

Chair, Vice Chair, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Stephanie Neal, and I am a lifelong resident of Franklin Furnace in Scioto County, Ohio. I appreciate the opportunity to submit written testimony regarding House Bill 646 and the proposed Technology and Innovation Study Commission.

I am concerned about the current lack of transparency and public engagement surrounding large-scale technology and data infrastructure projects that seek to locate in rural Ohio communities. Many of these projects are negotiated under non-disclosure agreements prior to any meaningful opportunity for affected residents to review or respond to potential impacts.

Rural communities such as Franklin Furnace differ significantly from Ohio's metropolitan areas in terms of infrastructure capacity, economic resilience, and land use priorities. Our local economy relies on agriculture, small businesses, public services, and employers that support schools, treatment facilities, and manufacturing. When large projects fail or are abandoned, these communities often lack the resources to absorb the resulting environmental or economic consequences.

Southern Ohio has experienced repeated instances where corporations receiving tax abatements or other public incentives acquired land, failed to meet projected outcomes, and ultimately withdrew, leaving local governments and residents to address unused property, environmental degradation, or infrastructure strain. This history warrants a higher standard of due diligence and public disclosure.

Ohio's rural regions also contain significant agricultural land, water resources, and ecological systems that support food production and local livelihoods. Data centers and similar facilities require substantial land, water, and energy inputs, yet there is limited publicly available information regarding their long-term effects on groundwater, soil integrity, wildlife habitats, or regional power infrastructure. Without comprehensive impact assessments, it is not possible to determine whether these projects serve the long-term public interest.

Residents of affected communities should not be excluded from discussions that will permanently alter local land use and resource allocation. Impact studies (environmental, economic, and public health) should be completed, independently reviewed, and made publicly available prior to any agreements or commitments with private entities.

I respectfully urge the General Assembly to ensure that HB 646 includes clear safeguards requiring transparency, public access to impact data, and meaningful community input before negotiations advance. Specifically, I ask that consideration of data center development be paused until such studies are completed and disclosed, allowing residents, local governments, and policymakers to make informed decisions.

Thank you for your consideration and for your commitment to responsible stewardship of Ohio's land, resources, and communities.

Respectfully submitted,
Stephanie Neal
Franklin Furnace, Scioto County, Ohio