

Supervisors say temporary “No” to data centers

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The proliferation of so-called “data centers” will not happen anytime soon in Calaveras County.

The county’s Board of Supervisors at its meeting on Tuesday voted 4-0 in favor of an urgency ordinance that imposes a temporary moratorium on the development of these types of centers that have multiplied during the current AI boom.

Board Chairman Benjamin Stopper was absent for the vote.

Wikipedia describes a data center as a physical room, building, or facility for storing, managing, and disseminating data and information, including computer systems and associated components, housing IT infrastructure, and training artificial intelligence.

Such a facility is being pursued for development in neighboring Amador County near Buena Vista.

The urgency ordinance took effect immediately upon the vote and will last for 45 days. In the meantime, county staff will study what impacts data centers have on items such as water, electricity, noise pollution, air quality and light pollution, and if feasible, make recommendations for permitting their development.

The county can extend the urgency ordinance two more times by a four-fifths vote of the board for up to 22 ½ months while staff works on the issues.

“This urgency moratorium I think will give us some clarity as far as our concerns about this type of use trying to come in,” county Planning Director Bret Sampson told the board on Tuesday. “There’s been some very negative stories throughout the nation of this type of use coming in. They have said it is ‘by right,’ very well-funded corporations, and so a county such as us with limited resources, we really need to be proactive and protect ourselves.”

District 4 Supervisor Amanda Folendorf questioned whether the moratorium would have the unintended consequence of prohibiting computer rooms for existing establishments in the county such as the hospital and even the county government center.

Sampson said those are secondary, not primary uses such as a full-fledged data center and are permitted under existing rules.

Valley Springs resident Brock Estes compared data centers to the Gold Rush. Once data centers become obsolete, just like when the Gold Rush petered out, he hoped any regulations approved for their development would include large deposits to pay for any clean up when abandoned, unlike when the mines closed and those cleanup costs were imposed on future generations.

Valley Springs resident Marti Crane asked, “If we do (allow data centers), where do we put it?” She then played a recording of the noise made by a data center in Michigan.