

https://www.princewilliamtimes.com/opinion/guest-opinion-data-center-plan-s-promises-are-built-on-false-premises/article_4b9ba902-8185-11ec-a6ac-23991cbeaf8a.html

GUEST OPINION: Data center plan's promises are built on false premises

By Deshundra Jefferson
Jan 29, 2022



Deshundra Jefferson
submitted

If wealthy developers for Pageland Lane are to be believed, the so-called “PW Digital Gateway” would bring millions of dollars into our county coffers, reverse inequitable land-use policies and close the Black-white wealth gap.

Those false promises are built on false premises.

The county's rural crescent was created in 1998 to protect farmland and to limit suburban sprawl. Land zoned A-1, or agricultural use, allows for only one single-family dwelling per 10 acres. That particular zoning designation has become a flashpoint given the push for more affordable housing throughout the county.

The PW Digital Gateway does nothing to create equitable housing within the county. Instead, the project would swap farmland for data centers. It's a sleight of hand that needs to be noted, given the applicants for PW Digital Gateway are leaning heavily into the argument that A-1 zoning contributes to segregation. If Pageland landowners truly feel that the A-1 zoning is an exclusionary practice – a practice that has long served them well – then why sell their land to data centers?

The Digital Gateway website claims that data centers are the better bet than housing, a win-win that would create “thousands of jobs for 15 to 20 years in construction and establish a permanent tech workforce.” Using language reminiscent of social justice activism, the website claims this project “can create a level playing field for all PWC residents.”

Creating opportunity doesn't necessarily create access. There's no guarantee that these jobs would employ people of color, nor are there assurances future employees would be paid prevailing union wages in a red-leaning, right-to-work state.

More to the point: Those jobs may never materialize.

Data Center Dynamics, an industry trade publication, plainly stated that, “[j]obs have always been a poor incentive for communities to accept data center proposals – the facilities simply don't require many people compared to, say, a manufacturing plant. The vast majority of jobs come in the first year or so, during the construction phase, with a large number of those being out-of-state contractors.”

Time magazine explored the impact of data centers on small towns. A couple of key takeaways: Data center owners increasingly rely on temporary contractors rather than full-time employees and are “extremely aggressive when it comes to extracting concessions from elected officials.”

Even Loudoun County, which has been at the forefront of data center development, had to reckon with a massive, \$60 million budget shortfall due to a sharp, unexpected drop in tax revenue from data centers.

It's uncertain what Prince William would actually stand to gain from the PW Digital Gateway, and there needs to be a closer examination of its potential pitfalls.

This proposal would essentially greenlight the controversial Bi-County Parkway, also known as the "outer Beltway." The Bi-County Parkway would create a new truck route connecting the cargo facilities at Dulles International Airport to Interstate 95 via Va. 23 or Dumfries Road.

There are four schools along Va 234, including the Washington-Reid Preschool Center that serves at-risk 4-year-olds and those with developmental delays, and numerous residential neighborhoods that would be adversely affected if the outer Beltway were to come to fruition.

There are also serious environmental concerns associated with the rezoning, primarily the impact on drinking water from the Occoquan Reservoir, near Woodbridge, and the Beaverdam Reservoir near Ashburn.

According to the Prince William Conservation Alliance, "[O]ver half of Prince William's total county population, located generally in the eastern portion of the county, depend on the Occoquan Reservoir for about 17 million gallons of clean drinking water each day." Prince William County's own environmental experts recommended that the Prince William Board of County Supervisors reject plans to rezone this land.

The supervisors need to resist giving in to what looks easy. Board Chair Ann Wheeler told the Washington Post that, "Just to say: 'No, we're not going to do this,' is not responsible governing." A quick payoff may ease the path to re-election, but responsible governing requires tough choices. Far too many organizations – including the Virginia Department of Forestry – have raised serious concerns about this proposal that should not be ignored.

And, if we are to truly look at this issue through the lens of equity, then we have to ask who most benefits from property tax relief. A 2020 study found Black and Hispanic homeowners like me, typically "bear 10% to 13% higher property tax burden than white residents." And few, if any, landlords would actually reduce rents simply because they pay less in property taxes.

The deeper one dives into this proposal, the less equitable it appears. Buzzwords like equity and inclusion are clearly being tossed around to make this more palatable – and easier to silence those in opposition.

Deshundra Jefferson is a Montclair resident and a former co-chair for the Potomac Magisterial District Democratic Committee.