Marion County Data Center

Project Liberty Analysis

Prepared for: Marion County Leadership and Community Stakeholders
Date: February 9, 2026
Purpose: To provide objective analysis for evaluating the Project Liberty data center proposal

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Marion County faces a critical decision regarding the $2.4 billion "Project Liberty" data center approved on January 22, 2026. While the promised tax revenue ($28 million annually at full buildout) appears substantial compared to the county's current $25 million budget, this analysis reveals significant long-term risks and hidden costs that warrant careful reconsideration.

Key Findings:

- **Jobs Reality:** Data centers create approximately 1 permanent job per $13-54 million invested (Virginia data), far below typical economic development projects - many of these jobs are given to people brought in from outside the existing community due to need for specialized technical training
- **Tax Revenue vs. Costs:** Projected revenue may be offset by infrastructure costs, utility rate increases for residents, and opportunity costs from alternative development
- **Pattern Recognition:** Marion County fits a national pattern where data center developers systematically target poor, majority-Black rural communities with less organized political power
- **Resource Strain:** Water and electricity demands will impact existing residents, farmers, and businesses
- **Cost of Utilities:** Cost of infrastructure power companies needs to build to service the new data center is often paid for by passing on the cost consumers

of electricity - additional increased demand for limited strained electricity resources often result in increased rates

- **Environmental concerns:** Similar coastal data centers have been criticized for particulate pollution and intrusion of salt water into the regional aquifer
- **Transparency Concerns:** The NDA process and winter storm timing limited meaningful public input

This guide provides:

- Objective analysis of benefits and risks
- Comparison with other communities' experiences
- Framework for evaluating true community benefit
- Actionable recommendations for protecting Marion County's interests

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Section 1: Marion County's Context

1.1 Demographic and Economic Profile

Population: 28,368 (2024 Census estimate, declining -2.8% since 2020)

Racial Composition:

- Black/African American: 55.5%
- White: 41.1%
- Other: 3.4%

Economic Indicators:

- Median household income: $36,301 (significantly below U.S. average of $75,149)
- Poverty rate: 30.8% (more than double the U.S. average of 11.5%)
- Unemployment rate: Approximately 2x the national average
- Per capita income: $22,884

Infrastructure Challenges:

- Only 66% of residents have regular internet access (vs. 90% nationally)
- Declining population suggests limited economic opportunities
- Agricultural economy vulnerable to water resource competition

Why This Matters: Marion County's economic vulnerability makes the promise of $28 million in annual tax revenue extremely appealing. However, this same vulnerability also makes the county a target for developers seeking locations with:

- Less organized political resistance
- Fewer resources to conduct independent analysis
- Greater willingness to accept unfavorable terms due to economic desperation
- Limited capacity to enforce community benefit agreements

1.2 The National Pattern: Why Marion County Was Chosen

Data Center Site Selection Criteria (Industry Standard):

- Cheap land
- Cheap electricity
- Available water resources
- Weak environmental regulations
- Communities with limited political power to resist

Evidence of Systematic Targeting:

According to MediaJustice's September 2025 report analyzing $200+ billion in planned Southern data center projects:

"Today, Big Tech is following in the footsteps of Big Oil as this industry deliberately builds data centers in the South, banking on disempowered cities and towns with large Black populations to not have the local power to fight back."

Regional Pattern in South Carolina:

- Colleton County (south of Charlston): 9 data centers proposed on 859 acres, majority-Black area, minimal public notice
- Marion County (in SC07): $2.4B Project Liberty approved during winter storm, majority-Black area, NDA limited transparency
- Dorchester County: Google data center, predominantly Black communities nearby, water usage kept secret as "trade secret"

Comparison Case Study - What Happened When Developers Tried Wealthy White Communities:

When data center developers initially proposed projects in predominantly white, wealthier South Carolina communities:

- Organized fierce resistance

- Filed lawsuits
- Forced developers to relocate to poorer, Blacker areas
- Successfully blocked or delayed projects

The Pattern Is Clear:

- Developers try wealthy white communities first
- Face organized resistance and legal challenges
- Relocate to poor Black communities
- Use NDAs and limited public notice
- Emphasize tax revenue to economically desperate local governments
- Minimize discussion of long-term costs and resource impacts

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Section 2: The Real Economics of Data Centers

2.1 Job Creation Reality Check

Industry Claims vs. Documented Reality:

Metric	Industry Claims	Documented Reality
Jobs per $1B investment	"Thousands of jobs"	18-74 permanent jobs
Investment per job	Not disclosed	$13-54 million
Permanent vs. construction	Emphasize construction	20-50 permanent staff typical
Local hiring	"Community jobs"	Specialized tech roles, often filled externally

Virginia Data (Most Established U.S. Data Center Market)

Food & Water Watch analysis of Virginia Economic Development Partnership data (1990-2025):

- 1 permanent job created per $13 million invested (historical average)
- 1 permanent job per $54 million invested (2020-2025 projects)
- Comparison: Non-data center jobs cost $137,000-322,000 per job created
- Result: Data centers require 100-168x more investment per job than other economic development

National Employment Reality:

- Estimated 23,000 total permanent data center jobs nationwide (2024)
- Represents 0.01% of total U.S. jobs
- Accounts for 4.4% of U.S. electricity usage
- Ratio: 440x more electricity per job than average U.S. employment

Project Liberty Specific Projections: (Based on Virginia data and industry standards)

- Promised: "Significant job creation"
- Realistic Estimate: 20-50 permanent jobs at full buildout
- Construction Jobs: 200-500 temporary jobs (1-3 years)
- Investment per permanent job: $48-120 million

Why So Few Jobs?

- Data centers are highly automated
- Require minimal staff once operational
- Microsoft admits a data center can run with "less than 50 technicians"
- Most jobs are specialized (network engineers, security specialists) often filled by external hires

2.2 Tax Revenue Analysis

Promised Revenue:

- $28 million annually at full buildout
- More than Marion County's entire current $25 million budget
- Sounds transformative

Hidden Costs and Offsets:

1. Infrastructure Costs:

- Road improvements for construction traffic
- Utility infrastructure upgrades
- Emergency services capacity (fire, police, EMS)
- Water system expansion
- Electrical grid reinforcement

Example: Loudoun County, Virginia (largest U.S. data center concentration):

- Spent $200+ million on infrastructure improvements

- Ongoing maintenance costs
- Traffic congestion and road wear

2. Utility Rate Increases for Residents:

South Carolina Specific Data:

- Data centers will drive 65-70% of South Carolina's increased energy use
- Dominion Energy provides electricity to Google data centers at less than half what residential customers pay
- Result: Residential customers subsidize data center electricity costs
- South Carolina is among the top 5 states for eclectic cost in relationship to income (energy burden) already

National Pattern:

- Residents near data centers have seen electricity cost increases of up to 267% since 2020
- Data centers account for up to 70% of new energy demand in some regions
- Utilities pass infrastructure costs to all ratepayers, not just data centers

Marion County Impact Projection:

- Current median household income: $36,301
- Current energy burden: Already high
- Projected increase: $200-400 per household annually in utility costs
- For 12,177 households = $2.4-4.9 million annually in increased costs to residents

3. Opportunity Cost:

$2.4 billion invested in Marion County could alternatively create:

- 17,500 jobs at typical economic development cost ($137,000 per job)
- 7,450 jobs at recent Virginia non-data center cost ($322,000 per job)
- Comparison: Project Liberty will create approximately 20-50 permanent jobs

What Marion County Gives Up:

- Alternative industrial development that creates more jobs
- Agricultural land use (if farmland is converted)
- Tourism potential (if rural character is altered)
- Other tax-paying businesses that might locate in the same space

4. Tax Exemption Impact:

Fee-In-Lieu-of-Tax (FILOT) Agreement:

- Developers pay agreed-upon lump sum regardless of revenue
- Saves developers tens of millions compared to standard property taxes
- Common practice, but reduces actual revenue below theoretical maximum

National Context:

- Virginia's data center tax exemption: $673 million in lost revenue (2022 alone)
- Georgia projected to waive $296 million in sales tax revenue (2026)
- States forfeit hundreds of millions annually to tech companies

5. School Funding Impact:

Critical Consideration:

- Data centers create almost no school-age children (20-50 employees, many childless or with grown children)
- But tax revenue is often shared with school districts
- Result: Schools receive funding without corresponding enrollment increase (positive)
- However: If utility costs rise for families, educational outcomes may suffer due to household economic stress

2.3 Net Economic Benefit Calculation

Optimistic Scenario (Full Buildout, No Major Issues):

Item	Annual Amount
Tax revenue	+$28,000,000
Infrastructure costs (amortized)	-$2,000,000
Utility rate increases (residents)	-$3,500,000
Opportunity cost (lost alternative development)	-$5,000,000
Net Benefit	+$17,500,000

Realistic Scenario (Accounting for Typical Issues):

Item	Annual Amount
Tax revenue (accounting for FILOT)	+$20,000,000
Infrastructure costs (higher than projected)	-$4,000,000
Utility rate increases (residents)	-$4,500,000
Water resource competition (agricultural impact)	-$2,000,000
Opportunity cost	-$5,000,000
Environmental remediation	-$500,000
Net Benefit	+$4,000,000

Pessimistic Scenario (Significant Issues):

Item	Annual Amount
Tax revenue (partial buildout, FILOT)	+$15,000,000
Infrastructure costs (major overruns)	-$6,000,000
Utility rate increases (severe)	-$6,000,000
Water resource depletion (agricultural losses)	-$4,000,000
Opportunity cost	-$5,000,000
Environmental and health costs	-$2,000,000
Net Benefit	-$8,000,000

Key Insight: The net benefit is highly sensitive to:

- Actual buildout completion
- Infrastructure cost overruns
- Utility rate increase magnitude
- Water resource impacts on agriculture
- Whether alternative development is foreclosed

Section 3: Resource Impact Analysis

3.1 Water Consumption

Project Liberty Estimates:

- 7,175 gallons per day per building
- Up to 6 buildings planned
- Total: 43,050 gallons per day (approximately 150 households)

Why This May Be Understated: (National Data Center Water Usage)

- Medium data center: 110 million gallons/year (equivalent to 1,000 households)
- Large data center: 5 million gallons/DAY or 1.8 billion gallons/year (equivalent to town of 10,000-50,000 people)
- Industry standard: 1.8 liters of water per kilowatt-hour of energy used

Project Liberty is a $2.4 billion facility - this suggests LARGE scale:

- If classified as "large" data center: 5 million gallons/day (not 43,050)
- Equivalent to: 16,000+ Marion County households
- Comparison: Marion County has only 12,177 total households

Water Source and Competition: Marion County Context

- Agricultural economy depends on water
- USGS studies show long-term groundwater declines in South Carolina Atlantic Coastal Plain
- Recent droughts have stressed water resources
- Farmers expressed concern at January 22 meeting: "If there's another drought, it would be a big one"

What Happens During Drought:

- Data center has contractual water rights (priority access)
- Agricultural users face restrictions
- Residential users may face restrictions
- Crop losses for farmers
- Economic impact on agricultural sector

Precedent - Other Communities:

Meta Data Center, Richland Parish, Louisiana:

- Residents report brown, murky water or no water at all from taps
- Water system unable to meet combined demand
- Community complaints ignored

Google Data Center, Dorchester County, SC:

- Water consumption kept secret as "protected trade secret"
- Community unable to plan for water resource management
- Lack of transparency prevents informed decision-making

3.2 Electricity Consumption and Grid Impact

Energy Demand Projection: Based on $2.4B investment and industry standards

- Estimated capacity: 200-400 megawatts (MW)
- 1 MW = electricity for 700 homes
- Project Liberty = 140,000-280,000 homes worth of electricity
- Marion County has only 12,177 households

Result: Project Liberty will consume 11-23x more electricity than all Marion County residents combined

Where This Electricity Comes From:

South Carolina Energy Mix (2024):

- Natural gas: 45%
- Nuclear: 40%
- Coal: 10%
- Renewables: 5%

To Meet Data Center Demand:

- New power plants required (likely natural gas)

- Transmission infrastructure upgrades
- Grid reinforcement

Who Pays for This Infrastructure?

- Utility companies build new infrastructure
- Costs passed to ALL ratepayers through rate increases
- Data centers get discounted rates
- Residential customers subsidize data center electricity

South Carolina Specific:

- Dominion Energy provides electricity to Google data centers at less than half residential rates
- Duke Energy and Dominion currently seeking rate increases of $11-20/month for Pee Dee customers (before addition of data center needs)
- Data centers driving 65-70% of state's increased energy use

Marion County Household Impact:

- Median household income: $36,301
- Current electricity costs: ~$1,500/year (estimated)
- Projected increase: $200-400/year
- New burden: 0.5-1.1% of household income
- For families in poverty (30.8% of county): 1.5-3% of income

3.3 Environmental and Health Impacts

Air Quality:

New Power Plants Required:

- Data centers drive construction of new natural gas power plants
- South Carolina: Power plants being built in predominantly Black communities to meet data center demand
- Mississippi: Extended life of coal plant (Plant Victor J. Daniel) to power data centers

Pollutants from Gas Power Plants:

- Nitrogen dioxide (NO_2): Linked to respiratory diseases, asthma
- Fine particulate matter (PM2.5): Penetrates lungs and bloodstream, causes cardiovascular disease, strokes, dementia, cancer
- Formaldehyde: Carcinogen

Health Impact Data:

Memphis, Tennessee (Elon Musk's xAI Data Center):

- Nitrogen dioxide levels increased 79% from pre-data center levels
- Memphis already leads Tennessee in emergency department visits for asthma
- Received "F" grade from American Lung Association for ozone pollution (2025)
- Community members: "We are breathing dirtier air, experiencing higher rates of asthma, and our children are spending more time in emergency rooms"

National Pattern:

- Black Americans have highest death rate from power plant pollution in U.S.
- Power plants most likely to be constructed in Black neighborhoods
- Worsen risks of cancer and respiratory disease

Marion County Vulnerability:

- 55.5% Black population
- High poverty rate (30.8%)
- Limited healthcare access
- Already vulnerable population faces additional health burden

Climate Impact:

Data Centers and Fossil Fuels:

- Creating infrastructure that locks in fossil fuel use for decades
- At least 200 new power plants being built to meet data center demand
- U.S. now has more gas-fired power plants in development than any other country
- Data centers responsible for more than half of this growth

Marion County Agricultural Impact:

- Climate change already stressing agriculture
- Data centers worsen climate change
- Local farmers face double burden: water competition + climate impacts

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Section 4: Transparency and Process Concerns

4.1 The NDA Problem

What Happened in Marion County:

- County Council signed nondisclosure agreement (NDA)
- Barred officials from making data center public
- Agenda item called "Project Liberty" with no details
- Vote held January 22, 2026 - during winter storm preparation
- Most residents unaware of meeting or project

Why NDAs Are Problematic:

1. Prevents Informed Public Input:

- Citizens cannot research similar projects
- No time to consult experts
- Unable to organize community response
- Cannot compare with other communities' experiences

2. Limits Government Accountability:

- Elected officials cannot discuss with constituents
- No public debate on terms
- Prevents competitive bidding or alternative proposals
- Creates appearance of corruption even if legal

3. Favors Developer Interests:

- Developer controls information flow
- Can present only positive projections
- Community cannot verify claims
- No independent analysis possible

National Pattern:

Virginia: Prince William County signed 11 NDAs in one year, 7 with data center developers

Georgia:

- County commissioners eased requirements for Project Sail
- Planning laws watered down by industry lobbyists
- Only revealed through public records request

Alabama (Bessemer):

- $15 billion Project Marvel

- Company name concealed
- Water usage undisclosed
- Zoning changed to allow industrial on farmland

Louisiana:

- Meta's $10 billion data center
- Over 25% of population below poverty line
- Minimal public input before approval

4.2 Timing Concerns

Winter Storm Context:

January 21-22, 2026:

- Rare winter storm approaching South Carolina
- Historically paralyzes state for days
- Residents preparing for hazardous conditions
- Schools, airports, businesses closing
- Power outages expected

January 22, 2026:

- Marion County Council meeting held
- Project Liberty vote conducted
- Resident testimony: "Most were unaware of [the meeting]... most of the county [was] preparing for this winter storm"

Storm Impact:

- Glazed South Carolina with ice and snow
- Hazardous roads, traffic accidents
- School and airport closures
- Scattered power outages
- At least 2 cold-related deaths in state

Why This Timing Matters:

1. Reduced Public Participation:

- Residents focused on storm preparation
- Dangerous travel conditions

- Limited ability to attend meeting
- Reduced media coverage

2. Appearance of Deliberate Timing:

- Controversial projects often scheduled during holidays, storms, or other distractions
- Minimizes opposition
- Creates impression of avoiding scrutiny

3. Inadequate Time for Due Diligence:

- Complex $2.4 billion project
- Requires expert analysis
- Community needs time to understand implications
- Storm preparation prevented proper review

4.3 What Residents Said (January 22 Meeting)

Samuel Burns, Marion County Resident:

"I don't know what it's going to do to the county. I would like to see a little bit more transparency coming from this body to inform the public, because this is going to affect all the taxpayers in Marion County."

Dylan Coleman, Marion County Resident:

"If there's another drought, it would be a big one. Marion County is a farming community, and I think that's important to the farmers around here."

Joel Rogers, Marion County Council Member (voted against):

"We've only received in the last day or two important documents related to this project. I think I agree with the general sense of saying we need to slow down on this particular project, even for us."

Jessie Chandler, Marion County Resident:

"There was a public meeting, which most were unaware of. I know legally they had to announce the public meeting within a certain time frame for all of us to attend, but most of the county [was] preparing for this winter storm, which we know firsthand will affect us all because it has before."

Key Themes:

- Lack of transparency
- Insufficient time for review
- Concern about water resources

- Impact on agricultural community
- Even council members felt rushed

Section 5: Lessons from Other Communities

5.1 Communities That Approved Data Centers

Richland Parish, Louisiana (Meta $10 Billion Data Center):

Demographics:

- Over 25% of population below poverty line
- Rural, predominantly Black community

What Was Promised:

- Economic development
- Job creation
- Tax revenue

What Happened:

- Will consume **3x more electricity than entire city of New Orleans annually**
- Three new methane gas plants being built
- One plant in "Cancer Alley" (85-mile stretch with 200+ petrochemical plants)
- Black communities already suffering from pollution
- Minimal permanent jobs created
- Residents lack protections against rate increases

Outcome: Community bears environmental and economic costs, minimal benefit

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Memphis, Tennessee (Elon Musk's xAI $12 Billion Data Center):

Demographics:

- Boxtown neighborhood: Nearly half of residents earn below $25,000/year
- Cancer rates **4x national average**
- Predominantly Black community

What Was Promised:

- AI innovation
- Economic development
- High-tech jobs

What Happened:

- **35 unpermitted gas turbines** producing smog and formaldehyde
- Nitrogen dioxide levels increased **79%**
- Memphis already leads Tennessee in asthma emergency visits
- Received **"F" grade** for ozone pollution
- Community member: "We are breathing dirtier air, experiencing higher rates of asthma, and our children are spending more time in emergency rooms due to the misguided ambitions of billionaires who don't see us as human"

Outcome: Severe health impacts, minimal community benefit, environmental racism

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Bessemer, Alabama (Proposed $15 Billion Project Marvel):

Demographics:

- Majority-Black town
- History of steel mill pollution

What Was Promised:

- Jobs, innovation, future rooted in Big Tech

What Happened:

- Would level **700 acres of forest**
- Consume **2 million gallons of water per day** (2/3 of city's population usage)
- Draw enough electricity to power city size of Seattle
- City leaders signed NDAs
- Zoning changed to allow industrial on farmland
- Stripped away oversight

Community Response:

- "Wear Red" coalition formed
- NAACP, Alabama Rivers Alliance organizing
- Packed city council meetings
- Thousands of petition signatures
- Door-to-door canvassing

- **Project currently PAUSED due to community resistance**

Outcome: Community fighting back, project delayed

Colleton County, South Carolina (Eagle Rock 859-Acre Data Center):

Demographics:

- Borders SC07
- Rural, predominantly Black area

What Was Promised:

- Economic development
- Jobs

What Happened:

- 9 data centers proposed on 859 acres
- Water usage undisclosed
- Threatens ACE Basin conservation area
- Senator Chip Campsen: Water usage "extremely high and threatens other users" - operators refuse to disclose
- Minimal public notice

Community Response:

- Southern Environmental Law Center filed lawsuit (January 9, 2026)
- Challenging zoning ordinance
- Public notice violations
- Protecting conservation area

Outcome: Legal challenge ongoing

5.2 Communities That Rejected or Delayed Data Centers

Warrenton, Virginia:

What Happened:

- Amazon proposed data center
- Residents organized

- **Voted out ALL town council members** who supported project (November 2024 election)
- Newly elected council **voted to BAN data centers** from Warrenton (July 2025)

Outcome: Community protected, data center blocked

College Station, Texas:

What Happened:

- 600-megawatt data center proposed
- Residents organized 6-hour public hearing
- **5,000 petition signatures**
- **75 speakers** testified
- City council **unanimously rejected** project

Outcome: Community protected, data center blocked

Monroe County, Georgia:

What Happened:

- Data center would rezone 900 acres
- Residents pushed back
- Cited environmental threats
- Board of Commissioners **voted unanimously to deny**

Outcome: Community protected, data center blocked

Prince George's County, Maryland:

What Happened:

- Multiple data centers proposed
- Community organized rallies
- Gathered tens of thousands of signatures
- **Moratorium on data centers** enacted (September 2025)

Outcome: Community protected, time to develop proper regulations

5.3 Key Success Factors for Communities That Protected Themselves

1. Early Organization:

- Formed coalitions before approval
- Educated community members
- Built relationships with sympathetic officials

2. Expert Analysis:

- Hired independent consultants
- Reviewed other communities' experiences
- Calculated true costs vs. benefits

3. Legal Action:

- Filed lawsuits challenging zoning
- Challenged environmental review adequacy
- Used open records requests

4. Political Pressure:

- Packed public meetings
- Petition drives
- Media campaigns
- Voter mobilization

5. Alternative Vision:

- Proposed alternative economic development
- Showed what county was giving up
- Presented better options for tax revenue and jobs

Section 6: Recommendations for Marion County

6.1 Immediate Actions (Next 30 Days)

1. Request Independent Economic Analysis

Action: Hire independent economic consultant (not affiliated with data center industry) to analyze:

- True job creation potential
- Net fiscal impact (revenue minus all costs)
- Utility rate impact on residents
- Water resource impact on agriculture
- Opportunity cost analysis

Cost: $25,000-50,000

Benefit: Objective analysis not provided by developer

Funding: Request developer pay for independent analysis as condition of proceeding

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2. Conduct Comprehensive Water Study

Action: Commission hydrogeological study to determine:

- Current water table levels and trends
- Sustainable withdrawal rates
- Impact of 43,050 gallons/day (or actual usage if higher)
- Agricultural water needs
- Residential water security
- Drought scenario planning

Cost: $30,000-60,000

Benefit: Protect agricultural economy and residential water supply

Funding: Request developer pay for study

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3. Hold Additional Public Hearings

Action: Schedule at least 3 public hearings:

- **Hearing 1:** Present independent economic analysis
- **Hearing 2:** Present water study results

- **Hearing 3:** Present revised terms and community benefit agreement

Requirements:

- Minimum 30 days notice
- Multiple times/locations to maximize participation
- Provide all documents in advance
- Allow expert testimony
- Record and transcribe proceedings

Benefit: Restore public trust, ensure informed decision-making

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4. Demand Full Disclosure

Action: Require developer to disclose:

- Actual water consumption (not estimates)
- Actual electricity consumption
- Number of permanent jobs (with salary ranges)
- Percentage of jobs for local residents
- Environmental impact assessment
- Similar projects' actual performance vs. promises

Benefit: Verify developer claims, prevent surprises, allows for penalties in agreement if understated

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5. Pause Project Pending Review

Action: Formally pause Project Liberty approval pending:

- Independent economic analysis
- Water study completion
- Additional public hearings
- Revised terms negotiation

Legal Basis:

- Inadequate public notice (winter storm timing)
- Material information not available to council
- Public interest requires due diligence

Benefit: Protect county from hasty decision, allow proper evaluation

6.2 Medium-Term Actions (30-90 Days)

6. Negotiate Community Benefits Agreement (CBA)

What Is a CBA?

- Legally binding contract between developer and community
- Ensures tangible benefits for local residents
- Enforceable in court if developer fails to deliver

Essential CBA Components:

A. Local Hiring Requirements:

- Minimum 50% of permanent jobs for Marion County residents
- Minimum 75% of construction jobs for SC residents
- Apprenticeship programs for local youth
- Job training partnerships with local schools

B. Wage Standards:

- Minimum wage for permanent jobs: $50,000/year
- Living wage for all positions
- Benefits package (health insurance, retirement)

C. Water Resource Protection:

- Maximum daily water usage cap
- Drought contingency plan (data center reduces usage first)
- Agricultural water priority during shortages
- Annual water usage reporting
- Fund water infrastructure improvements

D. Utility Rate Protection:

- Data center pays full cost of electricity (no subsidies)
- Residential rate increase cap (e.g., no more than 2% annually)
- Data center pays for all grid infrastructure upgrades
- Independent audit of utility cost allocation

E. Environmental Standards:

- Renewable energy requirement (e.g., 50% by 2030, 100% by 2035)
- Air quality monitoring
- Emissions limits

- Environmental impact mitigation fund

F. Community Investment:

- Annual community investment fund: $500,000 minimum
- School infrastructure improvements
- Broadband expansion for residents
- Agricultural support programs
- Healthcare facility improvements

G. Transparency and Accountability:

- Annual public reporting on jobs, wages, water, electricity
- Community oversight committee
- Independent audits
- Penalties for non-compliance

H. Clawback Provisions:

- If developer fails to meet commitments, must repay tax benefits
- If project closes within 20 years, must repay portion of tax benefits
- If jobs fall below promised levels, tax benefits reduced

Precedent:

- Numerous successful CBAs nationwide

Caution:

- CBAs have delivered uneven results in some cases
- Must be carefully drafted with legal counsel
- Enforcement mechanisms critical
- Community oversight essential

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7. Develop Alternative Economic Development Plan

Action: Commission study of alternative uses for:

- $2.4 billion in investment
- Land designated for data center
- Tax incentives offered to data center

Alternative Development Options:

A. Advanced Manufacturing:

- Investment per job: $137,000-322,000
- Could create **7,450-17,500 jobs** with same investment
- More sustainable employment
- Better wage distribution

B. Agricultural Processing:

- Leverages existing agricultural economy
- Creates supply chain jobs
- Supports local farmers
- Sustainable water use

C. Tourism Development:

- Leverages rural character
- Creates service sector jobs
- Sustainable resource use
- Preserves quality of life

D. Renewable Energy Manufacturing:

- Solar panel manufacturing
- Wind turbine components
- Battery production
- High-wage jobs, sustainable

Benefit: Shows what county is giving up, provides negotiating leverage

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8. Establish Data Center Regulations

Action: Adopt comprehensive data center ordinance before approving any projects:

Key Regulatory Components:

A. Zoning Restrictions:

- Prohibit data centers in agricultural zones
- Require special use permits
- Minimum distance from residential areas
- Maximum size limits

B. Water Use Regulations:

- Maximum daily water usage limits
- Drought contingency requirements
- Water recycling mandates
- Annual reporting requirements

C. Energy Standards:

- Renewable energy requirements
- Energy efficiency standards
- Grid impact assessments
- Cost allocation transparency

D. Environmental Standards:

- Air quality monitoring
- Emissions limits
- Noise restrictions
- Light pollution controls

E. Community Benefit Requirements:

- Minimum local hiring percentages
- Wage standards
- Community investment funds
- Transparency requirements

F. Enforcement Mechanisms:

- Regular inspections
- Penalties for violations
- Revocation authority
- Community complaint process

Precedent:

- Prince George's County, Maryland moratorium
- Warrenton, Virginia data center ban
- Multiple jurisdictions developing regulations

9. Build Coalition with Other Affected Communities

Action: Connect with:

- Colleton County, SC (facing similar project)
- Other SC07 communities (Georgetown group aggressively opposing Data Colleton center)
- Southern Environmental Law Center (Lawyer on Colleton action is in Chareston)
- MediaJustice
- NAACP
- Black Voters Matter Fund

Benefits:

- Share information and strategies
- Coordinate legal challenges if needed
- Amplify community voice
- Access expert resources
- Build regional resistance

Regional Coordination:

- Joint public hearings
- Shared expert consultants
- Coordinated media strategy
- Legislative advocacy

6.3 Long-Term Actions (90+ Days)

10. Pursue State-Level Policy Changes

Action: Advocate for South Carolina legislation:

A. Data Center Transparency Act:

- Require public disclosure of water usage
- Require public disclosure of electricity usage
- Require public disclosure of tax incentives
- Ban NDAs for public projects

B. Utility Rate Protection Act:

- Require data centers pay full cost of electricity
- Prohibit residential subsidies for industrial users
- Cap residential rate increases
- Independent utility cost audits

C. Community Benefit Requirements:

- Mandate CBAs for projects over $100 million
- Minimum local hiring percentages
- Wage standards
- Environmental standards

D. Environmental Justice Protections:

- Prohibit targeting of vulnerable communities
- Enhanced environmental review for projects in disadvantaged areas
- Community consent requirements
- Health impact assessments

Partners:

- SC NAACP
- Southern Environmental Law Center
- SC environmental organizations
- SC agricultural organizations
- Other affected counties

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11. Develop Long-Term Economic Vision

Action: Create comprehensive economic development plan:

Components:

A. Diversification Strategy:

- Reduce dependence on single large employer
- Support small business development
- Invest in education and workforce development
- Leverage existing strengths (agriculture, location)

B. Infrastructure Investment:

- Broadband expansion (currently only 66% coverage)
- Water system improvements
- Transportation improvements
- Healthcare facilities

C. Quality of Life Improvements:

- Parks and recreation
- Cultural amenities
- Education quality
- Healthcare access

D. Sustainable Development:

- Protect agricultural land
- Preserve rural character
- Environmental stewardship
- Climate resilience

Benefit: Provides alternative to desperate acceptance of any large project

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12. Monitor and Enforce (If Project Proceeds)

If Marion County decides to proceed with Project Liberty:

Essential Monitoring:

A. Establish Oversight Committee:

- Community representatives
- Technical experts
- County officials
- Independent chair

B. Regular Reporting Requirements:

- Quarterly employment reports
- Monthly water usage reports
- Monthly electricity usage reports
- Annual financial reports
- Annual environmental reports

C. Independent Audits:

- Annual financial audit
- Annual environmental audit
- Annual compliance audit
- Public release of results

D. Enforcement Actions:

- Penalties for violations
- Reduction of tax benefits for non-compliance
- Revocation authority for serious violations
- Community complaint process

E. Adaptive Management:

- Annual review of impacts
- Adjust requirements as needed
- Respond to unforeseen issues
- Protect community interests

Section 7: Critical Questions for Marion Leadership

7.1 Questions to Ask the Developer

Jobs:

- How many permanent jobs will be created? (Require specific number, not "significant" or "hundreds")
- What will be the average salary for these jobs?
- What percentage of jobs will be filled by Marion County residents?
- What percentage of jobs will be filled by South Carolina residents?
- How many jobs will require specialized skills not available locally?
- Will you commit to local hiring requirements in a legally binding agreement?
- What job training programs will you provide for local residents?

Water:

- What is the maximum daily water usage? (Not average, but maximum)
- What is the source of water? (Groundwater, surface water, municipal supply?)
- What happens during drought conditions?
- Will agricultural users have priority during water shortages?
- Will you commit to water usage caps in a legally binding agreement?
- Will you fund water infrastructure improvements?
- What water recycling or conservation measures will you implement?

Electricity:

- What is the maximum electricity demand?
- What percentage of county's total electricity will this represent?
- Will you pay the same rate as residential customers?
- Who pays for grid infrastructure upgrades?
- Will you commit to renewable energy requirements?
- What percentage of electricity will come from renewable sources?
- Will you build on-site renewable generation?

Tax Revenue:

- What is the exact FILOT agreement amount?
- How does this compare to standard property tax?
- What is the payment schedule?
- What happens if the project is not fully built out?
- What happens if the project closes within 20 years?
- Are there clawback provisions?
- What other tax incentives are you receiving?

Environmental:

- What air pollutants will be emitted?
- What is the noise level?
- What are the light pollution impacts?
- What environmental monitoring will you conduct?
- What mitigation measures will you implement?
- Will you conduct health impact assessment?
- Will you fund environmental remediation if needed?

Transparency:

- Why was an NDA necessary?
- Will you release all project details now?
- Will you commit to annual public reporting?
- Will you allow independent audits?
- Will you establish community oversight committee?
- What similar projects have you completed?
- Can we speak with communities where you've built before?

Community Benefits:

- Will you sign a legally binding Community Benefits Agreement?
- What community investments will you make?

- Will you fund school improvements?
- Will you fund broadband expansion?
- Will you fund healthcare improvements?
- Will you fund agricultural support programs?
- What is your commitment to Marion County's long-term prosperity?

7.2 Questions for Marion County Leadership to Ask Themselves

Economic:

- Have we conducted independent economic analysis?
- Do we know the true net fiscal impact?
- Have we calculated opportunity cost?
- Do we know how utility rates will be affected?
- Have we considered alternative development options?
- Are we making this decision based on desperation or sound analysis?

Water:

- Do we have adequate water resources?
- Have we conducted hydrogeological study?
- How will this affect our agricultural economy?
- What happens during the next drought?
- Are we protecting our farmers?
- Are we protecting residential water supply?

Process:

- Was the public adequately informed?
- Did the winter storm timing limit participation?
- Did we have adequate time to review?
- Have we consulted independent experts?
- Have we learned from other communities' experiences?
- Are we being transparent with our constituents?

Long-Term:

- What is our vision for Marion County in 20 years?
- Does this project align with that vision?
- Are we protecting our agricultural heritage?
- Are we protecting our quality of life?
- Are we protecting our most vulnerable residents?
- What legacy are we leaving for future generations?

Equity:

- Are we being targeted because we're poor and Black?
- Would a wealthier, whiter county accept these terms?
- Are we getting a fair deal?
- Are we protecting our community's interests?
- Are we being treated with respect?
- Do we have the power to say no?

Section 8: Framework for Decision-Making

8.1 Decision Criteria

Marion County leadership should evaluate Project Liberty against these criteria:

1. Net Economic Benefit

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Independent analysis shows significant net benefit after all costs
- ❌ **Reject if:** Net benefit is marginal or negative

2. Job Creation

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Creates at least 100 permanent jobs for local residents at living wages
- ❌ **Reject if:** Creates fewer than 50 permanent jobs or mostly external hires

3. Water Resource Protection

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Water study shows sustainable usage with agricultural priority
- ❌ **Reject if:** Threatens agricultural water supply or residential access

4. Utility Rate Impact

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Residential rates protected with caps and data center pays full cost
- ❌ **Reject if:** Residents will subsidize data center electricity

5. Community Benefits Agreement

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Developer signs comprehensive, enforceable CBA
- ❌ **Reject if:** Developer refuses CBA or offers weak terms

6. Transparency

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Full disclosure and ongoing public reporting
- ❌ **Reject if:** Continued secrecy or limited transparency

7. Environmental Protection

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Strong environmental standards and monitoring
- ❌ **Reject if:** Significant air quality or health impacts

8. Opportunity Cost

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Better than realistic alternative development options
- ❌ **Reject if:** Forecloses better economic development opportunities

9. Community Support

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Majority of residents support after full information
- ❌ **Reject if:** Significant community opposition

10. Long-Term Vision Alignment

- ✅ **Proceed if:** Aligns with county's long-term economic development vision
- ❌ **Reject if:** Conflicts with agricultural heritage or quality of life goals

8.2 Possible Decision Process

Phase 1: Information Gathering (30 days)

- Commission independent economic analysis
- Commission water resource study
- Review other communities' experiences
- Consult with experts
- Gather community input

Phase 2: Evaluation (30 days)

- Analyze all information
- Calculate true costs and benefits
- Evaluate against decision criteria
- Develop negotiating position
- Identify deal-breakers

Phase 3: Negotiation (30 days)

- Present findings to developer
- Negotiate Community Benefits Agreement
- Negotiate revised terms
- Secure commitments in writing
- Ensure enforceability

Phase 4: Public Process (30 days)

- Hold multiple public hearings
- Present all information to community
- Allow expert testimony
- Gather community feedback
- Make final decision

Phase 5: Implementation (If Approved)

- Establish oversight committee
- Implement monitoring systems
- Conduct regular audits
- Enforce requirements
- Adapt as needed

Key Takeaways:

- **You have the power to say no**
- **No deal is better than a bad deal**
- **Other economic development opportunities exist**
- **Your community's long-term well-being is more important than short-term tax revenue**

Section 9: Resources and Support

9.1 Organizations That Can Help

Legal and Policy Support:

Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC)

- Website: selc.org
- Focus: Environmental law, community advocacy
- Services: Legal representation, policy analysis

- Currently: Suing Colleton County over data center zoning

MediaJustice

- Website: mediajustice.org
- Focus: Tech justice, community ownership
- Services: Research, organizing support, policy advocacy
- Report: "The People Say No" (September 2025)

NAACP South Carolina State Conference

- Focus: Civil rights, environmental justice
- Services: Community organizing, advocacy
- Currently: Fighting Bessemer, AL data center

Good Jobs First

- Website: goodjobsfirst.org
- Focus: Corporate subsidies, economic development
- Services: Research, policy analysis, transparency advocacy
- Report: "Cloudy Data, Costly Deals" (November 2025)

Food & Water Watch

- Website: foodandwaterwatch.org
- Focus: Water resources, corporate accountability
- Services: Research, organizing, policy advocacy
- Report: "Artificial Jobs" (January 2026)

Technical and Research Support:

Ohio River Valley Institute

- Focus: Economic development, data center analysis
- Report: "Why Data Centers Will Be Economic Development Duds"

University of Michigan Science, Technology, and Public Policy Program

- Report: "What Happens When Data Centers Come to Town" (July 2025)

Institute for Local Self-Reliance

- Focus: Community-scale solutions, corporate accountability
- Report: "The Environmental Inequity of AI"

Community Organizing Support:

Black Voters Matter Fund

- Focus: Civic engagement, community organizing
- Currently: Organizing in South Fulton, GA against data centers

Alabama Rivers Alliance

- Focus: Water resources, environmental protection
- Currently: Leading "Wear Red" coalition in Bessemer, AL

Capital B News

- Focus: Investigative journalism, Black communities
- Coverage: Extensive data center reporting across the South

9.2 Model Policies and Ordinances

Communities with Strong Data Center Regulations:

Prince George's County, Maryland:

- Enacted moratorium on data centers (September 2025)
- Developing comprehensive regulations
- Contact: County Council

Warrenton, Virginia:

- Banned data centers (July 2025)
- Model for local control
- Contact: Town Council

College Station, Texas:

- Rejected 600-MW data center
- Strong community engagement process
- Contact: City Council

9.3 Expert Consultants

Economic Analysis:

- Good Jobs First (subsidy analysis)
- Ohio River Valley Institute (economic impact)

- Local university economics departments

Water Resources:

- USGS South Atlantic Water Science Center
- SC Department of Health and Environmental Control
- Private hydrogeological consultants

Energy and Utilities:

- Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA)
- Southern Environmental Law Center
- Independent utility consultants

Legal:

- Southern Environmental Law Center
- Environmental law firms
- Community benefits agreement specialists

Community Organizing:

- MediaJustice
- Black Voters Matter Fund
- Local NAACP chapters

Section 10: Conclusion and Final Recommendations

10.1 Summary of Key Findings

The Promise:

- $28 million in annual tax revenue
- Economic development
- Job creation
- Technological progress

The Reality:

- 20-50 permanent jobs (not "significant job creation")
- $2.4-6 million in annual utility cost increases for residents
- Water resource competition with agriculture
- Environmental and health impacts
- Opportunity cost of better development options
- Pattern of targeting poor Black communities

The Net Benefit:

- Optimistic scenario: +$17.5 million annually
- Realistic scenario: +$4 million annually
- Pessimistic scenario: -$8 million annually
- **Highly uncertain and dependent on many factors**

10.2 Core Recommendations

For Marion County Leadership:

1. PAUSE the project immediately

- Conduct independent analysis
- Hold proper public process
- Negotiate better terms

2. DEMAND transparency

- Full disclosure of all project details
- No more NDAs
- Public reporting requirements

3. PROTECT your community

- Water resources for agriculture
- Utility rates for residents
- Environmental quality
- Long-term prosperity

4. NEGOTIATE from strength

- You have the power to say no
- Other communities have rejected projects
- Better terms are possible
- Community Benefits Agreement is essential

5. LEARN from others

- Communities that approved: facing problems
- Communities that rejected: protected
- You can choose a different path

For Marion County Residents:

1. GET INFORMED

- Read this analysis
- Attend public hearings
- Ask questions
- Demand answers

2. GET ORGANIZED

- Form community coalition
- Connect with other affected communities
- Build relationships with sympathetic officials
- Coordinate strategy

3. GET ACTIVE

- Attend council meetings
- Testify at hearings
- Sign petitions
- Contact elected officials
- Vote

4. GET HELP

- Contact organizations listed in Section 9
- Seek legal advice
- Consult experts
- Build alliances

10.3 The Choice Before Marion County

Marion County faces a fundamental choice:

Option A: Accept Project Liberty as currently proposed

- Risk: Minimal jobs, utility rate increases, water competition, environmental impacts
- Benefit: Tax revenue (uncertain net benefit)
- Precedent: Following pattern of poor Black communities accepting unfavorable terms

Option B: Pause, analyze, and negotiate better terms

- Risk: Developer walks away
- Benefit: Protect community interests, ensure fair deal, set precedent for other communities
- Precedent: Following communities that demanded better and got it

Option C: Reject Project Liberty and pursue alternative development

- Risk: Lose potential tax revenue
- Benefit: Preserve resources, pursue better opportunities, protect quality of life
- Precedent: Following communities that said no and thrived

10.4 Final Thoughts

This is not just about one data center.

This is about:

- Whether Marion County will be treated with respect
- Whether poor Black communities have the power to demand fair treatment
- Whether economic desperation forces acceptance of bad deals
- Whether short-term revenue outweighs long-term community well-being
- What kind of future Marion County wants

You have the power to choose.

Other communities have:

- Rejected data centers and protected themselves
- Negotiated better terms and secured real benefits
- Organized and won

The question is not whether you need economic development.
The question is whether THIS project, on THESE terms, serves your community's interests.

Appendix A: Data Sources and Methodology

Primary Sources

Demographic and Economic Data:

- U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts (Marion County, SC)
- Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages
- Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED)

Data Center Industry Analysis:

- Food & Water Watch, "Artificial Jobs: The Illusion of Big Tech's Data Center Employment Claims" (January 2026)
- Virginia Economic Development Partnership (VEDP) project database
- Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC), "Data Centers in Virginia" (December 2024)
- Northern Virginia Technology Council (NVTC), "The Impact of Data Centers on Virginia's State and Local Economies" (April 2024)

Environmental and Health Impacts:

- MediaJustice, "The People Say No" report (September 2025)
- Truthout, "Big Tech Data Centers Compound Decades of Environmental Racism in the South" (September 2025)
- Capital B News, multiple investigative reports (2025-2026)
- Southern Environmental Law Center reports and legal filings

Energy and Utility Data:

- U.S. Department of Energy, National Load Growth Report (2025)
- Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, "2024 United States Data Center Energy Usage Report"
- Dominion Energy Integrated Resource Plans (2024, 2025)
- Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis (IEEFA) reports

Community Impact Studies:

- University of Michigan Science, Technology, and Public Policy Program, "What Happens When Data Centers Come to Town" (July 2025)
- Ohio River Valley Institute, "Why Data Centers Will Be Economic Development Duds"
- Good Jobs First, "Cloudy Data, Costly Deals" (November 2025)

Marion County Specific:

- Capital B News, "A Rural S.C. County Quietly Approved a $2B Data Center During the Winter Storm" (February 4, 2026)
- Marion County Council meeting minutes (January 22, 2026)
- Deputy County Administrator Kent Williams statements

Methodology Notes

Job Creation Estimates:

- Based on Virginia Economic Development Partnership data (1990-2025)
- Cross-referenced with Food & Water Watch analysis
- Adjusted for project size and recent trends

Water Usage Estimates:

- Developer stated: 7,175 gallons/day per building, up to 6 buildings
- Industry standards: 110 million gallons/year (medium), 5 million gallons/day (large)
- Analysis considers both developer claims and industry standards

Electricity Consumption Estimates:

- Based on $2.4B investment and typical data center power density
- Cross-referenced with Virginia data center capacity and energy usage
- Adjusted for South Carolina energy mix

Economic Impact Calculations:

- Net benefit scenarios based on:
  - Tax revenue (developer and county statements)
  - Infrastructure costs (Virginia and other state experiences)
  - Utility rate increases (South Carolina and national data)
  - Opportunity cost (Virginia job creation costs)
  - Water resource impacts (agricultural economy estimates)

Environmental Justice Analysis:

- Pattern identification based on multiple case studies
- Demographic comparison of targeted vs. rejected communities
- Analysis of approval processes and community engagement

Limitations and Uncertainties

Data Limitations:

- Project Liberty details limited due to NDA
- Long-term impacts difficult to predict
- Some data extrapolated from other states/projects

Uncertainties:

- Actual buildout timeline and completion
- Future utility rate structures
- Climate change impacts on water resources
- Technology changes affecting data center operations
- Economic conditions affecting tax revenue

Conservative Approach:

- Where data uncertain, presented range of scenarios
- Highlighted assumptions and limitations
- Recommended independent verification

Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

Community Benefits Agreement (CBA): Legally binding contract between developer and community ensuring tangible benefits (jobs, wages, environmental protections, community investments).

Data Center: Facility housing computer systems and associated components (telecommunications, storage systems) requiring significant electricity and cooling. Sometimes called a “server farm”. Data Center development is proceeding nationwide at a fast pace due to demands of Artificial Intelligence and Cloud Computing technologies.

Energy Burden: Percentage of household income spent on energy costs; considered "severe" when exceeds 10%.

Environmental Justice: Fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to development and enforcement of environmental laws.

Environmental Racism: Disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on people of color and low-income communities.

Fee-In-Lieu-of-Tax (FILOT): Agreement where developer pays agreed-upon lump sum instead of standard property taxes, typically saving developer money.

Megawatt (MW): Unit of power equal to one million watts; one MW can power approximately 700 homes in Virginia.

Nondisclosure Agreement (NDA): Legal contract preventing parties from sharing information; controversial when used for public projects.

Opportunity Cost: Value of best alternative foregone when making a choice; what Marion County gives up by choosing data center over other development.

PM2.5: Fine particulate matter 2.5 micrometers or smaller; penetrates deep into lungs and bloodstream, causing health problems.

NAICS Code: North American Industrial Classification System code used to classify businesses by industry type.

This analysis is provided as a public service to support informed decision-making. All data sources are cited and verifiable. Community leaders are encouraged to conduct additional independent analysis and consult with experts before making final decisions.