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If data centers are right for Montgomery County now, they will be right for the county in 6-12 months when a transparent public process has made a full accounting of where and how data centers can be sited to complement the county's goals - and the biggest question - who pays? Good leadership proceeds carefully and in collaboration.

The Potomac River is a treasure of the Maryland, Virginia and Washington DC geography and communities. Currently it is in danger of irreversible harm through the siting of mega-data centers that rely on the waters for cooling and discharge of heated effluent. At the community forum on data centers, it seems that the most basic research on siting and long term effects of these data centers on the Potomac and Montgomery County are sorely lacking. For example, a cost-benefit analysis of whether hosting these data centers will be beneficial to the county has not been done, or officials are not being transparent on the findings.

Public health research examining Virginia's "Data Center Alley," located adjacent to Montgomery County, demonstrates that large-scale data centers can create significant land and water use harms when growth outpaces planning. In Montgomery County, these risks are especially acute because proposed energy-intensive data centers would rely exclusively on withdrawals from the Potomac River, a critical regional drinking water source and ecological system. Data centers require enormous volumes of water for cooling and discharge heated effluent, yet there are currently no studies evaluating the cumulative impacts of sustained warm-water releases into the Potomac, including effects on aquatic life, water quality, and downstream users (this includes around 8 million residents and upwards of 7 million tourists per year). Once land is converted and water systems are stressed, these impacts are difficult or impossible to reverse. If major data center development is allowed to proceed in the absence of site-specific environmental and public health analysis, the County will be placed at unnecessary risk and further has the potential to rob Maryland residents of this precious and irreplaceable resource. Montgomery County has a civic and moral responsibility to require rigorous, precautionary planning including defined water use limits, thermal discharge analysis, and unambiguous zoning protections. Further, irreversible changes to the Potomac River and damage to any downstream environments could be devastating on the tourism industry that attracts up to 7 million visitors per year. These basic requirements must be determined before permitting infrastructure that could permanently alter our river, our land, and our community well-being.