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MEMORANDUM

TO: Cochise County Planning and Zoning Commission
FROM: Christine McLachlan, AICP, Director
SUBJECT: Docket R-26-01 (Data Centers)
DATE: March 6, 2026 for the March 11, 2026 Meeting

I. BACKGROUND

This is a staff-initiated text amendment to the Cochise County Zoning Regulations to establish a definition for “Data Center,” require Special Use Authorization in the RU (Rural), GB (General Business), LI (Light Industrial), and HI (Heavy Industrial) Zoning Districts, and adopt standards governing their siting, development, and operation.

The County has initiated this amendment in response to the rapid growth of large-scale data centers nationwide and within Arizona. These facilities, driven by cloud computing and artificial intelligence demand, can involve large building footprints, significant electrical consumption, cooling systems, emergency power infrastructure, and heightened security features. Depending on scale and location, such uses may also affect public utilities, water resources, fire protection capacity, transportation infrastructure, and compatibility with surrounding land uses.

Currently, the Cochise County Zoning Regulations do not define “Data Center” as a distinct land use nor establish specific development standards tailored to the operational characteristics of these facilities. In the absence of state-level siting regulations specific to data centers, local zoning authority remains the primary mechanism to determine where and how such uses may be developed.

This item was presented for discussion at the January 14, 2026 Planning and Zoning Commission work session and at the February 11, 2026 joint Board of Supervisors/Planning and Zoning Commission meeting to obtain policy direction and feedback. Based on that input, staff has prepared a proposed ordinance for formal consideration. The proposed amendments are intended to proactively establish clear expectations and performance standards prior to the receipt of any specific development applications. Exhibit A, attached, reflects the proposed text amendments in strike-through (deletions) and underline (additions).

II. SPECIFIC CHANGES

1. Definitions (Section 2.03.030)

- Adds a new definition for “Data Center” to clearly distinguish the use from accessory server rooms and battery energy storage systems.
- Clarifies that the definition includes customary cooling, power, and security infrastructure associated with such facilities.

2. Use Regulations – Special Use Authorization Required

- Amends the following Sections to require Special Use Authorization for Data Centers:
 - 2.15.070 (RU)
 - 2.33.050 (GB)
 - 2.36.050 (LI)

- 2.39.050 (HI)
3. **New Section 2.51.040 – Data Centers (Site Development Standards)**
 - Establishes intent language recognizing the potential scale and infrastructure demands of Data Centers.
 - Limits the use to approval by Special Use Authorization in the HI, LI, RU, and GB districts.
 - Exempts small, accessory on-site enterprise server facilities (10% or less of a building).
 - Clarifies that off-site transmission, substations, or utility infrastructure remain subject to separate review.
 4. **Additional Special Use Application Requirements**
 - Requires supplemental materials addressing:
 - Detailed site plans and equipment layout
 - Operational narrative (cooling systems, generators, hours of operation)
 - Electrical and telecommunication service availability and projected demand
 - Noise analysis (when warranted)
 - Water-Use Plan (including conservation and reclaimed water feasibility)
 - Fire protection and emergency response planning
 - Other site-specific studies proportional to project impacts
 5. **Construction Phase Standards**
 - Establishes construction hour limitations.
 - Requires dust control, lighting shielding, traffic management, and maintained emergency access during construction.
 6. **Development and Operational Standards**
 - Requires compliance with zoning height and setback requirements, with authority to increase buffering adjacent to residential or rural uses.
 - Establishes screening requirements for equipment yards, cooling infrastructure, and generators.
 - Requires adequate emergency access and fire protection measures proportional to site risk and available services.
 7. **Performance Standards**
 - Noise mitigation requirements, including limits on routine generator testing hours.
 - Outdoor lighting standards to minimize glare and spillover.
 - Traffic and delivery limitations if adjacent to residentially used parcels.
 - Utility capacity demonstration requirements.
 8. **Water Use Protections**
 - Prohibits routine potable water use for cooling unless non-potable or reclaimed water is demonstrated to be infeasible.
 - Allows conditioning for reclaimed water use, metering, and reporting where appropriate.
 9. **Security, Transferability, and Long-Term Site Management**
 - Allows necessary security features while requiring mitigation of visual impacts.
 - Provides that approval runs with the land.
 - Establishes abandonment determination procedures.
 - Requires a Decommissioning and Site Management Plan at building permit stage.
 - Authorizes financial assurance when site-specific features create elevated decommissioning or site stabilization risks, and allows such assurance to be used upon a County determination of abandonment.
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III. Summary of Revisions Since Prior Draft

Following the February 11, 2026 joint work session, staff made several targeted revisions to the proposed ordinance language, shown in yellow highlight in Exhibit A.

- The primary substantive revision is in Section 14 – Financial Assurance. The previous draft stated that financial assurance would not be required during active operation of a Data Center and could only be required upon a determination of abandonment. The revised language clarifies that financial assurance is not routinely required, but may be required through the Special Use Authorization process when site-specific features create a heightened risk of decommissioning or site stabilization costs. This change provides additional flexibility for the County to address higher-risk situations while recognizing that Data Centers are building-based uses that may be repurposed.
- The exemption for small accessory server facilities was also clarified in Section 2.b to ensure that the exemption applies only where such equipment supports on-site enterprise operations and does not function as the principal use of the site.
- In Section 3.c, the application requirements were revised to clarify that applicants must provide information regarding both electrical and telecommunications service availability and capacity, rather than electrical service alone. This revision reflects the operational characteristics of Data Centers and ensures the County has sufficient information to evaluate potential infrastructure demands when presented to the Commission for Special Use Authorization.
- In Section 5.e, language was added authorizing the County to require annual inspection or certification of fuel storage, containment systems, and other hazardous-material controls, and to require soil or groundwater testing where objective evidence indicates a potential contamination risk. This revision responds to Commission discussion regarding soil testing and is intended to ensure that facilities maintain appropriate safeguards to protect public health, groundwater resources, and surrounding properties in the event of a spill, release, or system failure.

These revisions do not alter the overall policy framework presented at prior work sessions, rather provide additional clarity and flexibility to address site-specific operational and public safety considerations.

IV. Comprehensive Plan Consistency/Staff Recommendation

Staff finds that the proposed text amendment is consistent with the Cochise County Comprehensive Plan 2045 (CP2045). The requirement for Special Use Authorization and demonstration of infrastructure and water availability supports Land Use Goal: Smart Growth, Right Places, Policy 4, which directs that high intensity uses be located where water and infrastructure capacity can support them without adverse impacts to domestic wells.

The amendment is also consistent with the Category D Purpose, which allows intensive non-residential uses in rural areas only where they can be accommodated by existing or planned infrastructure and reliable water availability.

Additionally, the ordinance supports Land Use Goal: Investing in People, Powering Industry, Policy 3, by establishing a clear regulatory framework for evaluating emerging industry sectors while ensuring long-term community benefit and protection of public resources.

For these reasons, staff recommends approval of Docket R26-01 as outlined in Exhibit A.

Sample Motion

I move to recommend approval of Docket R26-01 to the Board of Supervisors, amending text of the Cochise County Zoning Regulations as outlined in Exhibit A.

