

MANUFACTURED OUTRAGE

**How National Environmental Activists
Are Spending Millions to Elect Democrats,
Block Data Centers, and Undermine
President Trump's Pro-Growth Agenda**


APRIL 2026



POWER ⚡ THE FUTURE

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The same environmental groups that spent over \$150 million electing Democrats in 2024 are now running the national campaign to block data center construction across America, and they're doing it in your community while pretending to be your neighbors.

A University of Michigan political scientist said the quiet part out loud this year: data center opposition is “particularly opportune for Democrats” because the fights are “in exactly the type of rural areas and red or purple states in which Democrats are desperate to make inroads.” Food & Water Watch, the Washington, D.C. group that organized a 230-organization letter demanding a national moratorium, wrote New York’s moratorium bill (“our idea,” its organizer told Wired), and deployed paid staff into red-state communities, whose PAC has never given a dollar to a Republican.

Neither has the Sierra Club, whose PAC has sent 100% of its contributions to Democrats since the 1980s. Neither has Earthjustice, the \$154 million legal operation filing parallel lawsuits against data center projects in eight states simultaneously. These are not community groups. They are the professional infrastructure of the Democratic Party’s electoral machine, and right now they are aimed at the centerpiece of President Donald Trump’s economic agenda.

Data centers are the backbone of AI, cloud computing, military intelligence, and the digital economy. President Trump has made their expansion a national priority through the Stargate Project and executive orders accelerating federal permitting. Interior Secretary Doug Burgum has called opposition to that buildout a “surrender” to China. The compute infrastructure that trains AI models, processes intelligence data, and powers the next generation of American economic and military advantage has to be built somewhere. Every project blocked here is a project Beijing builds unimpeded.

And the projects are being blocked at an astonishing pace. \$98 billion in data center investment was disrupted in Q2 2025 alone, more than the total disruptions of the entire previous two years combined. Eleven projects were withdrawn in Indiana. The \$24.7 billion Prince William Digital Gateway was killed by court order after lawsuits from conservation groups. Eight Georgia municipalities enacted moratoriums in



rapid succession. Saint Charles, Missouri became the first city in America to ban data center construction outright.

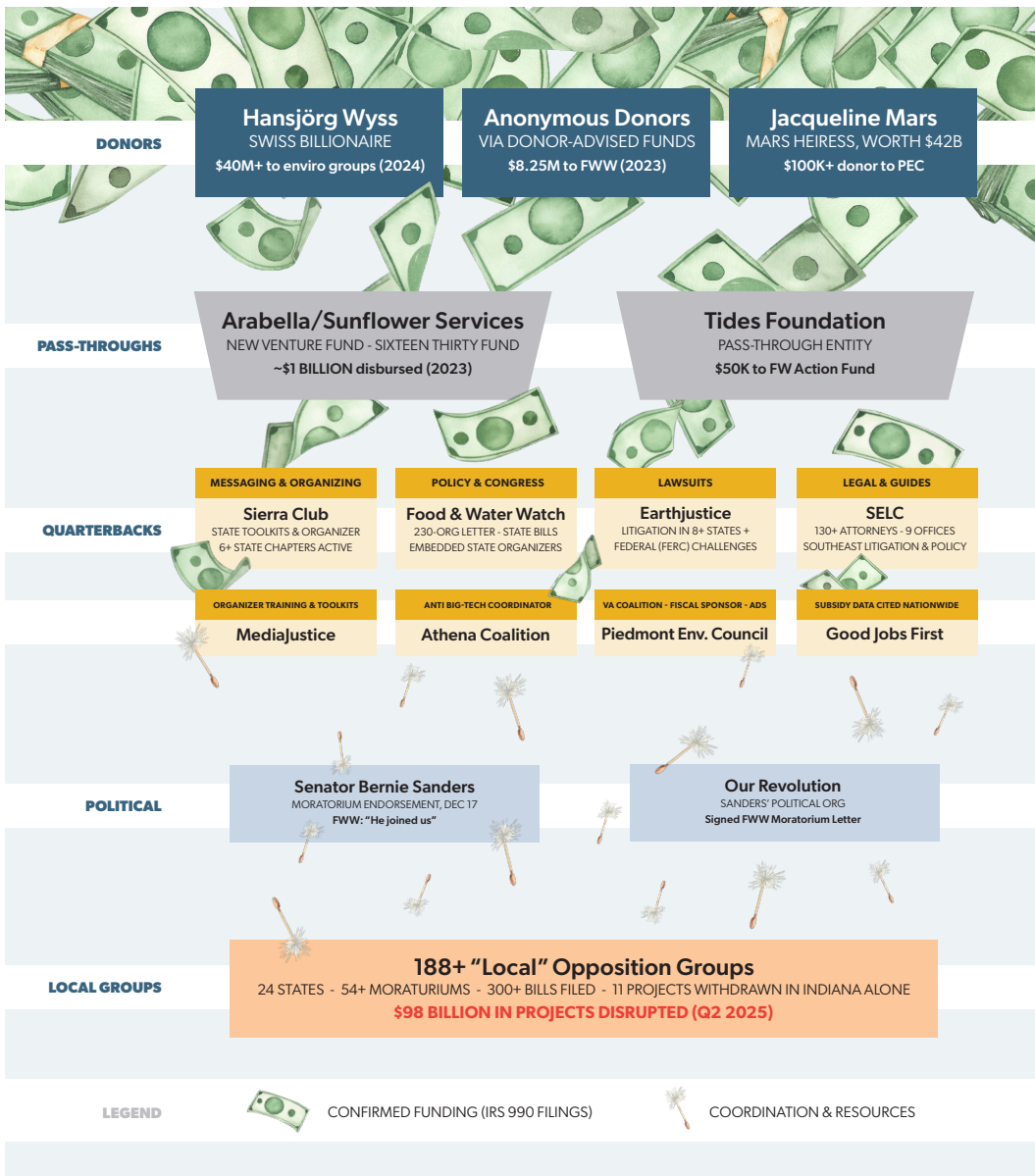
This is what losing looks like on the ground. In Loudoun County, Virginia, data centers generate \$890 million a year in local tax revenue, enough to hold property tax rates 25% below neighboring counties and save the average homeowner \$3,000 a year. Every project killed means higher taxes, fewer jobs, weaker schools, and less infrastructure for the people who actually live there. The projects lost are not only measured in economic impact but in the loss of AI development and military computing capacity. It is a double loss for the economy and national security.

The groups responsible had their chance to make this case honestly. The Biden years gave the professional environmental left four years of a sympathetic White House, a captured regulatory apparatus, and nearly unchecked influence over American energy policy. Voters saw what that agenda looked like in practice and rejected it. So the strategy changed. If the argument couldn't be won at the ballot box, it would be won project by project, permit by permit, lawsuit by lawsuit, while hiding behind the faces of genuinely concerned local residents who have no idea who is funding the campaign or what its actual goals are.

This paper documents how national environmental organizations and their financial backers launder ideological opposition by channeling it through newly formed local nonprofits, creating the false appearance of grassroots resistance while advancing a broader anti-growth, anti-Trump agenda. The residents at those town halls are real. Their concerns about water and power bills are legitimate. But the talking points they're reading were written in Washington. The legal teams representing them are funded by anonymous billionaires through donor-advised funds. The "grassroots coalition" was assembled by groups that have collectively spent hundreds of millions of dollars to elect Democrats and zero dollars to elect Republicans. The movement behind them is not local, not nonpartisan, and not spontaneous. It is the latest production of a national machine that manufactures outrage for a living.

THE HANDS THAT FEED THEM: BILLIONAIRE-BACKED ACTIVISM

The financial web behind these campaigns is difficult to follow, and that's by design. Money moves through layers of donor-advised funds, fiscal sponsors, and pass-through entities in a 'pay no attention to the man behind the curtain' scheme. For anyone looking for answers, they will find a maze of filings that rarely lead back to a clear answer. What follows in this report is the clearest way to cut through the obfuscation to see who is really calling the shots.



At the top of the funding pyramid sits a small number of left-wing megadonors whose giving priorities consistently target energy development, infrastructure expansion, and the kind of industrial growth tied to U.S. competitiveness.

HANSJÖRG WYSS AND THE ARABELLA MACHINE

Prominent among them is Hansjörg Wyss, the Swiss billionaire whose foundation has directed hundreds of millions into environmental and political advocacy designed to reshape U.S. land use, energy policy, and permitting regimes. Wyss is not just any donor. He is the financial godfather of one of the most sophisticated operations in American politics.

IRS Form 990-PF filings confirm the money trail. The Wyss Foundation's 2019 tax return shows a \$9.5 million grant to the New Venture Fund, one of the central nodes in the Arabella Advisors, now operating as Sunflower Services, network. The New Venture Fund is a 501(c)(3) "fiscal sponsor" that operates as a pass-through entity: it receives money from wealthy donors and foundations, then distributes it to aligned causes, often without public disclosure of the original source.

The New Venture Fund's own FY2023 Form 990 shows a \$100,000 grant to the Sierra Club Foundation. That's the publicly traceable portion. The New Venture Fund listed 823 different domestic grant recipients on its 2023 Schedule I, any number of which could support anti-infrastructure campaigns. In 2023, the combined Arabella network (New Venture Fund, Sixteen Thirty Fund, Windward Fund, Hopewell Fund) disbursed approximately \$1 billion in grants.

The structure is designed so that neither the public nor the communities targeted by these campaigns can identify who is actually paying for them.

The Sixteen Thirty Fund, Arabella's 501(c)(4) political arm, goes even further. Its FY2024 Form 990 shows a \$3.84 million grant directly to the Sierra Club. Not the Sierra Club Foundation. The Sierra Club itself, the organization whose state chapters are embedded in anti-data center coalitions from Virginia to Wisconsin to Georgia. Nearly four million dollars, from an entity whose donors are legally shielded from disclosure, flowing to the very organization building local "opposition" campaigns in your community.

HANSJÖRG WYSS

- Foreign billionaire using his fortune to shape America's energy future. Hansjörg Wyss made billions by selling his medical device company, Synthes, and now funnels that wealth through the Wyss Foundation to influence U.S. land-use and energy policy.
- Bankrolling the war on American oil and gas. In 2024 alone, the Wyss Foundation sent more than \$40 million to roughly two dozen environmental groups working to block domestic fossil fuel development, advance "climate justice" campaigns, and mobilize climate-focused voters, embedding political activism in philanthropic giving.

ARABELLA ADVISORS/ SUNFLOWER SERVICES

- A shadowy Washington power network. Arabella Advisors operates behind the scenes, managing a constellation of nonprofits that collectively move hundreds of millions of dollars through opaque funding channels, allowing donors to bankroll political campaigns without public scrutiny.
- A financial pass-through machine for progressive causes. Through entities like New Venture Fund, Sixteen Thirty Fund, Hopewell Fund, and Windward Fund, the network funds aggressive environmental and energy campaigns designed to block domestic fossil fuel production while shielding the original donors from transparency.
- Infrastructure built for influence, not accountability. Sunflower Services and related administrative arms provide the operational backbone that enables pop-up advocacy groups to launch quickly, lobby lawmakers, influence ballot initiatives, and shape public opinion—all while maintaining limited public visibility into who ultimately drives the agenda.

LIBERALS SECRETLY MOVING MONEY AROUND

Rather than funding local organizations directly, which would leave a paper trail, major donors route money through a layered system of financial intermediaries:

- **Donor-Advised Funds (DAFs):** Wealthy individuals deposit money into community foundations, receive an immediate tax deduction, and then direct grants anonymously. The community foundation's name appears on the 990, not the individual donor.
- **Fiscal Sponsors:** National organizations like the New Venture Fund provide 501(c)(3) status to campaigns that haven't incorporated as their own nonprofits, allowing them to receive tax-deductible donations without filing their own IRS returns.
- **Pass-Through Entities:** Organizations like the Tides Foundation and Advocacy Action Fund serve as intermediaries, receiving money from donors and redistributing it to aligned groups.

This structure is the architecture of deliberate opacity. The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee's "Chain of Environmental Command" report documented how "an elite group of left-wing millionaires and billionaires" directed environmental campaigns through "private foundations, pass-through public charities, and secretive donor-advised funds." The same architecture is now aimed at data centers.

FOLLOW THE MONEY: FOOD & WATER WATCH'S ANONYMOUS BANKROLL

Food & Water Watch (FWW), which functions as the campaign's chief political quarterback (more on that below), is funded almost entirely through anonymizing donor-advised funds.

In 2023, FWW's two largest institutional donors were:

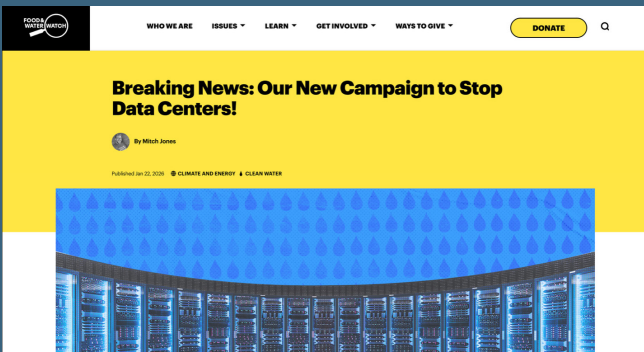
- **The Columbus Foundation (Columbus, Ohio):** \$6.1 million—FWW's single largest gift. The Columbus Foundation operates approximately 1,500 donor-advised funds and explicitly promotes them as offering "optimal tax benefits and privacy." The actual individual behind this \$6.1 million grant cannot be publicly identified.
- **The Santa Barbara Foundation:** \$2.15 million. It's typical that community grants max out at \$25,000-\$50,000, meaning a \$2.15 million outflow to a Washington-based activist group is almost certainly a DAF pass-through.

FOOD & WATER WATCH

- Food & Water Watch is a national progressive advocacy organization, founded in 2005 and headquartered in Washington, D.C., that focuses on energy, water, food, and climate policy. It operates as a nonprofit with a significant grassroots organizing arm and policy team.
- The group campaigns against fossil fuels, pipelines, fracking, factory farming, water privatization, and large-scale infrastructure projects, often advocating for stricter regulations at all levels.
- Part of a broader national activist ecosystem, the organization partners with climate and environmental justice groups to advance a rapid transition away from fossil fuels and toward renewable energy mandates.

This is not new behavior. In 2012, FWW received 75% of its total revenue from just two DAFs. FWW spokesperson Peter Hart has confirmed: “Food & Water Watch does not disclose the names of its individual donors publicly.” The organization that is writing state legislation, organizing national moratorium letters, and deploying paid staff into local communities refuses to tell anyone who is funding it.

FWW’s companion lobbying arm, the Food & Water Action Fund (501(c)(4)), shares the same address, same employees, and same executive director. The Action Fund received \$600,000 from the Advocacy Action Fund and \$50,000 from Tides Advocacy in FY2022, both well-documented conduits in progressive covert infrastructure.



THE PEC’S BILLIONAIRE PATRON

In Virginia, for example the Data Center Reform Coalition, the most mature state-level opposition structure, is convened by the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC), which also serves as fiscal sponsor for at least one partner group in the coalition.

PEC’s donor rolls reveal the wealth behind the curtain. According to PEC’s 2020 annual report, donors of \$100,000 or more include Jacqueline B. Mars, the Mars candy heiress with a net worth of approximately \$42 billion. Other six-figure donors include the Agua Fund Inc., William M. Backer Foundation, D.N. Batten Foundation, Manning Family Foundation DAF, Volgenau Foundation, and Prince Charitable Trusts.

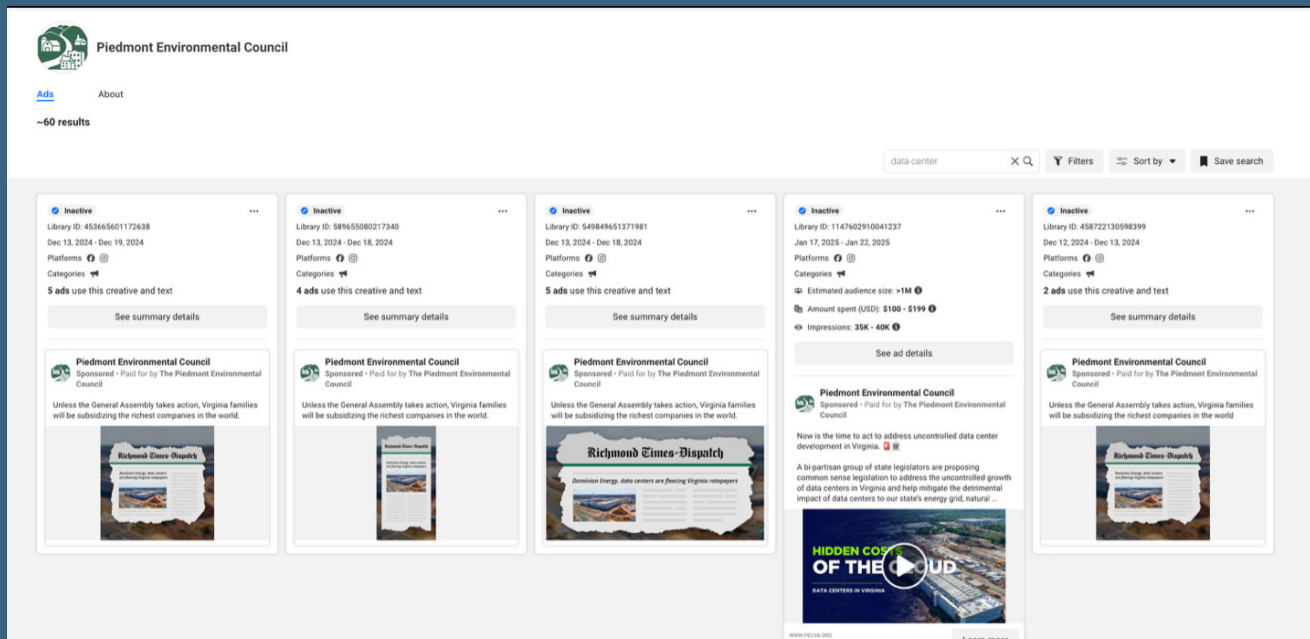
And PEC isn’t just writing letters. It’s running a professional paid media operation. A search of Meta’s Ad Library reveals approximately 60 paid Facebook and Instagram ads run by PEC targeting the phrase “data center.” The ads, paid for by

PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL (PEC)

- Piedmont Environmental Council is one of Virginia’s most influential advocacy groups, using land conservation as a platform to shape and restrict development across the commonwealth.
- From conservation to obstruction. While promoting land preservation, the organization has become a central player in efforts to block or slow large-scale infrastructure projects, mobilizing public opposition campaigns and pressuring local officials to curb development.
- PEC wields outsized influence in rural policy debates. Through lobbying, coalition-building, and sustained engagement in local planning processes, PEC shapes land-use policy in ways that can determine whether major investments proceed or are stopped altogether.

“The Piedmont Environmental Council,” ran across multiple campaigns in late 2024 and early 2025, hitting Facebook and Instagram feeds across Virginia. One ad pushed to an audience of over 1 million users with 35,000–40,000 impressions. The messaging is polished and uniform: “Unless the General Assembly takes action, Virginia families will be subsidizing the richest companies in the world,” reads one version, paired with a Richmond Times-Dispatch headline about Dominion Energy and data centers fleecing ratepayers. Another promotes a slick video titled “Hidden Costs of the Cloud: Data Centers in Virginia,” hosted on PEC’s website at pecva.org. This effort pretends to be a neighborhood phone tree but is a sophisticated, well-funded professional digital advertising campaign.

It is misleading for PEC’s coalition to show up at a Virginia General Assembly hearing claiming to speak for “local communities concerned about data centers,” but that is more palatable than the truthful claim: speaking for some of the wealthiest people in America.



THE QUARTERBACKS: WHO IS ACTUALLY RUNNING THE CAMPAIGN

Power The Future’s research identifies a network of organizations that function as strategic quarterbacks setting messaging, legal strategy, campaign timing, and political escalation. No single group operates alone; instead, they divide labor across a coordinated structure.

SIERRA CLUB: CAMPAIGN ARCHITECT AND STATE-LEVEL ENFORCER

The Sierra Club operates dedicated data center campaign infrastructure in at least six states: Virginia, Georgia, Wisconsin, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

In Georgia, the Sierra Club created a comprehensive [Data Center Organizing Toolkit](#) with pre-written talking points, sample outreach emails, social media graphics, commissioner contact forms, and “mythbusting” documents. Organizer Hannah Baker runs the state operation. In Wisconsin, the Sierra Club co-authored the [“Big Tech Unchecked” toolkit](#) with Midwest Environmental Advocates, Wisconsin’s Green Fire, and Healthy Climate WI, a ready-made campaign-in-a-box for local activists.

These are not inferences. They are line items on federal tax returns. Wyss’s money enters the Arabella network, and the Arabella network’s money exits into the Sierra Club, which then deploys it through state chapters running local anti-data center campaigns. The local volunteers at the town hall may have never heard of Hansjörg Wyss—or of the federal investigation into whether the Sierra Club received covert funding from China and Russia. But someone’s money helped build the toolkit they’re reading from.

SIERRA CLUB

- One of the most notorious environmental groups in America. Founded in 1892, the Sierra Club has evolved from a conservation group into a national political force with millions of members and a full-scale advocacy and litigation operation.
- At the forefront of the anti-fossil fuel movement. Through its “Beyond Coal,” “Beyond Gas,” and climate campaigns, the organization has aggressively worked to shut down coal plants, block pipelines, oppose natural gas infrastructure, and push for rapid electrification mandates.
- A litigation-driven strategy to stop projects. The Sierra Club routinely files lawsuits and regulatory challenges against energy, infrastructure, and industrial projects. The group uses the courts and the permitting process as tools to delay or derail development.
- Has been under [federal investigation](#) for allegedly receiving covert funding from Russia and China.



SOURCE	RECIPIENT	AMOUNT	EVIDENCE
Wyss Foundation	New Venture Fund	\$9.5 million (2019)	WYSS 990-PF, Grants Schedule
New Venture Fund	Sierra Club Foundation	\$100,000 (FY2023)	NVF 990, Schedule I
Sixteen Thirty Fund	Sierra Club	\$3.84 million (FY2024)	1630 Fund 990, Schedule I

At the end of March 2026, Senator Sanders and Congresswoman Ocasio-Cortez formally announced their legislation for a national data center moratorium. Within minutes, FWW put out a statement of support.

THE LEGAL WAR MACHINE: EARTHJUSTICE AND SELC

Two major environmental law organizations provide the litigation backbone: Earthjustice and the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC).

Earthjustice is running simultaneous legal campaigns in at least eight states plus federal proceedings, all targeting data center projects or the energy infrastructure needed to power them:

- **Louisiana:** Represented Alliance for Affordable Energy and Union of Concerned Scientists to investigate Meta’s \$27 billion data center arrangement.
- **Montana:** Filed a complaint challenging NorthWestern Energy’s data center electricity provision.
- **Michigan:** Co-represented Sierra Club, Michigan Environmental Council, NRDC, and Citizens Utility Board in Oracle/OpenAI data center proceedings.
- **Mississippi:** Filed notice of intent to sue Elon Musk’s xAI for unpermitted gas turbines powering a data center—partnering with both SELC and the NAACP.
- **FERC:** Challenged fast-track energy plans in MISO and SPP grid operators alongside NRDC and Sierra Club.

EARTHJUSTICE

- A legal powerhouse for the environmental left. Founded in 1971 (originally as the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund), Earthjustice operates as a national public-interest law firm dedicated to suing federal agencies, state governments, and private companies over environmental and energy policy issues.
- Litigation as a weapon against energy development. The organization routinely files lawsuits to block or delay oil and gas leasing, pipelines, LNG terminals, power plants, mining projects, and other major infrastructure. Oftentimes, leveraging environmental statutes to halt projects in the courts when they cannot win legislatively.
- Earthjustice is part of a coordinated national activist ecosystem. Working alongside advocacy groups and grassroots organizers, they provide the legal muscle that backs up on-the-ground opposition campaigns, turning policy fights into courtroom battles that can stall projects for years.



EARTHJUSTICE
BECAUSE THE ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

ABOUT US · OUR WORK · TAKE ACTION · DONATE

← PRESS ROOM

November 18, 2025

Lawsuit Challenges FERC Approval of Central U.S. Grid Operator's Fast-Track Energy Plan

Earthjustice filed a legal challenge to MISO's plan to fast-track connection of mostly fossil-fueled generation at the expense of households

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Earthjustice filed the lawsuit today on behalf of environmental groups Clean Wisconsin and Natural Resources Defense Council, and together with Sierra Club, chairperson the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission's (FERC) approval to fast-track the interconnection of mostly fossil-fueled generation in states where Midcontinent Independent System Operator (MISO) operates.



Earthjustice · Follow
March 5 at 4:24 PM · 🌐

Communities across the country are feeling the effects of data centers in higher energy bills, increased pollution, and water consumption.

"More than a pledge, we urgently need strong policies and protections to ensure that data centers pay their way, disclose and mitigate their impacts, and are powered by clean energy," said Earthjustice VP of Litigation for Climate and Energy Jill Tauber



APNEWS.COM
Trump says deal on data centers will lower electricity prices as tech companies vow to cover costs

👍👍👍 104 27 comments 20 shares

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The pattern: the same coalition of national organizations (Sierra Club, NRDC, UCS) represented by the same legal team (Earthjustice) filing parallel challenges across multiple jurisdictions. This is a nationally coordinated litigation strategy.

SELC, with 200 staff including over 130 attorneys across nine offices from Charlottesville to Washington, D.C., plays a parallel role across the Southeast. SELC published a guidance report for communities facing data center development, distilling strategies into a replicable template for local fights. SELC attorneys lobby the Virginia General Assembly, commission academic reports challenging data center demand projections, and file lawsuits against data center zoning approvals, including a January 2026 suit in Colleton County, South Carolina, on behalf of local landowners challenging a data center zoning ordinance in the ACE Basin.

MEDIAJUSTICE, ATHENA, AND THE “WORKING GROUP” THEY ADMIT EXISTS

Mediajustice published “The People Say No: Resisting Data Centers in the South” in September 2025, with a companion organizer toolkit providing plug-and-play templates for communities. Executive Director Steven Renderos let the quiet part slip in an interview, confirming the existence of a “data center working group with some national organizations” that serves as a “repository of information sharing” and referenced a “cross-state working group of state-based organizations.”

That is a direct admission of organized, multi-state coordination from the mouth of one of the participants.

SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTER

- The South’s most powerful environmental litigation group. Founded in 1986 and headquartered in Charlottesville, Virginia, SELC is a regional public interest law firm that uses litigation, regulatory challenges, and policy advocacy to shape energy and land-use decisions across the Southeast.
- Targeting fossil fuels and grid expansion. The organization has been deeply involved in opposing coal ash disposal, natural gas pipelines, and utility rate cases, while pushing utilities and state regulators to adopt faster renewable mandates and stricter emissions standards.
- Embedded in regional policymaking. Through sustained lobbying, regulatory filings, and coalition-building with grassroots groups, SELC plays a significant role in shaping how Southeastern states approach growth, energy reliability, and large-scale development projects.

ATHENA

What We're Fighting For Why We're Taking On Amazon Who We Are News Donate

Civil Society Groups Tell White House: Reject Big Tech's Unchecked Data Center Expansion; Instead, Take Action on Climate Commitments

October 31, 2024 | Press Releases

PRESS RELEASE
Press Contact: press@athenaforall.org

In comments to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, groups warn Administration against backsliding on corporate concentration and worsening the climate crisis.

This morning, in response to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) [request for comments](#) on the country's data center expansion strategy, 20+ groups, including the Athena Coalition, Piedmont Environmental Council, Institute for Local Self Reliance (ILSR), Public Citizen, Free Press, Good Jobs First, Kairos Action, People's Action Institute, 350.org, and the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC), submitted a [comment](#) highlighting the need for a new trajectory for energy and technology investments in order to serve the public interest. The groups urge the government to reject big tech's bids for unchecked data center expansion, and instead take action to address urgent climate commitments.

So we’re certainly a part of coalitions that are coming together, and I’ll name a couple like the Athena Coalition. We’re a member of a data center working group with some national organizations that’s helping to be a repository of information sharing on what we’re seeing out in the ecosystem. There’s also a cross state working group of state-based organizations that are fighting data centers much in the way that Vivek has brought up where the fight in Tucson has evolved into. Now, it’s a state fight because we’re dealing with a state corporate commission.

THE BLITZ: A TIMELINE OF COORDINATED ESCALATION

The most damning evidence of coordination is the compressed December 2025 sequence—a carefully orchestrated escalation from organizational letter to congressional endorsement to state legislation.

DATE	EVENT
Oct. 23, 2025	FWW adopts moratorium policy, calls itself “first national organization” to do so
Dec. 8, 2025	FWW-organized letter from 230+ groups sent to Congress
Dec. 9, 2025	FWW’s Mitch Jones tells NPR they’re “talking with members of Congress” about legislation
Dec. 15, 2025	Sens. Warren, Van Hollen, Blumenthal launch investigation into data center energy costs
Dec. 17, 2025	Sen. Sanders <u>endorses</u> moratorium; FWW says he “joined us”
Jan. 22, 2026	FWW launches formal “Stop Data Centers Now!” campaign with national webinar
Feb. 6, 2026	NY moratorium bill introduced — FWW says it was “our idea”
Feb. 2026	Moratorium bills introduced in Vermont, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Virginia, Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Wisconsin

By February 2026, over 300 data center bills had been filed across over 30 states in six weeks. At least six states introduced outright moratorium legislation. This volume of legislative activity requires coordinated policy development, model legislation, and cross-state organizational infrastructure.

Interior Secretary Doug Burgum called Sanders’ moratorium proposal what it is: a “surrender” to China in the AI race.

USING THE SAME PLAYBOOK: WHEN EVERY “LOCAL” GROUP SOUNDS THE SAME

Local opposition groups separated by thousands of miles deploy remarkably uniform talking points, suggesting a centralized communications framework. The same FWW-generated statistics appear verbatim in advocacy materials from coast to coast:

Data centers will consume 720 billion gallons of water and 300 terawatt-hours of energy annually by 2028

These figures are equivalent to the needs of 18.5 million and 28 million households, respectively

Nearly 80% of Google’s U.S. AI data center water came from drinking water sources

Good Jobs First subsidy research is cited in legislative testimony nationwide and the claim that Virginia forfeits \$1.6 billion annually and data center subsidies cost \$1.4-2 million per job has become a universal talking point.

IDENTICAL FRAMING ACROSS STATES

Side-by-side comparison of materials from different states reveals language too similar to be coincidental:

	VIRGINIA COALITION LETTER	WISCONSIN TOOLKIT	GEORGIA MATERIALS
WATER	"tak[ing] millions of gallons from the Occoquan.."	"massive data centers require vast volumes of water"	"6 million gallons per day withdrawal"
ENERGY	"increasing strain on the grid"	"resource- & energy-intensive"	"maximum power demand of 910 MW"
TRANSPARENCY	"virtually no public input or review"	"projects move forward with minimal public notice"	"rezoning behind closed doors"
UTILITY BILLS	"ratepayers pick up the tab"	"costs shifted onto families and businesses"	"taxpayer subsidies hidden in credits"

Each column draws from published coalition materials. The identical use of phrases like "millions of gallons" and "costs shifted onto families," with matching metaphors and nearly matching syntax indicates these campaigns are reading from a common script.

Sierra Club's Georgia toolkit provides the pre-written talking points. Mediajustice's organizer toolkit provides templates. SELC's guidance report distills legal strategies. FWW's campaign website centralizes the messaging. The local residents are real. The words coming out of many of their mouths were written in Washington.

HIJACKING MAGA: HOW THE ENVIRONMENTAL LEFT WEAPONIZED CONSERVATIVE COMMUNITIES

The campaign's most sophisticated achievement isn't organizing the left; it's capturing the right.

Data Center Watch found that 55% of elected officials who publicly opposed data center projects were Republicans. Republican legislators in Oklahoma, Michigan, Maryland, South Carolina, and South Dakota have introduced moratorium bills. The GOP-authored South Carolina moratorium bill (H5286) is a "Partisan Bill (Republican 20-1)." Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene broke with President Trump over AI data centers, warning about "massive" water usage and "replacing human jobs on mass scale," language that could have been copy-pasted from a Food & Water Watch press release. Sen. Josh Hawley co-authored federal data center legislation with Sen. Blumenthal. Ron DeSantis declared that citizens "should not be subsidizing the exorbitant power and water usage of AI data centers," a sentence virtually indistinguishable from FWW's core campaign messaging.

None of this happened by accident. The environmental left built it.

Consider Prince William County, Virginia, a purple community where the \$24.7 billion Digital Gateway was ultimately killed. The opposition coalition included both the Sierra Club and local conservative homeowners. Elena Schlossberg, who runs the Coalition to Protect Prince William County, told Bisnow that although "climate

change is a top concern for many of the environmental groups and activists involved,” she deliberately “steers away from the topic to avoid pushing away partners on the right.” She told coalition members: “Whatever feelings you all might have about whatever other issue cannot get in the way of the threat we are facing.” Her coalition then put its weight behind a Republican candidate to successfully unseat pro-data center Democrats.

In Coweta County, Georgia, Trump +30 territory, organizer Steve Swope was even more explicit: “Talking about the carbon footprint is just not going to sway anybody in Coweta County — we’d alienate people that we really want to bring to our side, so we try to stay away from those issues.” The opposition there deploys Chattahoochee Riverkeeper factsheets built from the same data points and argumentative framework as the Sierra Club toolkit—same themes, same structure, same call to contact county commissioners—but with every mention of climate change, carbon emissions, and environmental justice carefully stripped out.

The environmental left has proven remarkably skilled at embedding its resources in communities that would reject its broader agenda if it showed up wearing its own name.

This is the playbook in action: Sierra Club writes the toolkit. MediaJustice trains the organizers. Earthjustice provides the lawyers. FWW sets the national policy demands. Then the climate language gets stripped out, the framing shifts to “ratepayer protection” and “property rights” and “farmland preservation,” and the whole package gets delivered to conservative communities that would reject the Sierra Club’s broader agenda if it were presented honestly. A Trump voter in Sand Springs, Oklahoma told the Washington Post: “We know Trump wants data centers... but these things don’t

affect [them]. This affects us.” He’s right to be concerned about his community. He’s probably unaware that the arguments he’s making were developed by organizations funded by anonymous billionaires through donor-advised funds, the same organizations fighting fossil fuels, promoting the Green New Deal, and working to dismantle the energy industry that employs his neighbors.

The data center opposition movement may be bipartisan in its voters, but it is progressive in its architecture.

And the environmental left has proven remarkably skilled at embedding its resources in communities that would reject its broader agenda if it showed up wearing its own name.

THE REAL AGENDA: ELECTING DEMOCRATS AND UNDERMINING TRUMP

The strategy has been articulated openly. Ben Green, an assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Information, published an essay in March 2026 at TechPolicy.Press arguing that data center opposition is “particularly opportune for Democrats” because “many data center fights are in exactly the type of rural areas and red or purple states in which Democrats are desperate to make inroads.” Green urged Democrats to seize the issue before Republicans “outflanked” them, arguing that “Democrats can also incorporate data centers into anti-Trump arguments.” This is not a conspiracy theory. It is a published strategy memo from an academic at a major research university, telling the Democratic Party to use data center opposition as a vehicle for winning elections in MAGA country.

The organizations executing this strategy are not nonpartisan civic actors. They are among the largest financial backers of the Democratic Party:



The League of Conservation Voters spent \$120-155 million in the 2024 election cycle, with 100% going to Democrats. Its largest funder is a dark money 501(c)(4) that funneled \$27.7 million into the LCV Victory Fund, money whose original donors are not publicly disclosed. The Wyss-connected Berger Action Fund gave LCV \$3.5 million directly plus \$19.75 million through intermediaries. The Sierra Club PAC has given 100% of its contributions to Democrats in every tracked cycle since the 1980s and spent \$960,769 specifically opposing Trump's reelection in 2020. Sierra Club Independent Action spent \$6 million in independent expenditures between 2009 and 2020: all supporting Democrats or opposing Republicans. The Food & Water Action PAC has sent 100% of its spending to Democratic candidates in every cycle. Every candidate ever endorsed by Food & Water Action, Our Revolution, and Earthjustice Action has been a Democrat.

... urged Democrats to seize the issue before Republicans “outflanked” them, arguing that “Democrats can also incorporate data centers into anti-Trump arguments.”

The dual-purpose nature of this organizing is not subtle. Food & Water Action knocked on 65,000 doors and made 500,000 phone calls to elect Democratic candidates in 2024. In Pennsylvania, its organizers knocked 31,000 doors for endorsed Democrats, the same state where Food & Water Watch organizes data center opposition. Sierra Club mobilized 20,000 volunteers to send 500,000 letters to voters in Pennsylvania and Michigan, two states where the Club simultaneously runs anti-data center campaigns. Virginia LCV knocked on 210,000 doors in 2025 using energy affordability messaging tied to data center concerns—and those same door-knocking operations helped elect Democratic Governor Abigail Spanberger. The Brookings Institution documented the convergence: “Democratic candidates gained considerable traction by

expressing concern over high electricity rates and blaming data centers for the increases.”

The FWW moratorium letter itself reveals the movement’s ideological center of gravity. Of the 230+ signatories, the list includes Progressive Democrats of America, Our Revolution, Democratic Socialists of America chapters, Green Party committees, and Oil Change International. Not a single identifiable conservative, libertarian, or right-leaning organization signed the letter. The “nonpartisan” movement demanding a national halt to data center construction is, in its organizational DNA, an exclusively progressive operation.

Democratic candidates gained considerable traction by expressing concern over high electricity rates and blaming data centers for the increases.

This matters because data center development is a cornerstone of President Trump’s economic and national security agenda. The Stargate Project, the executive orders accelerating federal permitting, the vision of American AI dominance, all of it depends on building the physical infrastructure these groups are trying to stop. When the Sierra Club files a regulatory challenge against a data center power plan in Indiana, it is not protecting ratepayers. It is obstructing Trump’s AI buildout. When

Food & Water Watch writes a state moratorium bill and deploys organizers to red districts, it is not defending local communities. It is building voter contact lists for the next Democratic campaign. The anti-data center movement is, at its core, an anti-Trump movement wearing a hard hat.

THE NEGATIVE IMPACT ON REAL COMMUNITIES: STATE-LEVEL CASE STUDIES

VIRGINIA: GROUND ZERO. \$45.8 BILLION IN PROJECTS DISRUPTED

Virginia hosts 13% of global data center capacity and is the movement’s epicenter. The Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition, an over 50 member organizations convened by PEC, with fiscal sponsorship, annual Lobby Days in Richmond, and professional staff, has driven opposition statewide.

The \$24.7 billion Prince William Digital Gateway was the crown jewel. After a multi-group coalition letter (Sierra Club-VA, National Parks Conservation Association, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, and over 30 other organizations) urged supervisors to vote no in October 2022, the county approved rezoning in December 2023, only to have a circuit court overturn the decision in August 2025 following lawsuits from conservation groups and homeowner associations. The Virginia Court of Appeals heard combined arguments in February 2026.

In Fauquier County, Headwaters Site Development LLC withdrew a \$400 million data center project at Catlett Station in July 2024



before formal review concluded, after local opposition mobilized around PEC-provided messaging about noise, water, and environmental conservation.

AWS withdrew a 7.2 million-square-foot proposal from Louisa County in July 2025. DC Blox withdrew a \$500 million Richmond facility in November 2024.

In Warrenton, voters ejected every town council member who supported Amazon's data center in November 2024.

GEORGIA: EIGHT MORATORIUMS IN RAPID SUCCESSION

Georgia's opposition erupted in 2025 with moratoriums in Clayton, Coweta, Pike, Lamar, Troup, Monroe, and DeKalb counties, plus the cities of LaGrange and Social Circle. Sierra Club-Georgia provides the professional infrastructure through organizer Hannah Baker and a pre-built organizing toolkit.

In Coweta County, the "Project Sail" proposal, a 464-acre data center campus requiring 6 million gallons of water per day, drew organized opposition featuring Chattahoochee Riverkeeper factsheets that echoed Sierra Club framing almost verbatim. A \$19 billion Bartow County project was withdrawn after the planning commission recommended denial. Monroe County rejected a \$6 billion rezoning after 900 people packed a commissioners meeting.

INDIANA: THE CITIZENS ACTION COALITION RUNS THE PLAYBOOK

Indiana is another center of AI data center buildout with nearly 30 active projects and combined investment commitments exceeding \$36 billion from Amazon (\$11 billion in New Carlisle plus \$15 billion in northern Indiana), Meta (\$10 billion in Lebanon), Google (\$2 billion+ "Project Zodiac" in Fort Wayne), and Microsoft (over \$1 billion in La Porte County). Amazon's New Carlisle campus alone is projected to consume 2.2 gigawatts of power, nearly 10% of Indiana's entire current electricity demand.

Indiana's Citizens Action Coalition (CAC), the state's

oldest and largest consumer/environmental advocacy organization, serves as central node. CAC called for a statewide moratorium in October 2024, built a dedicated website with action tools, and negotiated a legal settlement creating a framework to prevent utility bill increases from data center demand.

CAC's leadership was refreshingly candid about the national coordination, stating: "There has been a coalition that has developed nationally and we have several groups that have developed within that coalition space who have helped us develop our site fight organizing, policy guidebooks, and legislative resources."

Three Indiana counties enacted data center moratoriums. Eleven projects were withdrawn statewide.

There has been a coalition that has developed nationally and we have several groups that have developed within that coalition space who have helped us develop our site fight organizing, policy guidebooks, and legislative resources.

WISCONSIN: TOOLKITS, WEBINARS, AND A STATEWIDE CAMPAIGN-IN-A-BOX

In December 2025, Sierra Club-WI, Wisconsin's Green Fire, Midwest Environmental Advocates, and Healthy Climate WI [released](#) the "Big Tech Unchecked" toolkit, a 34-page ready-made campaign package training local residents to monitor permits, petition lawmakers, organize Facebook groups, pitch stories to local media, submit letters to the editor, attend public meetings in coordinated attire, and file comments with the Public Service Commission. The toolkit explicitly cites past pipeline fights as a model.

The toolkit's messaging then migrated, almost unchanged, into state legislation, Sierra Club press releases, and local opposition campaigns across the

state. A chapter on page 26 is literally titled “Protect Your Community from Footing the Bill.” That exact phrase, “footing the bill,” then appeared in at least three separate Sierra Club Wisconsin press releases, in the framing of state Sen. Jodi Habush Sinykin’s data center accountability legislation (which Sierra Club publicly applauded), and in local news coverage of community opposition groups statewide.

Sierra Club Wisconsin’s PSC filings declared: “We must ensure that Wisconsinites do not subsidize Big Tech billionaires through higher energy bills” and warned residents were “at risk for skyrocketing bills.” Those phrases—“Big Tech billionaires,” “skyrocketing bills,” “footing the bill”—became the vocabulary of the entire Wisconsin opposition movement, from DeForest to Menomonie to Port Washington.

55% of Wisconsin Republicans said data center costs outweigh benefits, demonstrating the Sierra Club’s carefully de-climatized, ratepayer-focused framing had penetrated well beyond the environmental left’s usual audience.

The toolkit’s step-by-step organizing playbook reads as a near-exact blueprint for what happened next. In DeForest, where QTS proposed a \$12 billion, 1,600-acre data center campus on farmland, the “No Data Center in DeForest” group built a 4,000-member Facebook page, organized coordinated public forums, packed village board meetings, pitched stories to local media, and uncovered emails between QTS and village officials through open records requests, every tactic outlined in the toolkit’s chapters on “Organize Your Neighbors” (p. 29), “Pitching a News Story” (p. 31), and “Print Media: Letters to the Editor” (p. 33).

The Wisconsin Department of Administration determined the annexation was not in the

public interest, and in January 2026, village staff recommended rejection. QTS withdrew.

The Sierra Club then escalated to the regulatory arena, filing testimony before the Public Service Commission opposing We Energies’ proposed rate structure for data centers and hosting a follow-up webinar, “Big Tech Unchecked: No Discounts for Data Centers,” in February 2026. Democratic lawmakers proposed a statewide moratorium the same month. A Marquette Law School poll found 55% of Wisconsin Republicans said data center costs outweigh benefits, demonstrating the Sierra Club’s carefully de-climatized, ratepayer-focused framing had penetrated well beyond the environmental left’s usual audience.

SOUTH CAROLINA: SELC BRINGS IN THE LAWYERS

In Colleton County, SELC and Earthjustice filed suit in January 2026 on behalf of local landowners challenging a data center zoning ordinance in the ACE Basin, one of the most ecologically sensitive areas on the East Coast. SELC’s press release names local plaintiffs and frames the issue in environmental justice terms. The ordinance was repealed by February 2026.

OREGON: \$100 MILLION CANCELED AFTER POLITICAL UPHEAVAL

In Cascade Locks, Oregon, a \$100 million data center was canceled after local opposition led to the recall of two officials who supported the project. The Cascade Locks Port Authority discontinued the project following the political upheaval.

THE ANTI-FRACKING PLAYBOOK, RECYCLED

This is not FWW’s first rodeo. NPR itself connected the dots, reporting that the data center campaign “echoes a Food & Water Watch campaign from a generation back against hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.”

The playbook is identical:

- 1 National organization adopts extreme policy position (moratorium/ban)
- 2 Coalition letter organized with hundreds of signatories to create an illusion of mass support
- 3 Congressional champion secured (Sanders for both fracking and data centers)
- 4 State-level model legislation was authored and introduced
- 5 Professional organizers deployed to local communities
- 6 Legal challenges filed through allied law firms in multiple jurisdictions simultaneously

The Tar Sands Campaign of 2008, funded by longtime liberal funders the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Hewlett Foundation, and Tides Foundation, used a strategy paper that explicitly called for the coordinating center to “remain invisible to the outside” while staff would be “purchased from engaged organizations.”

The Tides Foundation made 400+ payments totaling \$35-40 million to nearly 100 anti-pipeline groups between 2009 and 2015.

Same money. Same playbook. New target.

The goal of these organizations has little to do with protecting communities and everything to do with ending one of the United States’ most valuable industries—it’s energy industry. The left is perverting real community concern and hijacking it for their own radical agenda.

THE POLICY AGENDA

Stopping individual data center projects is only part of the strategy. The same organizations fueling local opposition are also pushing policies designed to slow data center development nationwide. Moratorium

legislation has been the most visible demand, with activists calling for statewide, and even national, pauses on new construction. But blocking projects is only the beginning.

Across multiple states, activist groups are pressing regulators and lawmakers to erect new barriers around the infrastructure needed to power data centers. They are demanding new investigations, regulatory reviews, and government studies of data center energy and water use, often as a justification to delay or halt projects already moving through the approval process.

Some activists have gone further, targeting the financial framework that allows that infrastructure to be built in the first place. That includes calls to aggressively scrutinize utilities’ return on equity—the return that attracts the private capital used to finance power plants, transmission lines, and grid upgrades. Undermine those returns, and the infrastructure needed to serve new data centers becomes far harder to finance and build.

FROM THE PIEDMONT ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCIL:

According to PJM, nearly all projected electricity demand growth through 2045 is attributable to data centers.

Dominion Energy claims it will not be able to meet this projection without keeping coal on the grid and expanding natural gas facilities.

Other proposals aim to restrict where and how data centers can be built at all: tighter zoning rules, expanded environmental review, and legislation designed to slow approvals or halt projects entirely. Each proposal is presented as a narrow reform. Taken together, they amount to something very different, a coordinated effort to raise barriers to large-scale data center development.

Seen in that light, the protests described throughout this report look less like isolated community disputes and more like the political front line of a broader campaign to slow the infrastructure buildout behind America’s digital economy.

And if the strategy sounds familiar, it should. The same coalition networks, organizing tactics, and policy demands have been deployed before—most notably in the national arena.

REAL COSTS, REAL PEOPLE

Delays in new data center projects carry real costs that consumers see. Data centers contribute \$727 billion annually to U.S. GDP and support 4.7 million jobs. Each direct data center job supports 7.4 ancillary jobs.

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In Loudoun County, Virginia, data centers generate \$890 million annually in tax revenue, more than the county’s entire general operations budget, enabling property tax rates that are 25% lower than neighboring counties and saving the average homeowner approximately \$3,000 per year. The communities that lose these projects don’t just lose abstract “investment.” They lose schools, roads, fire stations, and lower tax bills.

Meanwhile, the activists blocking these projects face no consequences. They don’t live in the communities that need the jobs. They don’t pay the higher taxes that result from lost revenue. They collect their grants from anonymous DAFs, file their lawsuits from offices in Washington and Charlottesville, and move on to the next fight.

As Interior Secretary Doug Burgum warned, a national data center moratorium would amount to a “surrender” to China. Every project blocked cedes ground in the AI race, and the math is straightforward. China is

building data center capacity at a pace that faces no environmental litigation, no moratorium legislation, no billionaire-funded opposition campaigns. The compute infrastructure that trains AI models, processes intelligence data, and powers the next generation of American economic and military advantage has to be built somewhere. When it isn’t built here, it falls further behind what Beijing is constructing unimpeded.

That context makes one question impossible to ignore: who benefits? The EPA has formally asked the DOJ to investigate whether U.S. environmental groups, including the Sierra Club, the organization writing the toolkits, training the organizers, and filing the lawsuits that have killed billions in American infrastructure, received covert funding from China and Russia. The question it raises is worth sitting with: if a foreign adversary wanted to slow American AI infrastructure from the inside, the campaign documented in this report is exactly what that would look like.

SAVING LOCAL COMMUNITIES FROM THESE NATIONAL ATTACKS

Local communities deserve honest debate, not manufactured outrage funded and directed by national activists with no stake in local prosperity.

The residents who show up at town halls with genuine concerns deserve honest answers. But they also deserve to know that the talking points they’re reading were written by a Washington advocacy group. That the legal team representing “local landowners” is funded by an organization whose donors are legally shielded from disclosure. That the “grassroots coalition” was assembled by groups receiving millions from anonymous billionaires routed through donor-advised funds.

If these campaigns are truly about the public interest, their funders should have nothing to hide. Until they come out from behind the curtain, every “Save Our Neighborhood” rally should be understood for what it really is: the latest production of a national machine that manufactures outrage for a living.