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GUEST OPINION: Data centers, the Bi-County Parkway are too much for the rural crescent

By Danica Roem
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Del. Danica Roem, D-13th

I've received a number of phone calls and emails from my constituents in Gainesville concerned about the proposal to allow data centers in the rural crescent part of Gainesville here in the 13th District.

As I've stated for years now, I oppose all data centers being built north or west of Innovation Park in Manassas, and especially data centers being built near either Conway Robinson Park or Manassas National Battlefield Park.

While I personally consider the tax revenue generated from data centers to be the political equivalent of a sugar high and would prefer what's left of our woods in western Prince William be left alone rather than be turned into buildings, I respect that those are local land-use decisions to be made by the Prince William Board of County Supervisors.

In general, I respect division of powers between state and local office and, likewise, I respect local elected officials being able to make local land-use decisions – with an important caveat.

Transmission lines – huge 69KV and larger lines meant to power major consumers of energy, such as data centers – and roads both directly affect my legislative work: the former as a matter of the Code of Virginia, the latter as both a state delegate and a member of the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority.

Last year, I filed and the Virginia General Assembly passed my bill, HB 1030, to ban above-ground transmission lines along the Interstate 66 corridor between Gainesville and Haymarket for the next 10 years. I wrote that bill specifically to end 14 years of fights over above-ground transmission lines in that area. If *any* land-use decision runs afoul of the spirit or text of HB 1030, it will come at the project's peril, and I will do what I must to preserve the integrity of HB 1030.

I filed that bill and fought for it for three years to encourage the Prince William Board of County Supervisors to stop putting what electric utilities refer to as “bulk-load customers” (read: data centers) in Haymarket and Gainesville and rethink economic development in western Prince William County. Transmission lines only go up when there's something to charge at the other end.

One of the arguments for adding the data centers to Pageland Lane is that there are nearby transmission lines already in place. While I appreciate the argument that it relies on existing infrastructure, you of course could say the same about Innovation Park, which is specifically designed for technology-based economic development.

Also, if a bunch of data centers spring up at once to stress the capacity of those lines, it's just a matter of time before we're revisiting the protests of 2006 and 2014 about building new transmission facilities in an area that's had more than enough fights already.

My transportation concern is that the moment any significant commercial development is approved for that corridor, it will immediately bring with it calls to resurrect the proposed Bi-County Parkway. Pageland Lane, an existing two-lane country road, won't be able to support even more commuters at a time when we already have commuters using it as a short-cut.

The fight over the Bi-County Parkway was supposed to be over five years ago when the board of county supervisors stripped it from the county's comprehensive plan following the all-out political war over it in 2013 and 2014. It needs to stay dead. Let's focus on what we can agree on: fixing our existing roads – which we're now finally doing on Route 28 – before we create new problems with new roads.

Likewise, while recognizing that it is ultimately a local land-use decision for the board of county supervisors to make, I again urge all of our local officials – elected and appointed – to leave further development out of the rural crescent and lands adjacent to Manassas National Battlefield Park here in the 13th District.

Del. Danica Roem represents the 13th District of the Virginia House of Delegates. Elected to a third term Nov. 2, she is a lifelong resident of the Manassas part of Prince William County and covered western Prince William as a reporter for the former Gainesville Times and Prince William Times from 2006-2015.