



Local Advocacy in the Data Center Capital: An Interview with Julie Bolthouse

[Julie Bolthouse](#) is the Director of Land Use at the [Piedmont Environmental Council](#) (PEC). She works locally in Virginia's nine-county region from Loudoun County to Albemarle County, advocating for more sustainability in planning processes and local land use decisions. She also co-organizes the Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition, which brings together around 40 concerned community partners to better understand the impacts of rapid hyperscale data center development in Virginia, the "data center capital of the world." In response to this issue, the PEC has built and shared various resources, including [a web map of existing and proposed data centers](#), as well as a framework to encourage legislative action, "[Four Pillars of Data Center Reform](#)." In this interview with Policy & Communications Fellow Sean Wang, she talks about these projects and how they've empowered communities and legislators to tackle this ever-growing issue.

This interview was conducted on July 10, 2025. It has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Sean: *Something we're interested in, as people working with community environmental data tools, is that PEC shares and maintains things like the map of data centers, the four pillars of data center reform, and data center legislation tracking. Could you please walk me through the thought process behind their development in terms of: Who were they trying to target? What were the intended impacts? Why these resources specifically?*

Julie: Yeah, absolutely. We created the map because we were getting so many people telling us about data center development that was sometimes outside of our region. We realized that it would be really helpful for people, especially our legislators, as we're trying to talk to them about the need for state policy, to have a visual of just how many proposals are out there, and to help us better, as a community, track what's happening around us that is not just in our immediate community. And so that's why we created the data center map.

Basically, we're crowdsourcing information, but we check it, so if someone notifies us, "Hey, we've got a data center proposal in our community," we go into the land records for that locality and ensure that there is an application. If there's not a real application and it's just a purchase of a property or something, we don't add it to the map. We want these to be realistic. We want these to be the real projects that are actually moving forward. The map is just helpful as a visual to understand just how much is out there.

However, the one deceptive part of that map is that the dots are all the same size. We tried to make them adjust to the size of the proposals, to scale them, but the problem was that not all projects have square footage, and so very large projects that don't have square footage were still showing up as little, tiny dots. We decided not to do that because we just didn't have enough data to make it accurate. Some data centers, especially the existing

ones in Data Center Alley, are only 20,000 square feet, but then you've got the same size dot for 22 million square feet over at Digital Gateway.

I should tell you about the four pillars document. That was an attempt to try to organize our thoughts as we went into The General Assembly. We wanted to have a really clear platform for our legislators, because we had gone in two years prior, 2022 and 2023, to talk to our legislators. And the response we had gotten from the legislators was “I don't understand what you're talking about” or “What are you asking for?”. They said, “You're telling me there's a problem. I don't really know what a data center is, and I don't really know what you're asking for.” We said, “Okay, we need to be much more clear about our ask and we need to be much more clear about what the impacts are.”

And so we created that handout, which spells out, first of all, the basics: What are the regional impacts? Why are we concerned? Why do we think we need to have state-level oversight? Why is local authority not enough? Because the local authority is only looking at the data center as it would be proposed in their community. They're looking at the aesthetics. They're looking at the trials. Transportation impacts, they're looking at, but you know, does it fit with their comprehensive plan? They're not looking at all the things we just talked about: Air, water supply regionally, the energy impacts. And so we're trying to emphasize in that document why we need state oversight, and then the four pillars of where that state oversight needs to happen.

First of all, that's just a review process, an oversight process so that the state actually gets an opportunity to look at these applications before they move forward. And then having transparency around that information because you can't review it if you don't have basic information about energy usage, water usage and emissions. We need basic information. We don't need proprietary, secret, nuanced information about exactly how their servers are connected, or how their cooling technology works. What we need is just basic information about how much water, what the emissions are going to be, and how much power you are going to need. That's really basic stuff.

We also have ratepayer protection, making sure that the rest of the grid customers—residential, small businesses, even other data center customers that are existing right now—are not unfairly subsidizing the explosive growth of this industry and the amount of energy infrastructure that's necessary to feed it. That's a separate avenue that we tried to pursue legislative framing around, but we're also pursuing that at the SCC, which is the State Corporation Commission that makes some of these decisions. We're also pursuing that on a separate track, separate from legislation.

The fourth one is just incentivizing sustainability and mitigating those impacts. We're handing out this huge tax exemption that's the largest in our state. It's reaching nearly a billion dollars that we give them in tax exemption for these projects, but we're not getting anything back in terms of sustainability. We're not getting any mitigation of the impacts that they're causing in these communities. And so that's the fourth pillar there. And having that framework going into the General Assembly made it a lot clearer to our legislative officials what exactly we were looking for and why we were looking for it.

Sean: *Do you have some metric to measure its impacts, or any sort of idea or anecdote you can give us about its success?*

Julie: I think I have an anecdote: The response we got from the staff when we brought that hand out to them. We actually sent it to them ahead of time, so they could think about it before we walked into their office. We had this big Lobby Day, and we went to their offices and talked to them. The response we got, especially from staff that we met with was, “This is really helpful. Thank you so much for framing it so clearly what you're looking for. This is much more helpful for us in terms of what kind of bills we should be pursuing.” And then the follow-up questions were much more helpful too. Instead of them following up with us with “Okay, so what is it that you want?”, they were following up with “Does this bill, HB 38 (I'm just making up numbers) meet the oversight that you're asking

for?”. And then we could have much more in-depth conversations. So yes, I think it was extremely helpful. And we're definitely going to use something very similar going into this next year.

Sean: *How do you feel about the mapping tool, as well?*

Julie: The mapping tool has also been really helpful. Honestly, we have gotten requests for the data that is in our mapping tool from places you would never have expected to ask us for the data, such as Dominion Energy. They asked us for the data because, apparently, they're not tracking these projects. We truthfully decided not to give it to them because we basically were like, “You need to be doing this yourself. This is not our responsibility to provide you with this data.” We've provided it to many other entities. DEQ (the Department of Environmental Quality) asked for it, and we gave it to them, and we've given it to the State Corporation Commission. We've given it to and we filed it with our testimony to the State Corporation Commission. We've also shared it with the JLARC (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission), which wrote a report on data centers and their impacts in our region, just to help them with their background research.

But we've also had the industry itself asking for the data, which again, we don't share it with them either. We're just like, “You need to work for it. You can look at our map. You can click on the dots, just like everyone else, but we're not going to give you the background data.” Because they want to use it for competitor analysis. They want to sit there and look at where competitors are planning on building out data centers, and we don't want to get into that. We don't want to touch that with a 10-foot pole. But the fact is that the data is being used by those kinds of entities.

The reason I think that's important is because it shows that no one else is looking holistically at what's happening. And so it's this little, tiny nonprofit. I mean, we're not that tiny, but we're not a national organization, we're not a Sierra Club, we're not a Nature Conservancy. We're a smaller, little state nonprofit, and for us to be the ones that have this information and are tracking this information indicates that something's broken. Something is clearly very broken. Somebody at a state level should have been tracking this information and should have been looking at the cumulative impacts of what's happening here.

Sean: *I think that was a really strong example, and it gave us a clear picture of these tools. And now I want to ask about the Virginia Data Center Reform Coalition. Correct me if I'm wrong, but you're the one leading this coalition.*

Julie: Yeah, we organize it. It is a very loose coalition, though. So I want to be clear, it's not like a formal 501(c)(3), it's just a loose coalition of groups that meet and have conversations and share information. And we did that on purpose because it's just myself and another guy named Kyle Hart from the National Parks Conservation Association, who's kind of organizing everything. Because neither one of us wanted to take on the responsibility of managing a formal voting body, and also we didn't want to have to fight over donations. That was the other fear. If we created a 501(c)(3), then people would want to give money to that data center fighting. But who does it really go to? There are all these organizations involved anyway. So there's a lot of complexity as to why we didn't make it a 501(c)(3).

But anyway, the point being that group is run by me. It's organized, and we have monthly meetings. We have about 40-some odd groups involved in it, and those groups range over a wide spectrum of different interests. So we have HOAs, like little homeowner groups, we have historic preservation groups, we have land trusts, we have water conservation or watershed protection groups. We have wildlife protection groups and climate advocacy groups, health-focused groups like Virginia Clinicians for Climate Action. Just a wide spectrum of interests that are in that group. And that's also part of the reason we didn't want to have a voting body necessarily. It's because everybody's interest is so focused on a different tentacle of this octopus that it would be really hard for us to make

decisions besides focusing, like we did on the four pillars, and agree that the four pillars would be our foundation going into the General Assembly.

Beyond that, it's really hard for us to have a very focused aspect of this, because everybody has different aspects. But the one core thing that connects us all is trying to understand this monster that's before us. I mean, I hate to demonize the data center industry. I mean, I don't want to make them sound like they're really bad guys. They're not necessarily bad people. It's just that it has become so unwieldy and so impactful on so many fronts that the community has to work together to try to better understand what is actually before us, what is actually happening, and what the cumulative impacts are going to be. And that's the value of this. This coalition is that we're able to work together to get that information and share it with each other, and then build off of each other's knowledge bases.

Sean: *I think that gives us a good idea. It's good to hear you talk through all the challenges and all the benefits of having such a diverse range of voices. Looking forward a little bit, where do you think the data center reform movement is going to be headed in the next year? The next five to ten years? Are there any specific issues and hopes that you want to see realized?*

Julie: Yeah, what we're trying to do is continue with the three things that we're really focused on. Continued outreach, basically trying to get the message out there about: What are these giant buildings in your community? Get information out there about: Why did you smell diesel the other day? Why were there loud noises coming from that giant building? And then also trying to focus on getting that state oversight. That's our legislative focus, which is one of the four pillars that we talked about before. The third focus is trying to continue to gather information and use that information to affect the agencies that make decisions. And so what I mean by that is we're gathering information about substations, about transmission lines, about energy impacts, about the diesel generators and when they're running, and the impact that they might be having, and then we're using that in certain decisions that are being made. We're sharing that information in our outreach and with our legislators, but we're also using that information to try to effect change within the agencies when there are opportunities.

For example, the Department of Environmental Quality is going to be looking at its statewide air plan, and right now, backup diesel generators are exempt from consideration in that statewide air plan. We're using all of the data on the air permits that we've gathered and the anecdotal examples of outage events and impacts to residents smelling diesel and things like that, to try to push them, to not make them exempt, and to include them in there.

We're doing the same thing with the SCC, the State Corporation Commission. There's a rate case before Dominion energy, and we're pushing with all the information that we've gathered on rate payer impacts and the way that all these costs for this infrastructure is very likely going to fall onto other consumers, and how much of a risk there is on the rest of the consumers to be potentially holding the bag if all the data center development that is proposed doesn't build out to the capacity that they've asked for. We're using that information and filing that in testimony so that the SCC hopefully makes better decisions about their rate structure and utility tariffs, and things like that at Dominion Energy going forward. So those are our three fronts.

Sean: *Looking at the [broader conversation around data centers](#), do you think there are stakeholders who you feel should be more involved in the regulation and management? What are the barriers that are currently preventing them from joining the conversation?*

Julie: There are stakeholders that need to be involved from a regulatory standpoint, and that would be the state review. The SCC should be reviewing these contracts, like with Dominion Energy, and like our utility and the data centers. Companies are negotiating these contracts in private by themselves, and then they just come forward

with load demand, with their forecast, and they say, “Okay, this is how much power we need.” But no one ever reviewed it. Nobody looked at what the impact was going to be on the ratepayers, on the grid, on the climate, or any of those other things. So there needs to be a place for those entities like the Department of Environmental Quality, the State Corporation Commission, which is making decisions that would affect the grid and the communities around those grids. They need to be able to review that information.

What's preventing them from doing that right now is that we don't have a policy set up that allows for that. These contracts are all just allowed to be signed in private, and then our utility has an obligation to serve. They can't say no. Or at least that's the excuse that they use: They can't say no to providing power, and so they're trapped into continuing to provide this power endlessly.

That's one aspect, but there are also stakeholders that need to be involved more, not from the regulatory standpoint, but need to be engaged in this issue more. I would say that is the industry itself. That's the glaringly obvious omission that I see. And this is why I have been trying to go to data center conferences and give presentations. I think, unknowingly, many of them are in a tragedy of the commons. They are all acting in their own best interest, but they don't understand that they are threatening the reliability of the grid into the future. They're also risking the cost of the energy that they're dependent on skyrocketing. They don't want to pay higher bills any more than we want to pay higher bills, and so trying to get them to participate in this more and to understand the ramifications of the individual decisions and the cumulative impacts of those individual decisions on themselves.

The same thing with labor as well. We're seeing labor very supportive of continued data center development, especially the electricians' labor unions, and trying to get them to better understand that if you want to have these jobs into the future, then we have to have a sustainable data center development plan. This is not sustainable. This is leading us to a cliff where we're going to reach a point where we have an unreliable grid, we have too expensive energy, and we're going to have a whole lot of data center projects fall apart, and a lot of communities are going to be in fiscal danger because of what is going to happen. And so those are the other stakeholders that I'd like to see engaged in this conversation.

Sean: *Leading from this, what do you think are the resources that are crucial to develop so that we can engage more people on this issue, and even the public, generally?*

Julie: I think more outreach. I know we've done a lot, and there's been tons of press coverage, but we've gotta figure out how to get the regular person to be more informed about what a data center is and what the impacts of them are, but also provide more information to the industry itself. Like I said, trying to get to the industry. I've gone to a lot of these data center conferences, and they're very often talking about small modular nuclear and all these silver bullet kind of solutions, but they're not talking about the holistic, big picture. And so I think resources that help the industry to start thinking more holistically and more forward-thinking, planning ahead, would be very valuable. And also resources for our legislators to help them make more informed decisions.

Sean: *If I could just push the last point a little bit more, what could these resources look like?*

Julie: I think it would need to be more like a fact sheet for legislators about the big cumulative impacts — facts like how much power we're projecting into the future, and what kind of risk does this pose to the reliability of the grid going forward? What water, but having it all in one location? See, the problem is right now, it's scattered everywhere. And it's like you read one paper and it's focused on water, and you read another one, it's focused on generators, and you read another one, it's focused on energy, and it's like trying to get all of that into one consolidated document.

But the one other resource that I think is critically important for our community and our legislators to better understand is what these data centers do, and what is it that we need to ensure that they can continue to do, and what can we maybe start to think about possibly cutting back on. [...] They're selling AI, but we don't really know exactly what AI is going to do in the future. I mean, we have some ideas. It's doing some cool stuff. It's also doing some really frightening stuff, like taking over education surveillance. It's like there's no clear understanding of what AI actually is, or what we really need data centers to do, and why we need to have so many. It almost seems like we're just mindlessly building them because they make money. That's not a very good reason. It's not like a sustainable thing for the future. We grow food because you can sell it and make money, and people eat it, but we're building data centers because they make money? We never got to the second part of what exactly they are doing that we need them to actually do. I think that would be really helpful for us to get to that kind of information.

Sean: *That was a good parallel that you just drew. One last thing before we end — a little fun question to end off. What are you currently reading, watching, or listening to?*

Julie: My favorite podcast right now is Wired's [Uncanny Valley](#).