



**Kelli Hykes, Chair, Norwich Township Board of Trustees**

**Written Testimony in Support of H.B. 646**

*Data Center Study Commission*

February 24, 2026

Chair Clagget, Vice Chair Workman, Ranking Member Mohammed, and members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of H.B. 646, legislation to create the Data Center Study Commission.

My name is Kelli Hykes, Chair, Norwich Township Board of Trustees, and I am offering this testimony from the perspective of a local government official in a jurisdiction that currently has a data center within our fire protection district.

I support this legislation because it acknowledges a simple but critical reality: data centers are proliferating rapidly across Ohio, and state and local governments do not yet have a comprehensive understanding of their full impacts.

H.B. 646 appropriately directs the Commission to study environmental impacts, water usage, grid effects, farmland conversion, economic impact, and other emerging concerns.

That is necessary and timely work.

However, I respectfully urge this Committee and the future Commission to explicitly include and prioritize the impact on local fire departments and emergency services.

### **Data Centers Present Unique Fire Protection Challenges**

Unlike traditional commercial structures, modern data centers often include:

- Large-scale lithium-ion battery energy storage systems
- High-voltage electrical infrastructure
- Extensive diesel backup generator farms

- Specialized clean-agent fire suppression systems
- Enclosed server halls with limited natural ventilation

These facilities are capital-intensive, high-load environments that require:

- Advanced pre-incident planning
- Ongoing fire code inspections
- Specialized training in battery fire suppression
- Potential acquisition of thermal imaging equipment, foam systems, or other specialized apparatus

The cost structure and risk profile are fundamentally different from that of residential, retail, office, or light industrial buildings.

### **The Fiscal Reality for Local Jurisdictions**

In many cases, townships like Norwich have no direct authority to prevent a data center from being sited or expanded, particularly when annexation, tax incentive structures, or regional utility considerations are involved.

Yet we remain fully responsible for:

- Emergency response
- Inspection and enforcement
- Equipment procurement
- Personnel training
- Mutual aid coordination

This creates a structural imbalance:

The state and developers may benefit from economic development and tax structures, while local fire departments absorb increased operational and capital costs.

That imbalance deserves careful study.

### **Recommendation: Expand the Commission's Scope**

I respectfully request that the Commission, under its authority to examine “any other relevant topics” or by amending this bill (see attached), specifically study:

1. The cost burden on township and municipal fire departments

2. The training and equipment requirements unique to data center environments
3. The impact of battery energy storage systems on local emergency preparedness
4. Whether current property tax structures adequately compensate host fire jurisdictions
5. Whether a special assessment, state grant program, or revenue-sharing mechanism should be established

If Ohio intends to welcome data center growth, and there are valid economic and national security reasons to do so, then Ohio must also ensure that the local government first responders protecting these facilities are not financially disadvantaged for doing so.

### **Consider Special Support Mechanisms**

Possible policy tools the Commission could evaluate include:

- A dedicated Data Center Fire Protection Fund
- Mandatory host-community impact payments
- State matching grants for equipment and training
- A per-megawatt infrastructure assessment
- Required emergency services coordination agreements

These concepts are not anti-development. They are pro-preparedness.

Public safety infrastructure must scale alongside private investment.

### **Conclusion**

H.B. 646 is a prudent and necessary step. It acknowledges that Ohio is navigating new territory.

As the Commission conducts its work, I urge you to ensure that the voices of local fire chiefs, township trustees, and emergency service professionals are included in the process.

Data centers are critical infrastructure. But so are the fire departments that protect them.

Norwich Township supports H.B. 646 and stands ready to assist the Commission with real-world data, operational experience, and a commitment to balanced, forward-looking policy.

Thank you for your consideration.



Proposed Amendment to H.B. 646

**Amend Section 1(B)(1) to read as follows (new language in bold):**

Sec. 1(B)(1) There is created, within the Department of Development, the Data Center Study Commission, which shall consist of the following members:

- (a) Three members appointed by the Governor;
- (b) Three members appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives;
- (c) Three members appointed by the President of the Senate;
- (d) Two members appointed by the Minority Leader of the House of Representatives;
- (e) Two members appointed by the Minority Leader of the Senate;
- (f) One member appointed by the Governor who is a representative of a township or municipal fire department that provides fire protection or emergency medical services to a jurisdiction in which a data center is located.**

**Amend Section 1, Division (D) to read as follows (new language in bold):**

Sec. 1(D) The Commission shall examine all of the following concerning data centers:

- (1) Environmental impact;
- (2) Effect on the electrical grid, including on behind-the-meter electric supply and on consumer utility rates;
- (3) Water usage and impact on the local water supply;
- (4) Noise pollution;
- (5) Light pollution;
- (6) Impact on the local economy;
- (7) Impact on farmland;
- (8) Value to national security and the development of artificial intelligence;
- (9) Reports of foreign propaganda intended to create opposition to data centers;
- (10) Impact on local emergency services, including fire departments, emergency medical services, and mutual aid partners, including but not limited to:**

- (a) Capital equipment needs associated with responding to fires or other emergencies at data centers, including battery energy storage systems and high-voltage infrastructure;**
- (b) Training requirements unique to data center facilities;**
- (c) Ongoing inspection and code enforcement demands;**
- (d) Operational costs associated with increased service capacity;**
- (e) Whether existing property tax structures or incentive programs adequately compensate affected jurisdictions for public safety obligations; and**
- (f) The feasibility of special assessments, host community impact payments, grant programs, or other revenue mechanisms to support affected local jurisdictions;**
- (11) Any other relevant topics determined by the Commission.**