



Testimony to Montgomery County Planning Board
February 12, 2026
Re: ZTA 26-01, Commercial Uses - Data Center

My name is Karen Metchis and I am representing two groups - the Climate Coalition Montgomery County which includes 20 local community groups, and the Sierra Club of Montgomery County representing thousands of residents.

We are collectively concerned about ZTA 26-01 as well as Terra Energy's application to build a data center campus at the Dickerson coal plant site. I know of no one who likes data centers except those who think they will build us out of a revenue deficit. The argument goes, "We all use data and they'll be built somewhere regardless. So we might as well benefit." I'd like to address this perspective a little bit.

This ZTA is not ready for prime time. Our concerns were confirmed when we read the Planning Department's Climate Assessment. We strongly urge you to apply the precautionary principle.

The bottom line: PLEASE send this back to Council requesting a moratorium, and specify additional provisions that need to be articulated in the ZTA in order to ensure an informed and equitable decision making process.

For example,

- the ZTA needs to define small, large, and hyperscale data centers;
- Section 3.5.2.B.2 (Use Standards) needs to specify use standards for electricity supply, use, and efficiency; battery storage and stationary fuel use; heat islands; and water quantity and water quality factors.
- Modify the multiple uses of the phrase "....will be minimized to the maximum extent practicable" and instead provide quantifiable specifics to this otherwise vague phrase that will likely result in loopholes and lawsuits. Without objective project-level requirements, staff may gloss over these issues as 'inherent characteristics' of data centers rather than requiring remedies.

Also missing are requirements for evaluating cumulative impacts from a data center campus. Will each data center be approved in a vacuum or based on the cumulative impacts of being

co-located with other data centers? As you know, Atmosphere, LLC, is seeking approval initially for five data centers on the 110-acre “data center” site on the Terra Energy property. Will each of these data centers, plus several others likely to be built on the remaining 170 acres, be evaluated as to their cumulative impacts, or each in a vacuum?

To fully understand the implications of adding data center use classes, we turned to the climate assessment. First, let’s discuss the findings that are “indeterminate.”

- The ZTA does not require sufficient information to evaluate where each light, medium, and heavy industrial site is in relation to residences, hospitals, overburdened communities, sensitive water bodies, forest and tree cover, or whether the site can comport with sector plans, Thrive 2050 goals, or functional plans.
- This lack of information impedes an evaluation of potential environmental and health impacts.

Second, regarding Adaptive Capacity, we must take issue with the “no impact” findings.

- Without knowing the exact locations, how can one say there is no change to present or future community and public resources, jobs, transportation networks, etc?
- Also, The ZTA must include standards for impervious surface limits, use of green building materials, green site design, change to tree cover, noise, humming, vibration abatement, etc.

Third, a real economic assessment should be required - including for plans at the Terra Energy site - to inform decision makers whether the costs outweigh the benefits, including whether any kind of incentive is appropriate.

We are clearly not on track to achieve the County’s greenhouse gas emissions reduction or resilience goals of the Climate Action Plan. The ZTA should require data centers to ‘bring their own renewable energy and to otherwise address their detriment to meeting those goals.

- The Climate Assessment for this ZTA correctly states that data centers will have a “Major Negative Effect.” They are energy-intensive with continuous electricity demand, (much higher than other commercial or industrial uses) and have high electricity consumption *regardless of efficiency measures.*
- Let’s quantify the range of potential carbon emissions and air and water pollutants - not just assumed but calculated based on better analysis of the possible location, size, and design of data centers.

If we are serious about protecting future generations, this lack of specificity is just wrong.

We take note that Councilmember Glass has proposed Bill 4-26 to form a Task Force to fully study this issue. And the State legislature has mandated a data center report be submitted by this September from the Maryland Department of the Environment. We support taking time to study this issue. We believe that without a temporary moratorium, this ZTA as written undermines public transparency, trust, and interest.

We ask the Board to convey to the Council the proposed modifications to ZTA 26-01 as recommended in our, and other stakeholders', comments. Additionally please request a temporary hold - moratorium if you will - on all data center applications and permitting, including the proposed but not yet fully evaluated - nor approved - Dickerson hyperscale complex, until the process to codify and regulate the use is complete. We also ask that the Planning Department be directed to update the Climate Assessment Quant tool to inform this decision making process.

I also note that while there are only four testimonies here today, the County Executive's town hall on February 3 more than a hundred people, including at least 50 speakers expressing concerns.

Thank you for your consideration.

Karen Metchis

karen.metchis@gmail.com

Submitted on behalf of:

Climate Coalition Montgomery County

6106 Harvard Ave
PO Box 102
Glen Echo, MD 20812

Sierra Club of Montgomery County

Montgomery County Sierra Club
P.O. Box 4024
Rockville, MD 2084

CCMC Member Organizatons

- 350 MoCo
- ACQ Climate (Ask the Climate Question)
- Bethesda Green
- Biodiversity for a Livable Climate
- Chesapeake Climate Action Network
- Ecosystems Study Group
- Elders Climate Action
- Environmental Justice Ministry Cedar Lane UU Church
- Friends of Sligo Creek
- Green Sanctuary Committee UU Church of Silver Spring
- Montgomery Countryside Alliance
- Montgomery County Faith Alliance for Climate Solutions
- One Montgomery Green
- Poolesville Green
- Safe Healthy Playing Fields
- Sugarloaf Citizens' Association
- Transit Alternatives to Mid-County Highway Extended
- The Climate Mobilization Montgomery County
- Takoma Park Mobilization Environment Committee
- Zero Waste Montgomery County

References:

Health: <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/climate/articles/10.3389/fclim.2026.1648912/full>

Energy: Maryland Office of Peoples' Counsel - the role of data centers for steeply rising electricity cost to consumers, especially those in the vicinity of data centers
<https://opc.maryland.gov/Consumer-Learning/Data-Centers>