walkerga.us**. The committee is scheduled to meet every other Thursday at the same time, with meeting notices to be provided in advance.

Ms. Watkins also noted that each commissioner has appointed two designees to serve on the committee. She encouraged members of the public to submit comments and thoughts in advance of meetings. Attendees were reminded that disruptive behavior would not be permitted and that disruptive guests could be dismissed from the meeting.

ATTENDANCE

Committee members in attendance included:

- **Stephanie Watkins**, Economic Development Director
- **Jon Pursley**, Planning Director, Walker County
- **Lacey Smith**, Walker County Chamber of Commerce

- **Jason Rader**, District 1
- **Kenneth Wilson**, District 4
- **Laura Owsley**, District 3
- **Travis Middleton**, District 4
- **Chad Hodges**, District 2
- **Barney Danks**, District 1
- **Jon Madden**, District 2
- **Courtney Johnson**, District 3

REVIEW OF COUNTY ORDINANCES AND EXISTING DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS

The committee reviewed existing Walker County ordinances and land-use development standards. It was noted that Walker County does not currently have specific regulations addressing data centers; however, existing land-use and development standards are already in place that may apply to future development.

Ms. Watkins provided a definition of a **data center** and discussed the growing demand for data-center infrastructure. Examples of everyday services that rely upon data infrastructure included online banking, telehealth, Amazon orders, and Walmart pickup services.

The committee discussed the significant growth in data consumption. Reference was made to the 2024 global outlook indicating that data consumption is expected to increase substantially, with estimates that global data usage could be approximately twice current levels.

The committee discussed different types of data centers, including **enterprise, hyperscale/cloud, and edge data centers**. Hyperscale and cloud facilities were described as generally requiring larger acreage, while edge facilities typically have a smaller footprint, potentially around an acre and a half, and are located closer to their end users.

RESPONSIBLE GROWTH AND POTENTIAL DEVELOPMENT

Jon Pursley provided an overview of research conducted over approximately six to seven months. His research included reviewing the approaches being taken in Whitfield and Bartow Counties and considering the issues those communities are facing with data-center development.

Mr. Pursley stated that the committee's focus should be responsible growth and determining whether and where data centers may be appropriate in Walker County, while establishing restrictions and standards that protect the community and provide an appropriate benefit to the county.

He discussed the role of utility providers in the development and approval process. It was noted that any and all projects already require documentation from utility providers regarding the availability of power. If sufficient power cannot be provided, the project cannot proceed.

The possibility of requiring a **closed-loop system** was also discussed.

Stephanie Watkins noted that Georgia is a **power-of-choice state**, meaning companies may select their power provider.

Jason Rader discussed the extent to which residents and businesses already rely on data centers and related infrastructure, including their importance to emergency services and other everyday functions.

Travis Middleton asked whether Walker County currently has data centers.

Kenneth Wilson referenced research regarding a data-center project in Dalton involving approximately **145 megawatts of electricity demand** and approximately **175 acres**, along with concerns related to potential pollution and other impacts.

Mr. Pursley stated that, from his perspective, he did not see a reason to recommend anything other than a closed-loop system for water use/discharge associated with data-center development.

WATER USAGE AND AVAILABILITY

The committee discussed water consumption and wastewater/discharge associated with data centers.

Jon Madden asked questions regarding discharge from data centers. Courtney Johnson discussed water usage and indicated that, depending upon the system, water may be evaporated rather than discharged.

Mr. Johnson provided perspective based upon his professional experience in the water and wastewater industry, including considerations related to water availability, drought conditions, system capacity, and the demands that large-scale developments could place on existing infrastructure.

Laura Owsley asked whether exclusive-use provisions could be considered and also raised questions regarding water usage.

Stephanie Watkins stated that there are more than **400 acres of available land** in the county, including approximately **50 acres in the Rock Spring industrial park**.

Mr. Johnson emphasized the importance of determining what the county's existing water and wastewater systems can supply compared with the potential demands of a data-center development.

The committee also discussed the possibility of establishing minimum and maximum thresholds or other standards related to utility demand.

LAND USE, ZONING, BUFFERS AND SETBACKS

The committee discussed potential zoning and land-use requirements for data centers.

Mr. Pursley stated that he believed data centers should be limited to **industrial-only zoning districts** and expressed concern about the viability of allowing data centers to occupy existing agricultural land.

The possibility of utilizing a **conditional-use process** was discussed.

Mr. Pursley also noted that infrastructure such as booster stations could potentially be incorporated under the broader requirements applicable to a data-center development.

Laura Owsley asked whether an exclusive-use designation could be considered.

The committee discussed existing buffer requirements and compared potential data-center standards with requirements that have previously been applied to other land uses, including solar developments and poultry/chicken houses.

Mr. Pursley referenced poultry-industry requirements, including the use of berms and a 200-foot setback.

The committee discussed the fact that data centers constructed approximately five years ago can be substantially different from facilities being proposed today, underscoring the need to consider current and future technology when establishing regulations.

Potential standards discussed included:

- Minimum setbacks
- Property-line buffers
- Green-space requirements
- Noise limitations
- Lighting standards
- Motion-activated lighting
- Security lighting
- Landscaping and screening
- Berms
- Industrial zoning requirements
- Water and wastewater requirements
- Utility capacity
- Minimum and maximum project sizes

The committee also discussed standards recently adopted in Floyd County as a potential reference point.

NOISE, LIGHTING AND COMMUNITY IMPACTS

Mr. Pursley discussed the potential use of decibel limitations to regulate noise generated by data-center facilities.

The committee discussed the importance of green space, lighting controls, security lighting, and motion-activated lighting as potential components of development standards.

The discussion emphasized the importance of establishing standards that address the impacts of a data center on surrounding properties and neighboring land uses.

ENERGY USE AND CURTAILMENT

Barney Danks, who owns solar farms, provided information regarding energy use and curtailment requirements. He stated that TVA may require certain facilities to participate in a curtailment system, under which power can be reduced or shut off when necessary, potentially within approximately five to ten minutes.

Mr. Danks also discussed the potential tax implications associated with large data-center facilities. He noted that the economic impact could include taxes associated with the building, computers and other equipment, and electricity, with the ultimate impact depending in part upon the type of facility, including whether it is an artificial intelligence-related data center.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS AND AGREEMENTS

Jason Rader raised the concept of a **Community Benefits Agreement (CBA)** and the possibility of establishing agreements that could provide benefits to local schools or other community priorities.

Travis Middleton expressed concern about ensuring that companies contribute their fair share to the community over the long term, referencing a previous 30-year tax abatement.

The committee discussed the need to balance economic development opportunities with infrastructure capacity, community impacts, and long-term benefits to Walker County.

SITE VISIT

The committee discussed the possibility of visiting an operating data center to gain a better understanding of the facilities, their operations, infrastructure requirements, noise, lighting, water usage, and overall community impact.

NEXT STEPS

The committee discussed at length the need for additional research and continued discussion regarding potential minimum and maximum standards, including acreage, utility demand, water usage, buffers, setbacks, noise, lighting, green space, zoning, and community benefits. The

recent ordinance from Floyd County was also referenced and copies were provided by an attendee.

Members were encouraged to continue submitting information and recommendations for consideration as the committee develops potential recommendations for the Board of Commissioners.

MEETING SCHEDULE

The committee discussed changing the regular meeting time from **3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.**

A motion was made to move the meeting time to 4:00 p.m. going forward, which was approved by the group with no objections.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at **4:48 p.m.**

Respectfully submitted,

Lacey Smith