Walker County Data Center Study Committee

Meeting Minutes

Date: October 8, 2026
Time: 6:00 p.m. – 7:21 p.m.

1. Call to Order

Stephanie Watkins called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

2. Attendance

Present:

- Jon Pursley
- Barney Danks
- Chad Hodges
- Travis Middleton
- Jon Madden
- Jason Rader
- Lacey Smith
- Kenneth Wilson
- Courtney Johnson
- Laura Owlsley

3. Review and Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

Laura Owlsley requested the addition of Mr. Danks' previous comments and circulated a copy with her proposed revisions marked in red.

Jason Rader made a motion to approve the minutes, as amended. Laura Owlsley seconded the motion. The motion carried.

4. Data Center Development and Regulatory Authority

Travis Middleton initiated a discussion regarding the committee's purpose and the county's authority concerning data center development. Jon Pursley clarified that the county could not prohibit development without potentially facing litigation. He noted that the Board of

Commissioners could enact a permanent moratorium but that doing so could expose the county to legal challenges.

Travis acknowledged this clarification and asked whether the committee agreed on the importance of closed-loop cooling systems, limiting development to industrial parks, and enforcing appropriate setbacks.

Jon explained the proposed setback distinctions, noting 400 feet between residential and industrial uses and 100 feet between industrial uses. He also raised the legal question of whether a particular use could be prohibited on an individual parcel.

The committee discussed the importance of establishing clear development standards and understanding the distinction between regulating a use and prohibiting it outright.

5. Infrastructure, Telecommunications, and Development Standards

The committee discussed high-density fiber infrastructure and whether the term “telecommunications” should be included in the proposed recommendations. Chad Hodges and Jason Rader suggested removing the term because smaller telecommunications facilities may also require high-density fiber infrastructure.

Courtney Johnson asked whether the Board of Commissioners would retain the authority to deny a proposed development. Stephanie Watkins clarified that the committee’s role was to develop a list of recommendations for consideration.

Jon Madden noted that data centers are increasingly integral to modern technology, including mobile phones and artificial intelligence. Jon Pursley discussed lessons learned over the past 20 years and emphasized that decisions made by neighboring jurisdictions, including LaFayette, would be matters for those jurisdictions to address.

The committee also discussed the importance of ensuring that development standards remain effective as technology evolves. Laura Owsley emphasized the need to protect the county from companies bringing outdated systems into the area. Jon Pursley described regulation and enforcement as an ongoing process requiring continued oversight to ensure that companies comply with their commitments.

6. Noise, Monitoring, and Enforcement

The committee discussed noise standards and enforcement mechanisms for potential data center developments.

Jon Pursley referenced a nearby rock quarry operating at approximately 73 decibels and noted that a conversation inside a truck can reach approximately 70 decibels. He emphasized the importance of establishing appropriate restrictions and following up to ensure compliance.

Kenneth Wilson noted that his business can be loud at times but does not operate at the same noise level continuously, distinguishing intermittent industrial noise from continuous operations.

Jon Madden observed that open-air Bitcoin operations could become outdated as technology advances.

The committee discussed potential fines for violations. A fine of $1,000 per day was raised, and Jon Pursley clarified that the county's allowable daily fines may range from $100 to $1,000, subject to applicable authority and requirements.

Additional discussion included:

- Laura Owsley's concern regarding lighting standards, with reference to Floyd County.
- Chad Hodges' question about state recommendations and potential maximum limits along state roads.
- Laura Owsley's recommendation to remove the phrase "average volume" from the draft.
- Laura Owsley's presentation of a decibel reader and recommendation that the committee consider C-weighted decibel measurements. She indicated that 68 dBC was a level she felt comfortable considering.
- Clarification that A-weighting is generally used for higher-frequency sound measurements, while C-weighting captures more low-frequency sound.
- Jon Madden's recommendation to use a third-party tester.
- Barney Danks's suggestion that the county and developer agree upon a testing company in advance.

The committee discussed the need for clear measurement standards, independent verification, and ongoing enforcement.

7. Permitting, Utilities, and Development Review

Barney Danks asked whether the proposed ordinance would differ significantly from existing industrial development regulations.

Jon Pursley explained that utility-related work in the county requires appropriate approval and that projects involving septic systems must receive approval from Environmental Health. He described the county's plan-review process and noted that the variety of water providers serving the area requires preconstruction meetings to confirm that infrastructure can accommodate proposed development, from industrial facilities to residential properties.

Jon Madden also noted that the first modern data center dates to the 1940s.

The committee discussed concept plans and conditional use permits. Stephanie Watkins clarified that applicants may request consideration of smaller acreage through a conditional use process. Jon Pursley explained the distinction between a variance and a conditional use permit.

He further clarified that the Planning Commission makes recommendations, while the Board of Commissioners serves as the ultimate governing authority.

Travis Middleton recommended involving the Board of Commissioners in the committee's work to obtain feedback and ensure that the recommendations reflect the governing body's perspective.

8. Community Engagement and Governance

Lacey Smith shared a Georgia Tech presentation regarding the Digital First Communities initiative, which offers a structured, community-led process for addressing digital development and related issues.

Jon Pursley reiterated the importance of governance and discussed Pilgrim's as an example of an industrial operation and its relationship with neighboring properties. He noted the importance of maintaining effective relationships between businesses and surrounding communities.

Jon Madden asked who would be responsible for meeting with companies and negotiating development expectations.

The discussion reinforced the importance of clear accountability, community engagement, and consistent oversight.

9. Site Design and General Development Standards

The committee reviewed potential additions and revisions to the proposed development standards.

- **Vegetative buffers:** Laura Owsley requested that dense vegetation be added to Section 4 under General Development Standards.
- **Permanent versus mobile structures:** Laura Owsley expressed a preference for fixed structures rather than mobile structures. Barney Danks noted that fixed property also depreciates.
- **Building size and permanence:** Travis Middleton questioned whether smaller buildings would qualify as permanent structures.
- **Employment impacts:** Courtney Johnson asked how many jobs a data center would create. Barney Danks observed that technological advancements are reducing employee requirements across many industries.
- **Prohibited locations:** Laura Owsley asked whether wetlands, conservation areas, protected natural resource areas, historic properties/districts and environmentally sensitive areas containing protected or endangered species should be specifically included among prohibited locations. Jon Pursley explained that soil and erosion control plans would address many related concerns.

- **Groundwater protection:** Jon Pursley raised the importance of groundwater protection and discussed the possibility of quarterly testing. He provided an example involving a retention pond in an industrial park.

The committee discussed the need to evaluate site-specific environmental protections and incorporate appropriate safeguards into the recommendations.

10. Review of Correspondence and Economic Impacts

Stephanie Watkins called attention to emails she had previously distributed and asked committee members to identify any items requiring further consideration.

The committee discussed potential tax implications, community benefits, and the broader impacts of data center development.

11. Adjournment

Prior to adjournment, Travis Middleton stated that data centers have been located in Walker County since 2020, citing a container data center operation.

The meeting adjourned at 7:21 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Lacey Smith