

# NEWS

## Meeting from front: Lack of transparency a major concern for those on panel

noise and water pollution and higher electric rates, negative impacts on nearby residents, livestock and wildlife, and what many feel is a lack of transparency by both the companies wanting to build these facilities and government officials who appear to some to be making “back room” deals to attract data center projects.

Klein has become a vocal spokesperson in Mercer County as residents there struggle to gain some control over the proposed construction of a 1000 megawatt hyperscale facility and the River Run Energy Center being spearheaded by NextEra Energy. Both he and Berg have experienced significant negative interaction with NextEra and state officials, saying that the project has moved along at a rapid pace without proper permitting. Both said no environmental impact studies have been done, nor have Dept. of Transportation permits been issued, necessary documentation due to the heavy use of area roads.

It was evident that these projects have taken emotional and personal tolls on both men, who voiced concerns about how decisions being made today without the benefit of time to study and weigh the pros and cons of this type of development will impact future generations. “It’s my children and grandchildren who will suffer the consequences of decisions we make,” Klein said.

Gawrylow told the crowd that in the 1980s, North Dakota communities were clamoring for economic development in almost whatever form it could be found, and state officials invested tax dollars into the types of technology and

infrastructure that have been built in the last 40 years.

Today, he said there has been a 180-degree turnaround in many cases in which communities are pushing back on the development of energy-generating projects such as wind and solar farms, and now data, AI and cryptocurrency facilities. But many state officials are supporting such projects in response to what they say people wanted back then. “The data center initiative is backed by officials,” he said. “It’s state policy. Because tax dollars were invested, the state needs to have the data centers succeed.”

Thompson is calling for the entire state to impose a one-year moratorium on data center projects. “It’s becoming like the wild, wild west,” he said. “We need to get everyone to slow down so we don’t have to live with this after the fact.”

Every panelist touched upon, and agreed, that communities that are or will deal with future data center companies shouldn’t expect much support from state agencies that are being directed to push the agenda that such projects are good for the state’s economy. It was suggested by some that residents contact their elected officials, the Public Service Commission and Industrial Commission members to voice their concerns over how the state is dealing with the industry.

“You all need to go home, look in the mirror and ask yourselves ‘what is the common denominator that will determine what happens?’ It’s you,” Klein said.

All panelists encouraged city and county zoning commissions to do their due diligence, learn about the pitfalls of

such projects and draft strong ordinances as soon as possible that deal with land issues, zoning of land and other wording that ensures local communities have a say in how these projects proceed.

Another major concern voiced by the panel is the apparent lack of transparency by companies wanting to build data centers across the northern tier of the country. The cool climate half the year, relatively cheap land and the lack of ordinances in some areas are main draws for companies.

Comments were plentiful that company officials typically don’t share all pertinent information with community leaders, who down the road find out they agreed to things that are not in the best interest of their towns. Most companies building data centers are multi-billion dollar organizations that can take advantage of a local board’s lack of knowledge, panelists said.

Wishek City Council members Jessica Welder and Jim Eiseman, along with Wishek resident Patti Herr attended the meeting hoping to learn what other cities and counties are experiencing. “I think it’s great to link arms and make these connections,” Welder said. “You don’t know what you don’t know, and we’re in very uncharted territory.”

“We can’t be afraid to reach out to other counties, as well as our elected officials in order to make the best decisions for our community,” she added. My biggest takeaway from the meeting is that we aren’t in this alone.”

The McIntosh County Zoning Commission adopted ordinances earlier this year addressing issues with new development it hasn’t faced in the past. The proposed site of the Wishek data center project falls under the jurisdiction of the Wishek City Council and city zoning commission. There will be much collaboration in the coming months between these bodies as they draft ordinances and educate themselves about what the future holds.

Finally, community leaders were strongly encouraged not to sign non-disclosure agreements a company may present, which protects it from having to share too much project information until the community has signed on in support.

## Forged from front: The Alliance keeps stories alive

wrought-iron crosses for the group to see, the room fell into a quiet appreciation—part admiration for the craftsmanship, part reverence for the history it represents.

The cross, dark and elegant, bore the unmistakable curves and flourishes of the German-Russian blacksmithing tradition that once defined cemeteries across the prairie. For Haas, it’s more than a project. It’s a calling. “I just want to help keep it going,” he told the group, his hands still marked with the faint soot of the forge.

### A Tradition Passed Down, Hammer to Hammer

Haas is not working alone. He has spent the past several years under the mentorship of Jeffrey Malm of Kulm, a master blacksmith recognized by the North Dakota Council on the Arts for his expertise in crafting traditional wrought-iron cemetery crosses. Through Folk and Traditional Arts grants awarded from 2022 to 2024, the two have worked side by side—one passing down knowledge, the other ensuring it has a future.

For the German-Russian immigrants who settled in Emmons, Logan, and McIntosh counties, wrought-iron crosses were once a signature art form. Each cross served as a grave marker, but also as a deeply personal tribute. No two were alike. Some bore hearts or stars; others carried intricate scrollwork or symbols of faith. All were made by hand, often by the same blacksmith who shod horses, repaired plows, and built the tools that kept a homestead running.

“These crosses were part of everyday life and part of eternal life,” Haas said. “They tell stories.”

### The Alliance Keeping Those Stories Alive

The Tri-County Tourism Alliance, which hosted the meeting, has made it its mission to ensure those stories are not forgotten. Covering Emmons, Logan, and McIntosh counties, the Alliance works to preserve and promote the region’s German-Russian heritage—an identity woven into everything from food traditions to architecture to the

wrought-iron crosses Haas now creates.

As a nonprofit, the Alliance brings together community members, historians, artisans, and local leaders who share a common goal: to make this corner of North Dakota the premier destination for German-Russian cultural tourism. Monthly meetings like Friday’s are part planning session, part storytelling circle, part celebration of the people who keep heritage alive. “Every time someone like Bradley shares their work, it strengthens the connection between past and present,” one member said after the meeting. “It reminds us why we do what we do.”

### A Cross That Carries More Than Metal

The cross Haas displayed was still in progress, but even unfinished, it carried the weight of generations. Its curves echoed the style of the old masters. Its welds were clean and deliberate. Its presence in the room felt almost ceremonial.

For Haas, the work is both technical and emotional. He speaks of the craft with humility, aware that he is stepping into a lineage shaped by blacksmiths who forged not only metal, but identity. “These crosses stood in the wind for a hundred years or more,” he said. “They’re reminders of who we are and where we come from.”

### A Living Heritage

As the meeting wrapped up, members of the Alliance lingered around the cross, tracing its lines with their eyes, asking questions, sharing memories of similar markers in rural cemeteries across the region.

In that moment, the purpose of the Alliance—and the importance of Haas’s work—felt unmistakably clear. Heritage isn’t preserved by accident. It survives because people choose to carry it forward.

And in a small room in Ashley, with a single wrought-iron cross as the centerpiece, that heritage felt very much alive.

## JOIN US AT THE ANNUAL MEETING

Join us for an evening filled with camaraderie, food, prize giveaways, Luck-of-the-Draw scholarships and more!

🕒 4 - 4:45 p.m. Registration  
5 p.m. Business meeting & membership meal to follow

📅 Tuesday, June 9

📍 American Legion  
Barry-Hoof Post #72  
69 Broadway, Napoleon

