LMJ CENTER FOR POLICY INNOVATION | POLICY WHITE PAPER

Data Centers and Camden County: A Framework for Responsible Decisions

Infrastructure capacity, utility cost allocation, and enforceable public governance.

An analytical framework for evaluating power, water, land use, and fiscal impacts in Coastal Georgia.

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Executive summary

Data center developments represent immense capital investment and expanded construction activity, promising substantial local tax revenues. However, their net community benefits and potential long-term costs depend critically on facility design, utility service arrangements, intergovernmental alignment, and enforceable operating commitments. Camden County stands at a defining crossroads: commercial developers are actively scouting Coastal Georgia sites due to regional transmission routes and industrial acreage, yet Camden's fragile coastal hydrology, reliance on the Floridan aquifer, proximity to Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, and limited municipal infrastructure require an evidence-driven, cautious evaluation architecture.

A sound local decision cannot rely on generic promotional claims from project sponsors. County and municipal leaders must independently scrutinize power demands, water withdrawal and cooling architectures, tax abatement structures, and public safety implications before granting land use approvals or infrastructure guarantees.

The central proposition

Economic development strengthens communities only when industrial facilities pay their own full freight. Camden County grows stronger when large-scale data center proposals are evaluated against independently verified utility capacity, third-party hydrologic and fiscal studies, and legally binding development agreements that insulate residential ratepayers and protect irreplaceable coastal resources.

The decision for local leaders

Before the county's temporary moratorium expires, the Camden County Board of Commissioners and the city councils of Kingsland, St. Marys, and Woodbine should establish a unified, intergovernmental siting protocol. Leaders must prohibit discretionary tax incentives without an independent fiscal net-benefit study, mandate closed-loop cooling to safeguard the Floridan aquifer, ring-fence electric utility infrastructure to protect residential ratepayers, and require comprehensive development agreements with enforceable performance clawbacks and decommissioning surety.

SECTION 01 | POLICY CONTEXT & LOCAL URGENCY

Why this matters now: A pivotal moment for Camden

Data centers house specialized enterprise computing, data storage, and network gear supporting cloud computing, digital commerce, and artificial intelligence workloads. While commonly grouped under a single industry label, facilities vary drastically in scale, power intensity (from 20 MW to over 500 MW), cooling design (evaporative water consumption versus closed-loop air chilling), and employment density. A local proposal must be assessed on its precise physical, mechanical, and operational characteristics rather than marketing generalizations.

In May 2026, the Camden County Board of Commissioners adopted a six-month moratorium on data center development within unincorporated county territory, directing staff to draft protective zoning and development standards. County officials scheduled an intensive work session for October 27, 2026, to examine draft ordinance provisions [1, 2]. Crucially, the county's moratorium and land use ordinances apply exclusively to unincorporated areas. Incorporated municipalities—including Kingsland, St. Marys, and Woodbine—exercise independent home-rule zoning and permitting authority. Without explicit county-municipal alignment, developers could exploit jurisdictional seams through municipal annexation or direct municipal siting, imposing countywide traffic, water, and power externalities while bypassing county standards.

SECTION 02 | LOCAL EVIDENCE & NATIONAL TRENDS

The evidence: local context and national trends

Sound governance begins with verified baseline data. Evaluating hyper-scale industrial proposals requires examining local demographic realities alongside national energy projections and regional hydrologic vulnerabilities:

Indicator & Baseline Evidence	Analytical Context & What It Tells Camden Leaders
1. Population & Public Service Demands Camden 2020 Census: 54,768. 2024 Population Estimate: 59,065 (+7.8%). [3, 4]	These represent different Census series (decennial enumeration vs. vintage population estimate). Rapid residential growth is already expanding baseline demand on transportation, emergency response, and municipal utilities. Industrial demand must be evaluated alongside community service growth.
2. Household Economic Vulnerability 2020–2024 ACS 5-Year Estimate: 12.9% of Camden residents below poverty line. [5]	The ACS five-year estimate reflects multi-year structural conditions, not a transient snapshot. With constrained household budgets, Camden families cannot absorb utility rate hikes, fuel surcharges, or regressive infrastructure assessments caused by speculative industrial grid expansions.
3. Electricity Consumption Surge LBNL: 176 TWh in 2023 (4.4% of U.S. power); projected 11.8% by 2030. [6, 7]	Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory projects a near-tripling of national data center power usage. However, this is a national aggregate projection, not a local forecast. Camden leaders must demand utility-specific capacity, peak-demand load models, and tariff allocations from local providers.
4. Coastal Groundwater Vulnerability Camden Board of Commissioners Draft Moratorium Resolution (April 2026). [8]	The county resolution identifies exclusive reliance on the Floridan aquifer and highlights severe risks of coastal saltwater intrusion. While a vital policy statement, it is not a hydrogeologic engineering study; project-specific drawdown and cumulative pumping models are legally essential.

Evidence implications for Camden decision-makers

The empirical baseline demonstrates that Camden County cannot treat data center proposals as conventional light industrial warehouses. Because water resources are hydrologically constrained and local households face distinct economic pressures, any industrial project that shifts public costs or endangers natural resources creates immediate local harm.

Local diagnostic requirement before commitments

Camden County and its municipalities should prohibit executing letters of intent, rezoning approvals, or utility service commitments until a verified project diagnostic is completed. This diagnostic must combine site-specific groundwater drawdown modeling, utility-confirmed power interconnection studies, and an independent fiscal cost-benefit evaluation funded entirely by the applicant but reporting directly to public officials.

SECTION 03 | MULTI-DIMENSIONAL IMPACT ANALYSIS

Weighing the opportunity and obligations

A complete evaluation framework must systematically balance capital investment opportunities against structural community liabilities across four core analytical domains:

Impact Domain	Community Opportunity	Operational & Public Risk	Mandatory Policy Safeguard
Economic & Fiscal	High initial capital expenditure; substantial real property tax base additions; construction trade activity.	Low permanent employment (20–50 jobs); reliance on itinerant labor; Georgia sales tax exemptions; fast equipment depreciation.	Independent 20-year net fiscal impact model; local hiring benchmarks; enforceable tax revenue guarantees (PILOT).
Power & Ratepayers	Potential utility grid modernization; anchor tenant revenues for regional transmission providers.	Enormous baseload demand (50–300+ MW); risk of substation and grid costs shifted onto residential ratepayers; capacity limits.	Utility-verified load studies; tariff ring-fencing; developer-financed transmission upgrades; take-or-pay power contracts.
Water & Resources	Potential adoption of advanced closed-loop zero-water cooling architectures.	Massive evaporative withdrawals from the Floridan aquifer; thermal discharges; coastal saltwater intrusion; wetland runoff.	Mandatory closed-loop dry cooling; strict prohibition on potable aquifer evaporative use; site-specific hydrologic modeling.
Safety & Kings Bay	Secure, monitored industrial facilities with minimal daily traffic congestion.	Continuous diesel generator noise; millions of gallons of on-site fuel; BESS battery fire risks; military radar/EMF interference.	Decibel caps at property boundaries; hazardous fuel containment plans; formal compatibility sign-off with Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay.

Deep Dive: Scrutinizing the Four Core Domains

1. Economic and Fiscal Realities

Local officials must separate short-term construction gains from permanent economic yield. Data centers generate substantial initial construction activity, but specialized trades are frequently recruited from outside Camden County. Once operational, even a 100-megawatt facility typically generates only 20 to 50 permanent jobs, offering limited direct employment for local residents. Furthermore, Georgia offers an attractive high-technology data center sales and use tax exemption on computing and power equipment under O.C.G.A. § 48-8-3(68) [9]. Server hardware depreciates rapidly over a 3- to 5-year cycle, causing personal property tax assessments to drop precipitously unless long-term floor valuations or Payments in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) are contractually locked in. Public revenues must be modeled against increased municipal service burdens and road maintenance costs.

2. Power Infrastructure and Ratepayer Protection

Data centers are among the most electricity-intensive industrial facilities in the world, requiring continuous, round-the-clock baseload power. In Coastal Georgia, electricity is supplied by Georgia Power or electric membership cooperatives like Okefenoke REMC and Satilla REMC. Siting a multi-megawatt project can require high-voltage transmission lines, dedicated substations, and redundant feeders. Leaders must require written verification that all system improvements, line extensions, and grid reinforcements are financed solely by the developer. Without tariff ring-fencing approved by regulatory authorities, the immense capital costs of power upgrades risk being rolled into the general rate base, raising electric bills for local residents and small businesses.

3. Water Resources and Coastal Hydrology

Cooling architectures dictate water vulnerability. Traditional evaporative cooling towers consume millions of gallons of water daily, evaporating moisture into the atmosphere. Camden County depends upon the Upper Floridan aquifer for drinking and agricultural supplies. Coastal Georgia faces documented risks of saltwater intrusion into freshwater aquifers due to heavy cone-of-depression pumping. While air-cooled and closed-loop chilling systems dramatically reduce water consumption, they consume more electricity and require makeup water during peak summer heat. Local ordinances must ban evaporative cooling drawn from potable groundwater and require closed-loop cooling, non-potable greywater recycling, and stormwater containment that protects coastal wetlands.

4. Neighborhoods, Public Safety, and the Kings Bay Mission

The physical presence of a data center introduces distinct community impacts. Backup power arrays composed of dozens of multi-megawatt diesel generators require millions of gallons of on-site fuel storage, posing diesel particulate emissions and hazardous runoff risks. Periodic load-bank testing generates low-frequency industrial droning that travels long distances across coastal flatlands. Lithium-ion battery energy storage systems (BESS) require specialized thermal-runaway firefighting protocols. Finally, Camden County is home to Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay, an anchor of national strategic defense. Development must be rigorously screened for electromagnetic compatibility, radar clearance, high-voltage transmission line placement, and emergency response corridor access in direct consultation with naval command.

Balancing industrial opportunity with coastal preservation

A data center is not inherently good or bad for Camden County; its net community impact is determined entirely by the enforceable conditions under which it operates. A facility utilizing closed-loop dry cooling, developer-financed grid interconnection, strict acoustic setbacks, and a binding PILOT agreement can support public finances. A facility relying on unconstrained aquifer pumping and public utility subsidies will erode both local environmental resilience and household affordability.

SECTION 04 | POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Camden leaders

Based on the empirical evidence and multi-dimensional impact analysis, the LMJ Center for Policy Innovation recommends six actionable measures for the Camden County Board of Commissioners, the city councils of Kingsland, St. Marys, and Woodbine, and the Camden County Joint Development Authority:

1. Adopt Unified County-Municipal Siting Standards — Establish identical, binding land use criteria across unincorporated Camden County and the cities of Kingsland, St. Marys, and Woodbine. Standards must mandate robust parcel setbacks (minimum 200 feet from residential zoning), boundary noise limits (e.g., max 50 dBA daytime, 45 dBA nighttime at property lines), dark-sky lighting, and strict stormwater retention to prevent jurisdictional arbitrage.

2. Require Comprehensive Upfront Utility & Water Disclosures — Prohibit docketing any rezoning or permit application without certified engineering disclosures detailing peak MW electrical demand, hourly ramp-up schedules, water cooling architecture, daily peak and average water withdrawal, wastewater discharge chemistry, and emergency fuel storage volumes.

3. Commission Independent, Developer-Funded Impact Studies — Require developers to fund independent, third-party technical reviews commissioned directly by local government. Analyses must include hydrogeologic aquifer modeling, grid stability assessments from electric providers, and 20-year net fiscal modeling testing low, base, and high equipment depreciation scenarios.

4. Enact Enforceable Development Agreements & Financial Surety — Execute legally binding Development and Community Benefit Agreements prior to granting any land use approval. Agreements must mandate developer payment for all off-site infrastructure, enforceable local hiring benchmarks where lawful, annual compliance audits, clawback penalties, and decommissioning surety bonds.

5. Guarantee Structured and Accessible Public Participation — Publish all engineering studies, utility filings, and proposed agreement drafts at least 45 days prior to public hearings. Conduct well-advertised public town halls in Kingsland, St. Marys, and Woodbine, providing structured question-and-answer periods so residents can review evidence directly.

6. Institutionalize Multi-Agency Coordination with Kings Bay — Formalize an intergovernmental review committee comprising county and municipal planning directors, local fire marshals, Georgia EPD, electric utility engineers, and designated liaison officers from Naval Submarine Base Kings Bay to evaluate security, land use, and emergency preparedness.

Key decision threshold for local governing bodies

Public approval should be contingent on verified protection, not speculative promises. If an applicant cannot demonstrate water conservation through closed-loop engineering, fully cover electric transmission upgrades, and provide legal guarantees against ratepayer cost-shifting, the responsible policy choice is to deny the application.

SECTION 05 | IMPLEMENTATION PROTOCOL & GOVERNANCE ROADMAP

Implementation protocol: From review to accountability

To operationalize these recommendations, Camden leaders should adopt a structured four-phase governance roadmap paired with an ongoing accountability dashboard:

Phase & Timeframe	Core Focus & Milestones	Responsible Parties & Required Deliverables
Phase 1: Readiness Days 1–30 (Pre-Application)	Audit county/municipal water, wastewater, grid capacity, and emergency response capabilities. Harmonize county and municipal zoning ordinances before moratorium ends.	County Commission, City Councils, Planning Commissions. *Deliverable: Unified Data Center Siting Overlay & Application Checklist.*
Phase 2: Scrutiny Days 31–90 (Application Review)	Mandate complete utility disclosure. Retain independent consultants to model aquifer drawdown, utility tariff allocations, and 20-year fiscal net yield. Host public informational hearings.	Independent Hydrologists, Utility Engineers, Fiscal Analysts, Kings Bay Liaison. *Deliverable: Published Independent Impact Assessment Report.*
Phase 3: Agreement Days 91–180 (Pre-Approval)	Draft and negotiate binding Development Agreements, including PILOT schedules, infrastructure cost allocations, local workforce targets, and decommissioning bonds.	County/City Attorneys, JDA, Project Sponsors. *Deliverable: Executed Enforceable Development & Decommissioning Agreement.*
Phase 4: Audit Ongoing Annually (Operational Era)	Conduct annual audits of actual water usage, electric peak demand, noise boundary compliance, fuel storage safety, local hiring, and tax revenue receipts. Enforce clawbacks if necessary.	County/City Building Officials, Environmental Inspectors, Fire Marshal. *Deliverable: Annual Public Compliance & Economic Dashboard.*

Minimum Shared Oversight Dashboard

A transparent monitoring dashboard ensures ongoing operational compliance throughout the facility's lifecycle:

Oversight Domain	Required Operating Metric / Disclosure	Verification Mechanism & Action Trigger
Electric Grid Load	Continuous MW demand; peak-hour ramp rate; power factor; backup generator run-hours.	Quarterly utility reporting. Grid stress triggers automated curtailment protocols.
Groundwater Use	Daily water withdrawal (gallons); discharge volume; water temperature; effluent quality.	Direct telemetry metered by Georgia EPD. Exceeding baseline triggers daily fines.
Fiscal Receipts	Real property taxes paid; PILOT payments received; personal property equipment valuation.	Annual tax digest review. Revenue shortfall below base model triggers clawback payment.
Noise & Safety	Boundary dBA decibel levels; generator testing logs; hazardous fuel containment checks.	Unannounced third-party acoustic audits; biannual joint Fire/Emergency inspections.
Decommissioning	Surety bond or escrow fund maintained for facility demolition and site remediation.	Triennial independent engineering review of salvage value vs. total demolition cost.

SECTION 06 | CONCLUDING SYNTHESIS & ANALYTICAL BOUNDARIES

Conclusion and analytical boundaries

A sound decision is built on credible evidence, enforceable commitments, and genuine public trust. Camden County and its cities can explore economic opportunities while rigorously protecting coastal water, electric reliability, community character, and public finances. This white paper does not endorse or oppose any specific development proposal; it establishes an objective, evidence-based policy framework to evaluate any future application.

Methodology and analytical boundaries: This analysis synthesizes public demographic data, federal energy research, Georgia statutory provisions, and local proceedings available as of October 27, 2026. No project-specific electrical load, hydrologic pumping, or fiscal engineering study was supplied. National energy projections illustrate macro industry trends and should never be substituted for utility-specific load studies in Camden County. Local leaders must verify the legal status of municipal and county codes and secure formal technical, engineering, and legal reviews prior to taking binding action.

SECTION 07 | REFERENCES & RESEARCH RECORD

[1] Georgia Public Broadcasting. (2026, May 6). Camden County Commission approves six-month moratorium on data centers.

[2] Camden County Board of Commissioners. (2026, October 27). Agenda Center: Work Session on Data Center Zoning Regulations.

[3] U.S. Census Bureau. (2020). Decennial Census: Camden County, Georgia (Total Population: 54,768).

[4] Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (FRED). (2025). U.S. Census Bureau Vintage 2024 Population Estimates: Camden County, GA (59,065).

[5] Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis (FRED). (2025). American Community Survey 2020–2024 5-Year Estimates: Poverty Rate in Camden County, GA (12.9%).

[6] Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL). (2024). United States Data Center Energy Usage Report (176 TWh in 2023).

[7] Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL). (2025). Projected Electricity Consumption of U.S. Data Centers Through 2030 (11.8% of U.S. electricity).

[8] Camden County Board of Commissioners. (2026, April 7). Draft Resolution on Coastal Water Resources, Floridan Aquifer, and Data Center Moratorium.

[9] Georgia Department of Revenue. (2026). High-Technology Data Center Sales and Use Tax Exemption Guidelines, O.C.G.A. § 48-8-3(68).

[10] Coastal Georgia Regional Water Planning Council. (2023). Coastal Georgia Regional Water Plan: Floridan Aquifer Management Guidelines.

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