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Chairman Claggett, Vice Chair Workman, Ranking Member Mohamed, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on House Bill 646. My name is Aaron Thomas, and I serve as Mayor of the Village of South Bloomfield, Ohio.

I want to be clear at the outset I am not opposed to data centers. I understand their role in the modern economy, their connection to artificial intelligence development, and their potential value to national security. Technology and infrastructure growth are part of our future.

However, location matters.

Large scale data centers belong in properly zoned industrial areas where infrastructure, utilities, and surrounding land uses are designed to support that level of demand. They do not belong in rural townships or small villages that lack the electrical capacity, water resources, road infrastructure, and buffering needed to absorb that kind of development without serious disruption.

House Bill 646 creates a Data Center Study Commission, which I appreciate in concept. We do need more information. We need to understand environmental impact, strain on the electrical grid, water usage, noise, light pollution, and farmland loss. Those are not minor concerns in communities like mine. They are real issues that directly affect residents.

In rural areas, one large data center can dramatically change the character of a community. It can strain water systems, increase utility costs for residents, require expensive infrastructure upgrades, and consume land that will never return to agricultural use. Once that land is gone, it is gone.

My concern also extends to the tax structure surrounding these projects. Data centers often receive significant tax abatements and incentives. In a time when there is a real threat of abolishing property taxes and the potential impact of House Bill 503, granting additional large scale tax breaks to high consumption industrial facilities raises serious concerns for small communities.

Property taxes are a primary revenue source for local governments, schools, and safety services. If that structure changes or is weakened, and at the same time we continue to reduce the tax burden on major industrial users, rural communities will be left carrying more responsibility with fewer resources.

Small villages operate on tight margins. We do not have unlimited utility capacity. We do not have expansive infrastructure budgets. And we do not have the flexibility to absorb major revenue shifts without cutting services or raising costs on residents.

If data centers are going to expand in Ohio, that growth should be directed to areas that are already industrial in nature and properly equipped to handle them. Rural townships and small villages should not be the default landing spot simply because land is available.

I strongly oppose broad tax breaks for these facilities, particularly under the current financial uncertainty facing local governments. Incentives should be measured, responsible, and mindful of long term local impact.

Growth is important. Economic development is important. But it has to make sense for the community where it lands.

For those reasons, I urge careful reconsideration of how and where these facilities are encouraged, and I ask that the concerns of rural communities be given serious weight as this issue moves forward.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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