

Data

tal-focused data centers of at least 300,000 square feet- but what type of centers they are cannot be predicted. According to Pierce, the work of companies like Applied Digital (a group that has expressed interest in ND) focuses more on building structures and cooling facilities rather than bringing in servers, meaning that the actual focus of any incoming data centers cannot be confirmed until they are formally proposed. There are some differences between AI and Cryptocurrency facilities, but Pierce adds that Planning and Zoning does not deal with the distinctions, especially when no plans are in place.

“Applied Digital operates more as landlords than anything else,” said Pierce, “and companies like those have been the ones pushing for data centers in North Dakota. We don’t really get involved in the data that’s coming back and forth, and there isn’t a good way of telling what’s in those servers. For our guidelines, we aren’t differentiating between types of data centers, so long as they have servers that are housing, managing, or sending digital data.”

This lack of differentiation, however, does not mean that there will be no review process. Any new data center plans will be heavily analyzed

by Planning and Zoning, with special attention being paid to potential noise pollution.

“In Morton County, the applicant has to measure ambient noise on the boundary of their proposed site,” said Pierce. “They need to establish how loud or quiet a typical day would be in their location, and mitigate noise from their project so that it doesn’t reach a certain threshold.... If they can’t mitigate, then they just can’t go there. When these things are reviewed, they will be very thorough reviews.”

As promising as this sounds, noise is not the only problem that would stem from a potential data center. Another tremendous issue is the water use of such a building, something that Morton County is simply not able to match.

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~ Natalie Pierce, Director of Morton County Planning and Zoning Commission

“One major question is how you’d get that much water,” said Pierce. “Rural county water systems aren’t set up to serve industrial

users, let alone any kind of heavy commercial project. You’d have to truck the water in, and that has big impacts on county roads. The last option would be ground-water, but they’d need the state’s permission to do that or tap into aquifers.”

Pierce also adds that there may be some benefits from adding data centers to the county, but they are often overshadowed by the negatives. The state’s counties have been using an Applied Digital project in Ellendale as a ‘guinea pig’ to see these, and while there are notable surges in both jobs and traffic, analysts have already identified several issues that they would prefer not be repeated in other jurisdictions.

“I know they had issues getting teachers,” said Pierce. “There’s nowhere for them to live, because housing is in such short supply when you’ve got hundreds of construction workers coming in. There are also questions about who gets hired: is it locals, or crews that get shipped in from out of state? At the very least, we have a model for the future. With that, we can replicate the things that worked well, and change the ones that didn’t.”

Taxes are also a major consideration when discussing potential data centers. When these projects first became

established across the country, many states and counties welcomed them in hoping to obtain tax benefits. This poses a problem in North Dakota, as our tax structure only includes taxes for oil and energy sales from similar operations. As a result, a potential data center may be even less profitable than originally expected, especially if it does more damage to the area than it is worth.

“There’s definitely a tax aspect to it,” said Pierce. “But in North Dakota, the only revenue that would come in is from the structure itself. There’s no sales tax or revenue that comes from any of the activity on the site. It’s a big value, certainly, but maybe not as big as what some people may think. It all just depends on what the impacts are versus the income you’re getting.”

Their dubious effect on local power grids, meanwhile, is something that is worthy of a separate discussion all to itself, especially after state utility providers have displayed a vested interest in preventing registration.

“In the last legislative

session,” said Pierce, “there was a bill that required data centers to go through a Public Service Commission and earn a certificate of site compatibility before any process. That bill turned into a legislative study, and once that’s done, there will probably be another effort to regulate data centers at the state level. But when I looked at the testimonies for that bill, many utility providers were in the ‘against’ column, which I thought was interesting. They don’t seem to be interested in having data centers regulated by the PSC, even though they can have such a huge impact on the grid.”

Regulated or not, Pierce stresses that any potential data center plan will be heavily reviewed to ensure that it meets every guideline possible. A new center would be far from the first industrial complex to be built in Morton County, she states, and it would also not be the last.

“It depends on how things shake out,” said Pierce, “but we’d expect it to be the same as any other industrial use that exists. We have

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others in Mandan, like the oil refinery. They’re either far enough away from people for it not to matter, or things that the people who live there have gotten used to. Ideally, we’d like to have the developers mitigate their impacts as much as possible, or put themselves in a location where there’s hardly anyone around to be impacted.”

If one does have concerns, Pierce states that the best way to make them known is by getting involved in community feedback sessions. Any potential data center plans will be brought up during Morton County Commission meetings, most of which are open to the public. Like any other development, public information and protest sessions will also take place before any data center is built in the community.

The most recent version of the data center guidelines is expected to be presented at Planning and Zoning’s next meeting on March 25. More information on past and future guideline plans, as well as previous meetings, can be found on Morton County’s website.



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