

DATA

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of people who are worried about how a data center would impact the environment, electricity rates and local resources such as fire prevention.

Stinnett is one of a number of people who've spoken before a county planning and zoning commission that's now considering a draft ordinance to regulate such data centers. Organizing with that group, We Are Mercer County, has also galvanized Stinnett to another first: running as a write-in candidate to be a county magistrate.

"The data center definitely got me to run," Stinnett said. "After seeing how decisions are made here and how it affects regular families, I decided to bring my real-world common sense to try to bring it to the magistrate position. People deserve someone who will actually listen to them."

His candidacy is just one of many examples of how the prospect of data centers moving into Kentucky — in need of large amounts of electricity and water to power clusters of computers boosting online services including artificial intelligence — have been animating politics and elections across Kentucky.

It's also led to contentious debates in local communities grappling with the peril and potential of data centers, the clash between local elected officials who perceive economic development benefits and constituents worried about the environmental impacts.

Stinnett describes himself as a "regular guy" who wants to look out for neighbors who could potentially be living near a data center.



Courtesy Diane Floyd

Diane Floyd, one of the organizers for We Are Mercer County, wearing a blue shirt for the group.

"I've lived in Mercer County for six years. My fiancé, she's grew up here whole life. We're wanting to continue that tradition and raise our three-year-old son here," Stinnett said.

Emerging data center disputes

The debate and concerns over a potential data center in Mercer County have been evolving for months.

The Harrodsburg Herald reported in December 2025 that the Mercer County Planning and Zoning Commission was hiring a consultant to deal with the possibility of a large-scale data center in the community. The newspaper reported the chair of the commission, Bobby Upchurch, said there "may be a request for our community sooner rather than later."

The Mercer County Industrial Development Authority told the Lexington Herald-Leader in February that a private landowner was marketing a sprawling piece of undeveloped land near the coal-fired E.W. Brown Generating Station run by Louisville Gas and Electric and Kentucky Utilities.

In the planning and zoning commission meetings since, media outlets have reported that concerned residents have



Nathan Howard | Getty Images

In an aerial view, the IAD71 Amazon Web Services data center is shown on July 17, 2024 in Ashburn, Virginia. Northern Virginia is the largest data center market in the world, according to a report this year cited in published accounts, but is facing headwinds from availability of land and electric power.

packed the meetings, including a special-called meeting in late April where the commission unveiled a draft ordinance on data center regulation.

A provision in the draft ordinance details that newly established zones for data centers shall be within at least a mile away "the intersection of the eastern right-of-way of Curdsville Road and the main entrance to the E.W. Brown power plant property."

The more than three-hour-long meeting in April, archived on social media, heard from people with concerns ranging from worries about the use of "prime farmland" for the project and whether the costs of electricity infrastructure upgrades needed to serve data centers would be burdened by other ratepayers.

Diane Floyd, one of the organizers with We Are Mercer County and a biology professor at the Hazard Community and Technical College, told the Lantern she's worried her local government doesn't have the knowledge or resources to adequately vet potentially massive projects backed by "giant tech companies" and protect

their community from impacts.

"I don't think that there's a single person in our local government that has ever even come close to making a deal of that size and the impacts on us as individual citizens," Floyd said. "It's all going to have a long term impact, and it's going to change the way our small rural life looks."

Calls for a pause on data centers

Multiple people during that April meeting called on the county fiscal court to implement a moratorium on data centers to give the local government more time to assess potential regulations and impacts.

Randy Strobo, an environmental attorney representing Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, a local nonprofit preserving homes and buildings associated with the Kentucky Shaker community, told the commission the proposed draft ordinance was incomplete, short-sighted and potentially unlawful.

"A temporary pause for planning will allow the community to properly assess infrastructure demands, fiscal impacts and land use consequences rather than rushing to an

irreversible decision," Strobo said.

The idea of a data center moratorium is one that's gained traction among some Democratic politicians in Kentucky running in the May primaries. Erin Petrey, a candidate for Kentucky's 6th Congressional district, called for a "full moratorium" on data centers at that April meeting.

Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Charles Booker has also called for a moratorium, and another Democratic U.S. Senate candidate, Logan Forsythe, visited with anti-data center organizers in early April.

The idea also has traction with a local Republican candidate in Mason County, the epicenter of a much older data center fight. The nonprofit group We Are Mason County is suing the local government, arguing an ordinance to regulate data centers there is in conflict with the county's comprehensive plan.

That candidate, Max Moran, the nonprofit's leader who's running as a Republican to be county judge-executive, told the Lantern the "data center issue" is the reason he began his run for office but is one of several issues he's campaigning on, primarily centered on improving government transparency.

Democratic incumbent Judge-Executive Owen McNeill, the county's former economic development director, is in support of the project because of the potential local tax benefits and the opportunity to bring well-paying jobs to the county. McNeill did not respond to emailed interview requests from the Lantern.

McNeill has previously defended the use of elected officials signing non-disclosure agreements to discuss the data center

project behind closed doors, saying it's a necessary part of the economic development process. Critics, including Moran, have panned it as anti-transparent.

State lawmakers in Frankfort ultimately did not pass any sort of regulation or limits on data centers before legislators ended their regular legislative session in mid-April.

Moran said he finds that disappointing.

"With Kentucky in general, we always seem to regulate when it's too late, when no regulations apply, or we over-regulate before something takes off," Moran said.

A bill sponsored by Rep. Josh Bray, R-Mount Vernon, that would have required utilities to ensure other ratepayers do not bear the costs of data center infrastructure died on the final legislative day of this year's session in Frankfort.

Louisville Gas and Electric and Kentucky Utilities, which serves Mercer County, and East Kentucky Power Cooperative, which serves Mason County, have argued their existing regulations for data centers approved by the Kentucky Public Service Commission are protective of ratepayers.

Other state legislatures have also considered measures such as banning non-disclosure agreements associated with such projects, rolling back tax breaks for data centers or proposing moratoriums on data center construction.

For Stinnett, the Mercer County magistrate candidate, he said he would be in favor of all of the above.

"It doesn't seem to matter what side of the political spectrum you're on, whether it be Republican or whether it be Democrat. We're all in this together, and we're trying to fight it. I love it." Stinnett said.

TEMPERS

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his way through the parent conversation until more information followed.

McCormick responded, "You've got to trust the administration is going to do what they are supposed to do. In my experience, they have."

He also asked Asher if he would ask the new superintendent for this level of communication.

Asher said, "Absolutely, it's on my list."

Kayla Shelton was recognized and addressed Asher directly.

"You expect direct communication from Harrell, but you'll bullcrap a parent?" she asked.

She said that the details about the Sebree bus incident were sent out on Parent Square, so the parent in question was calling to complain.

"It's not your job to handle that," she told Asher.

Asher backed down at that point, stating, "I don't know why she was calling me then."

Amy Wright was again recognized, speaking against Coomes' comments on the TNTP curriculum grant.

"No one was told they had to read from a script," she stated.

Asher also had things to say about TNTP. While it was before his time, Asher contended that it was bought with grant monies that came out of ESSER money (federal covid relief funding).

"I would have spent the money on other things," Asher stated. He also stated that ESSER money in other districts was spent on facilities and athletics.

Director of Special Education Kim Saalwaechter was the next to respond, correcting Asher that the district was required to spend ESSER money on certain things.

Saalwaechter, also visibly frustrated, described the district in the last 12 years as "progressive, growing and with positive instructional materials." She urged people, including the board, that if they didn't know something, they needed to ask, not assume. She wanted them to quit buying into rumors. The longtime Webster educator said the growth mindset had existed with the last three superintendents, where principals and staff were supported, and everyone did what's best for kids. She urged people to work together as a team instead of "living the bickering and disheveled lifestyle" that wasn't the example anyone wanted to set for their kids.

"When we are divisive, the children lose," Saalwaechter admonished.

Asher was the first to speak after Saalwaechter finished, apologizing for saying "He didn't have to give anyone jack squat" at the March meeting.

"It set the tone and came out unintentionally wrong," Asher stated.

Samantha Winebarger announced then that the Webster County Middle School soccer team was advancing to regionals. Despite the positive message, the frustration was wearing on everyone at that point.

Marsha Rakestraw wasn't finished with Coomes, though, correcting her that she did indeed represent Slaughters on the board when she made decisions. Coomes was offended when Rakestraw added that it was "common sense." Coomes also was questioned by educator Lisa Lucas about Harrell's perfect evaluations contrasting with how the board felt about him now.

Kayla Shelton wasn't finished, either, asking if it was legally required for board members to live in

their district. When the board confirmed, she asked each board member if they would state publicly that they each lived in their district.

Asher was the first to respond and this time he was visibly frustrated.

"I will tell you to your face,

first, it's none of your business, and second, I live in the Sebree district," he said.

The discussion halted after that, with Hobgood only adding that the county clerk checks one's residency when running for school board.

McCormick got the

meeting back on track, first appointing Venita Murphy as the board's representative on the steering committee. The board also heard the 2027 budget proposal, information about a new insurance bid and a myriad of upcoming district

events. The board also looked at staffing requests that schools had submitted.

Director of Finance Brandi Burnett stated, "There are more requests than we have funding for."

SEE **TEMPERS/PAGE A7**

LEGAL NOTICE

PURSUANT TO KRS 424.290, "MATTERS REQUIRED TO BE PUBLISHED," THE FOLLOWING RACES WILL APPEAR ON THE VOTING MACHINES AND PAPER BALLOTS IN THE PRECINCTS LISTED IN WEBSTER COUNTY FOR THE PRIMARY ELECTION, MAY 19, 2026.

<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: small;">REPUBLICAN PARTY PRIMARY ELECTION</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;"> </div> <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">1st Congressional District UNITED STATES SENATOR (Vote for One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Other Donald WENZEL <input type="checkbox"/> James D. DUNCAN <input type="checkbox"/> George WASHINGTON <input type="checkbox"/> Valerie "Dr Val" FREDRICK <input type="checkbox"/> Andy BARR <input type="checkbox"/> Nate MORRIS <input type="checkbox"/> Jimmy I. LEON <input type="checkbox"/> A. Nick SHELLEY <input type="checkbox"/> Daniel CAMERON <input type="checkbox"/> Anissa CATLETT <input type="checkbox"/> Michael James FARIS <input type="checkbox"/> Jonathan M. HOLLIDAY <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE in CONGRESS 1st Congressional District (Vote for One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> David SIMS <input type="checkbox"/> Robert James SUTHERBY <input type="checkbox"/> Penny ARCOS <input type="checkbox"/> James R. COMER <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">JAILER (Vote for One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Cameron SHELTON <input type="checkbox"/> Nathan STINCHCOMB <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">CORONER (Vote for One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Jason TODD <input type="checkbox"/> Darin K. TOWNSEND <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">ALL PRECINCTS</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">MAGISTRATE 3rd Magisterial District (Vote for One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ken STUART <input type="checkbox"/> Taryn Bailey ZARETZKE <input type="checkbox"/> Tony FELKER <input type="checkbox"/> Charles "Mike" SYERS <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">EAST PROVIDENCE, WEST PROVIDENCE, NORTH PROVIDENCE and SOUTH PROVIDENCE</p>	<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: small;">DEMOCRATIC PARTY PRIMARY ELECTION</p> <div style="text-align: center; margin-bottom: 10px;"> </div> <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">1st Congressional District UNITED STATES SENATOR (Vote for One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Joshua BLANTON SR. <input type="checkbox"/> Vincent Anthony THOMPSON <input type="checkbox"/> Charles BOOKER <input type="checkbox"/> Pamela STEVENSON <input type="checkbox"/> Dale Lewis ROMANS <input type="checkbox"/> Logan FORSYTHE <input type="checkbox"/> Amy McGRATH <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">COUNTY JUDGE/EXECUTIVE (Vote for One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Stacey Britt ELIOT <input type="checkbox"/> Jeremy Tyler BROWN <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">ALL PRECINCTS</p>
<p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">MAGISTRATE 2nd Magisterial District (Vote for One)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Jerry "Poogie" BROWN <input type="checkbox"/> Darrin BUCHANAN <input type="checkbox"/> Jimmy Ray COLLINS <input type="checkbox"/> Bob HARDISON <p style="text-align: center; font-weight: bold; font-size: x-small;">NORTH SEBREE, SOUTH SEBREE, POOLE, ONTON and SLAUGHTERS</p>		