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OPINION

Data centers and AI: Public Service Commission race is pivotal to Georgia's future

The interrelated issues of energy, data centers, artificial intelligence and economic justice are crucial to the upcoming PSC election.

LINK: Opinion: Georgia PSC race could shape future of AI and data center growth

By David Kyler – For The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

David Kyler, a resident of St. Simons Island, is the co-founder and director of the Center for a Sustainable Coast, a donor-supported nonprofit organization established in 1997 dedicated to advancing responsible policies important to the environment and quality of life of coastal Georgia.

Georgia Power is proposing to produce an added 10 gigawatts of electricity, the largest surge in electricity demand in its history, dominated by the state's aggressive pursuit of datacenter development. More than three-quarters of power-generation expansion is predicted to be used by datacenters, primarily for artificial intelligence – technology with profound risks to society that remain dangerously unregulated in the U.S.

Georgia's Public Service Commission's five members determine how much energy the state needs, when it will be implemented, what rates will be charged, and how power will be generated. They are poised to approve Georgia Power's proposal to burn fossil fuels – natural gas – generating at least 60% of the added power, defying calls for using less costly and grid-dependent 'distributed' clean energy.

PSC decisions reflect little regard for the environment

Datacenter development is becoming increasingly controversial. In Georgia, legal disputes proceed over communities rejecting datacenter projects due to a range of factors.

A recent report by Media Justice, titled "The People Say No: Resisting Data Centers in the South," outlines the reasons for resistance to datacenters:

- **Water usage**: Datacenters require millions of gallons of water per day for cooling, straining local resources.
- **Energy consumption**: The high energy needs of datacenters can be a significant burden on local infrastructure.

- **Pollution**: Backup generators can contribute to air pollution, which disproportionately affects vulnerable communities.
- **Environmental racism**: Critics argue that the expansion of datacenters often repeats the South's history of environmental burdens being placed on poor and minority communities.
- **Lack of transparency**: Communities are pushing for public processes, rather than secret negotiations, to approve datacenter developments.
- **Economic arguments**: Concerns exist that the promised jobs are not local and that the long-term costs to the community outweigh the short-term benefit

See *Resisting Data Centers in the South*.

Nevertheless, despite enormous demands on Georgia's water resources, decisions of the PSC consistently reflect little regard for environmental factors or economic justice.

Instead, PSC energy choices have imposed unjustified stresses on Georgia's water resources while threatening the needs and costs of other water users and energy consumers. Compounding this negligence, the PSC approved the combustion of wood products to generate electricity, further imperiling air quality, public health, and climate change. Evidently, **this PSC action** was a concession to Georgia's powerful timber industry which is seeking profitable new markets. Few decisions could be more ironically negligent than burning wood to power 21st century digital technology.

U.S. should regulate AI to protect citizens and national security

"Artificial intelligence is one of the most powerful technologies humanity has ever created," notes the Center for Humane Technology. AI permeates all areas of human knowledge and its applications in public and private decision-making – including science, healthcare, economic development, resource extraction, and social services.

Powerful economic forces are avidly expanding AI, promoting it with simplistic, cavalier promises while deflecting well-justified examination of its perilous risks to society. An estimated $252.3 billion was invested globally by corporations in 2024, and financial speculators see these ventures as lucrative opportunities, deceptively marginalizing the consequences. Investors oppose regulation as a threat to prospective profits using the pretext of free speech.

Unlike the European Union and its member nations which have adopted controls on AI, regulating artificial intelligence has been opposed in the U.S., on the false claim that such controls would violate the First Amendment. On the contrary, well-informed experts warn that regulating AI is essential to prevent potentially destructive consequences of subversive actions when renegade AI systems threaten civil liberties. Leaving AI unregulated is clearly reckless, exposing the public to enormous risks in pursuit of ill-conceived financial objectives and national security.

Due to these concerns, letters by the AFL-CIO, the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, the Brennan Center for Justice, and the Center for Biological Diversity (among others) were recently sent to Congress requesting that no laws will prevent the regulation of AI,

under either state or federal authority. (Center for a Sustainable Coast was among hundreds of non-profit public-interest organizations co-signing such letters nationwide.)

The interrelated issues of energy, data centers, artificial intelligence, and economic justice are crucial to the upcoming election of Georgia's Public Service Commission members. Rapid, unregulated advancement of AI will accelerate demand for energy-hungry data centers, with harsh consequences for Georgia's energy costs, environment, and quality of life.

Improving public awareness about these development trends and energy-generation decisions will help voters make better-informed decisions when electing members of the PSC in November. [See https://www.wabe.org/a-quick-guide-to-georgias-2025-public-service-commission-elections/]

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