

Woodbury County Zoning Commission Meeting Minutes

SPECIAL MEETING – TOWN HALL – MOVILLE, IA

Date: September 21, 2026

Time: 7:00 PM

Location: Merville Area Community Center, 815 Main Street, Merville, IA 51039

MEETING VIDEO:

For specific content of this meeting, refer to the recorded video/audio on the Woodbury County Zoning Commission “Committee Page” on the Woodbury County website.

YouTube Direct Link (Full): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuiS7elOeTM>

This full complete version includes one set camera angle. Due to a loss of connection, there includes a Part 1 and Part 2 Version linked below that does not include a portion of Dan Priestley and Board of Supervisors Chairman Mark Nelson's initial comments.

YouTube Direct Link (Part 1): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=65Ke7SIeE18>

YouTube Direct Link (Part 2): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dT2vrGwEu6Q>

County Website Link: https://www.woodburycountyiowa.gov/committees/zoning_commission/

Attendees

Commissioners Present: Christine Zellmer Zant – Chair; Tom Bride – Vice Chair; Corey Meister; Steve Corey; Jeff Hanson

Staff Present: Daniel Priestley – Zoning Coordinator; Dawn Norton – Senior Clerk

Supervisor(s) Present: Mark Nelson (Board of Supervisors Chair, in person); Daniel Bittinger (in person)

Public Attendees (sign-in / present): Tyler Manker, Andrew Glover, Randa Glover, Bob Kempers, Dianne Kempers, Chris Gonzales, Randy Beaver, Sherry Beaver, Mort Zenor, Bev Zenor, Christian Gonzales, Mary Livermore, Marcia Kuehl, Gloria Wahlberg, Shelia Stau, Dan Bittinger, Tony Yanak, Janet Yanak, Jillian Leekly, Missi Lenz, Mitch Nelson, Erin Nelson, Larry Fillipi, John Nealy, Marcia Nealy, Greg Manker, Tina Manker, Chris Countryman, Steve Bleil, Gary McMullen, Darlynn McMullen, Vicki Hulse, Ron Butler Sr., Deb Butler, Stacey Butler, Ronald Butler, Joe Mehlhaff, Chase Koehler, Michael Peterson, Rita Leckband, Doug Leckband, Gary Byers, Cody Griffin, Kolby DeWitt, Robert Knaack, Denise Knaack, Pam Clark, Ann Hopp, Diane Weaver, John Weaver, Dan Volkert, Karen Havlicek, Bill Havlicek, Ben Havlicek, Leslie Willet, Daniel Hair, Catelin Drey, Justin Smith, Rick Diamond, Joe Davis, Rick Davis, Sarah Sanford, Mackennen Sanford, Alexis Mawes-Gregg, Linette Ross, Mayh Ross, Delton Knight, Troy Knight, Shari Zenor Kiple, Ashley Wolfe, Mitchell Peterson, Jody House, Rev. Harold Werley, Tom Morgan, Tim Hoy, Amanda Davis, Kevin Alons, Brittney Wilson, Kurt Nash, Nathan Ryan, Terry Waugh, Dawn Thomas, Keely Purscell, Margaret Scott, Brian Sadler, Jim Fischer, Bret Hayworth, Doyle Turner, Sam Domnick, Jayden Lloyd, Michael O'Mara, E. Griesel, Jodi Nelson, etc. +/- 93

Call to Order

The Woodbury County Zoning Commission special town-hall meeting was called to order at approximately 7:00 PM on September 21, 2026, at the Merville Area Community Center, 815 Main Street, Merville, IA. Chair Christine Zellmer Zant opened the meeting, welcomed those in attendance, and reviewed standard Commission procedures. The meeting was audio-taped and minutes prepared. Procedures for public comment (three-minute limit with a 30-second grace period, statement of name and address or affiliation, respectful and on-topic comments directed to the Commission) were explained. The Chair and Commission

noted that this was a listening/input session focused solely on data-center permitting in the unincorporated areas of Woodbury County. Incorporated cities and towns regulate their own zoning independently.

Roll Call

Roll call was conducted. All five Commissioners were present: Christine Zellmer Zant (Chair), Tom Bride (Vice Chair), Corey Meister, Steve Corey, and Jeff Hanson. A full Commission was present. Supervisor Mark Nelson (Board Chair) and Supervisor Daniel Bittinger were present in person. Commissioners briefly introduced themselves: Chair Zellmer Zant (south of Bronson, unincorporated, multi-generation farm family); Vice Chair Tom Bride (east edge of Sioux City); Steve Corey (rural Salix, 32 years); Corey Meister (rural Merville); Jeff Hanson (rural Woodbury County, adjacent to Lawton).

Public Comment on Matters Not on the Agenda

No public comments were offered on matters not listed on the agenda at the opening of the meeting.

Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

The Commission reviewed the minutes from the previous special town-hall meeting held August 31, 2026, in Sloan. A motion was made by to approve the minutes by Corey Meister. The motion was seconded by Steve Corey. All in favor said “aye.” No opposition. The motion carried unanimously (5-0).

ITEM(S) OF BUSINESS – PUBLIC TOWN HALL MEETING TO SEEK INPUT FROM THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE PERMITTING PROCESS OF DATA CENTERS IN UNINCORPORATED WOODBURY COUNTY (ACTION / INFORMATION)

Zoning Coordinator Daniel Priestley provided background. He explained that the Board of Supervisors had placed a moratorium on data-center applications in the unincorporated area in June 2026 to slow the process and allow orderly public input and research. The Commission’s role is to collect information and ultimately recommend ordinance amendments or other measures to the Board of Supervisors. Priestley emphasized that the town halls and any resulting regulations apply only to the unincorporated areas under county zoning jurisdiction; incorporated cities regulate their own zoning independently. He displayed and discussed the Woodbury County Comprehensive Plan 2040 Future Land Use Map, highlighting the agricultural character of most of the county (green on the map) and the designated general-industrial area south of Sergeant Bluff between the Missouri River and Interstate 29. He noted the recent solar debate and the importance of corn-suitability rating and agricultural protection. Priestley stressed that any ordinance must be rooted in the comprehensive plan’s goals for the community the county wants to be through 2040. He invited written submissions by email (dpriestley@woodburycountyiowa.gov) or mail to Planning and Zoning, 620 Douglas Street, 6th Floor, Sioux City, IA 51101, and noted a questionnaire available at the back table. He asked the public to be respectful of all perspectives and to observe the three-minute limit (with 30-second courtesy). The goal is for every person who wishes to speak to have a first opportunity before any second rounds.

The floor was then opened for public comment limited to three minutes per speaker (with a short grace period of 30 seconds). Speakers were asked to state their name for the record. The following individuals spoke in the order listed below. When a person spoke more than once, each appearance is shown separately in sequence.

Public Comments – Speakers in Order of Appearance

1. Mark Nelson (Chair, Woodbury County Board of Supervisors)

- Thanked the five volunteer Zoning Commission members for their service.
- Posed three questions to the public for response either at the meeting or later by email/phone:

- Question 1 – Does the developer or end-user matter? Is there a preference for local developers serving local institutions (hospital, financial institution, school, government) versus large outside companies such as Google or Meta with no local roots?
- Question 2 – Does the size of the data center matter? Facilities can range from 1–2 acres (size of a small home) to thousands of acres and multi-story campuses. Is there appetite for small facilities, large facilities, or none at all?
- Question 3 – Does location matter, and does location depend on size? Traditionally industrial uses have been directed to the industrial corridor (CF, Port Neal, etc.). Hyperscale facilities may fit only there; smaller facilities might be considered near rural communities or existing substations.
- Stated he would now sit back and listen; thanked the large crowd for attending.

2. Christian Gonzalez

- Stated there is no way to compartmentalize, rationalize, or use “word witchcraft” to separate what is truly at stake.
- Expressed concern that many in the audience may not fully understand the internal as well as external factors of large corporations introducing data centers.
- Cited ecological and environmental damage caused by data centers and questioned the real purpose behind the industry.
- Raised speculation about a mass-surveillance grid and AI building databases on every citizen down to likes, dislikes, and mannerisms.
- Argued that if Facebook, Meta, and YouTube are already problematic, bringing that technology here is a huge danger.
- Concluded there is no condition or regulation that would allow him to accept data centers into the community; urged that they be stopped.

3. Justin Smith

- Agreed with the previous speaker.
- Stated that bringing in data centers of any size or purpose is a taint on the community.
- Emphasized that Woodbury County is an agricultural community at heart and that even its industrial sector has always retained an industrial-agricultural nature.
- Noted he works at an industrial agricultural plant (pea processing) across the river in Nebraska and values the long partnership between Iowa and Nebraska rural agricultural communities.
- Supported additional industry only if it remains focused on the county’s agricultural soul and heart.
- Referenced a lengthy (>100-page) document posted by a counselor; while the beginning spoke strongly of agricultural roots, the reference materials were largely about how to build data centers and how to massage zoning laws “without costly delays.”
- Stated the community should care about the cost to its way of living, not the costs of giant corporations.
- Declared he is vehemently against any type of data center in the county, city, or surrounding towns.
- Noted Iowa’s spiking cancer rates and stated he could see only harm, not help, from data centers.

4. Delton Knight

- Stated he currently rents but plans to purchase rural property soon; therefore the issue concerns him directly.

- Asked what data centers actually bring: they do not bring many permanent jobs and, from what he has heard, do not help the local community.
- Expressed concern that projects are sometimes approved not because the people want them but because some part of government can make money from them.
- Stated he does not care about government making more money; governments already take plenty.
- Believed that if a data center ends up in the county, that will be the reason.

5. Janet Yanack

- Thanked the County Supervisors and Planning and Zoning Commission for offering the opportunity for citizens to voice opinions.
- Stated there has been a rush to build massive centers and that normal safeguards have been abandoned; that should not happen in local backyards.
- Insisted that environmental-impact studies, market-value studies for surrounding properties, water-usage and source disclosures, energy and backup-energy sources, and noise and air-pollution levels must be included in county zoning ordinances.
- Highlighted the often-ignored risk to emergency services: data centers and their construction carry risks that rural emergency services are neither trained nor equipped to handle.
- Raised e-waste as a critical issue; cited Jim Puckett (Basel Action Network) that society cannot ethically manage current e-waste, and hyperscale centers replace servers, graphics cards, and racks every 3–5 years, generating still more.
- Stated pollution does not stop at city, county, or state borders; the obligation is to protect water, soil, and rural lifestyle for future generations.
- Noted Iowa ranks second in cancer rates in the United States; hyperscale data centers and other industries must be held to a higher standard if the goal is to reduce cancer rates.
- Concluded that allowing unchecked access to land and resources is not in the best interest of county citizens or Iowa.

6. Ben Sanford

- Wanted to put the scale of AI data centers into perspective with concrete numbers.
- A typical mid-size AI data center consumes roughly 110 million gallons of water per year (over 300,000 gallons daily / over 12,000 gallons per hour).
- Average Iowa home (low end) consumes about 832 kWh per month; a standard AI data center consumes around 72 GWh per month—enough to power roughly 81,000 Iowa homes.
- Explained that a gigawatt is 1 billion watts (1,000 megawatts).
- After construction, even the largest data centers employ fewer than 150 constant on-site workers; a typical center employs around 27.
- Compared noise to wind turbines (with which many rural residents are familiar); an AI data center is roughly half as loud as a turbine but still loud enough to cause damage to people and animals living or passing nearby.
- Strongly urged anyone with a say in implementing or allowing data centers to reconsider.

7. Keely Purscell (Member, Winnebago Tribal Council)

- Spoke on behalf of the Winnebago Tribal Council in opposition to a data center anywhere in Woodbury County.
- Stated the Tribe are landowners and good neighbors.
- Compared data centers to large retail buildings that are abandoned and left as dead structures, and to wind turbines whose 20–30-year lifespan leaves waste for the landowner.

- Asserted that the planned data center for Salix is already obsolete; better technology exists that uses far less water and energy.
- Emphasized protection of farmland, water, and future generations.
- Urged the Commission to say “no.”

8. Doug Leckband

- Asked to see a show of hands of anyone with a positive view.

9. Tom Morgan

- Lives in rural/unincorporated Mobile area and has farm ground in the county.
- Is not firmly for or against the proposal and feels not knowledgeable enough to decide.
- Worries that the public meetings may be creating an overly negative “against everything” atmosphere.
- Questions whether Woodbury County is turning away business opportunities by not exploring alternatives.
- Wants the county to reach out and see if there’s another way to work with companies like Google.
- Thinks the county needs help with property taxes.
- Says rural Woodbury County is being hit hard by property taxes.

10. Pam Clark

- Lives in rural Woodbury County on a small acreage.
- Not fully informed enough to strongly support or oppose the issue.
- Notes that AI is already widely used in hospitals, businesses, and schools, and sees it as a growing technology.
- Believes data centers can provide benefits and efficiency.
- Suggests there is plenty of unused or unproductive land in other parts of the U.S. where data centers could be built.
- Strongly values Woodbury County’s productive farmland and soil.
- Opposes using prime farmland for large data centers because it would remove land from farming and food production.
- Main concern is protecting farmland from being taken over and covered by data centers.

11. Keely Purscell (Member, Winnebago Tribal Council)

- Mentioned attending a Winnebago Tribe-sponsored teach-in about the effects of data centers.
- Cited ecologist Elijah Small saying hyperscale data centers can affect an area within a six-mile radius.
- Claimed data centers dry out the air enough to cause wood in homes to crack.
- Said the dry air makes it very hard to grow anything.
- Warned that these effects could harm homeowners and property values.
- Said research showed the Missouri River is at 14% health from headwaters to ocean.
- Compared the river’s condition to a loved one whose heart or organs were only working at 14%.
- Argued the river should be protected because it sustains everyone.
- Opposed Woodbury County approving data centers if they would contribute to the Missouri River’s decline.
- Emphasized that the concern comes from a scientist’s findings, not just personal opinion.

12. Mitchell Peterson

- Said he is against the proposal.

- Lives close to the 900-acre area and did not expect to live next to something like this.
- Said location matters.
- Acknowledged industrial land may seem like a good place for data centers, but raised concerns about impacts on the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska.
- Referenced the tribe's presentation about temperature changes from data centers and effects on walleye spawning.
- Warned that placing many data centers along the river could affect more than just Woodbury County.
- Said decisions should consider the bigger picture and who else will be affected.
- Invited people to an event in the city park on Friday at 5 p.m.

13. Justin Smith

- Said they had an additional comment after speaking earlier.
- Referred to comments from a Winnebago Nebraska representative and a young man about water use.
- Pointed to the Colorado River as an example of heavy activity leading to major environmental harm.
- Said the Colorado River no longer reaches the ocean because of development and water use.
- Asked people to imagine a similar outcome for the Missouri River.
- Noted they work near the Missouri River in the industrial area.
- Warned that if the Missouri River were similarly harmed, Iowa's economy could be affected.

14. Delton Knight

- Said there are other places companies could use that are not farmable land.
- Questioned why the project should be built here specifically.
- Believes the reason is that it costs less to build here than elsewhere.
- Said local resources are being targeted because they are available.
- Argued that wealthy companies should spend money to build somewhere that won't harm others or local resources.
- Said the issue is "all about the money," especially for big companies and governments.
- Stated that's just their opinion.

15. Ben Havlicek

- Identified as Ben Hich and said he still lives in town.
- Noted that AI is being used in schools, but said some students use AI search tools to cheat on assignments.
- Questioned whether AI is being used for its intended purpose.
- Said AI data sets store a huge amount of data.
- Believes the human mind and human intuition will always be better than AI.

16. Karen Havlicek

- Reiterated concerns about emergency-services impact on both incorporated and unincorporated areas.
- Noted that rural communities always look for the common good while city and county budgets are stretched thin by the status of the Iowa legislature.
- Emphasized reliance on volunteer emergency services who put their lives on the line daily.
- Stated tax dollars are already stretched at the county and local level.

- Reiterated that rural areas have always been the domain of the farmer and the duty is to leave the land better for the next generation; AI data centers will impact that next generation.

17. Jody Nelson

- Pointed out that a hyperscale AI data center is never “just a data center.”
- Neighbors have already received letters requesting land options for battery-storage facilities (BESS).
- Large substations will also be required; eminent domain can be used to site them.
- Warned that the project could create another huge industrial area in a place that is currently agricultural—a major consideration.

18. Dawn Thomas

- Described herself as probably the most pro-data-center speaker of the evening, but with important caveats.
- Has no inherent objection to data centers per se, but regulatory guardrails must be in place.
- Called for mandatory use of closed-loop cooling systems, required infrastructure development, and renewable-energy sources.
- Expressed concern about financial trade-offs: companies seek tax breaks so that the public pays for streets, lines, and water infrastructure.
- Opposed granting tax exemptions; if companies come, they must pay their full share, including property taxes.

19. Sherry Zenor Kiple

- Although residing in an incorporated area, stated she is heavily impacted by unincorporated decisions.
- Reminded the Commission of the ripple effect: even a facility placed in an industrial zone affects far beyond that zone.
- Spoke against property-tax incentives; the same argument was made for wind turbines and the money never offset the true costs and risks.
- Stated there is no amount of money that counters the environmental, EMS-strain, noise, and other costs already articulated by previous speakers.
- Noted that companies come because of local resources and may view the community as “pushovers” for the almighty dollar; the community has the heart not to be bought out.
- Strongly discouraged data centers across the board for all the reasons already stated.

20. Mark Nelson (Board of Supervisors Chair)

- Noted that the Board of Supervisors received significant flak for imposing the moratorium and scheduling the town-hall series, but it was the right decision.
- Pointed to the huge crowds in Sloan and Merville (and expected in Salix) as evidence the process is valued.
- Compared turnout favorably to the earlier solar hearings (which were roughly one-quarter the size).
- Expressed pride in the speakers, many of whom claimed not to be good public speakers yet delivered excellent remarks.
- Stated the Board tries hard to listen to the people of the county; the Zoning Commission is a channel for that input.
- Confirmed the Board has no regrets about the process.

21. Daniel Priestley (Zoning Coordinator – process and technical remarks)

- Explained the nuts-and-bolts of conditional-use permits and the criteria the Commission and Board of Adjustment already apply: necessity and desirability for the public good, impacts on neighborhoods and the county, and public health, safety, and welfare.
- Noted that the solar debate produced decommissioning standards and a partnership among the Zoning Commission, Board of Adjustment, and Board of Supervisors.
- Emphasized the need for precise definitions: data centers can range from small accessory server rooms serving a single business to hyperscale campuses; a blanket ban risks unintended consequences.
- Distinguished hyperscale (high-energy GPU/AI computation) from traditional server farms or co-location facilities.
- Stated he has compiled an annotated bibliography of best practices from other jurisdictions while remaining careful not to simply “copy-paste” ordinances that do not fit Iowa or Woodbury County conditions.
- Reiterated the Future Land Use Map’s designation of the industrial corridor south of Sergeant Bluff / between the river and I-29 as the primary industrial area.
- Noted contact with Iowa DNR indicating most large data centers prefer connection to public/city water systems—raising annexation and inter-jurisdictional issues.
- Urged cities and the county to watch one another carefully; annexation pressure is already visible.
- Stressed that water, energy, noise, lighting, closed-loop vs. open-loop cooling, and development-plan detail will be key questions any permitting apparatus must enable the county and public to ask.

22. Keely Purscell (Member, Winnebago Tribal Council)

- Distinguished traditional data centers (5–10 kW, air-cooled, single-building, serving a single company or local government—already present in county, city, church, and tribal facilities) from hyperscale AI data centers.
- Hyperscale facilities are used for AI training, surveillance, and machine learning; they draw 500–250+ kW per rack, are liquid-cooled (hence water demand), and occupy 500-plus-acre campuses (the Salix proposal is approximately 900 acres).
- Hyperscale centers serve global, not local, needs.
- Urged the Commission to leave room for the small, locally owned data centers that already exist while saying “no” to hyperscale facilities that use local data for “nefarious reasons” (targeted advertising, seed recommendations, etc.).
- Stated hyperscale operators are not good neighbors.

23. Tom Bride

- Reiterated the three questions posed at the beginning of the meeting (developer/end-user, size, and location relative to size) as a useful pathway for distinguishing small traditional facilities from hyperscale projects.
- Encouraged the public to communicate answers to Supervisor Nelson and to staff.

Closing of Public Town-Hall Input and Announcements

After confirming that all who wished to speak a first time had been heard, the Chair invited any remaining comments and then closed the public-input portion. Staff reminded attendees that written comments and completed questionnaires could still be left on the table or submitted later to Dan Priestley (dpriestley@woodburycountyiowa.gov or Planning & Zoning, 620 Douglas Street, 6th Floor, Sioux City, IA 51101).

Steve Corey - An announcement was made of a gathering / bus-tour stop in Salix on Friday at 5:00 PM at Salix City Park, organized by parties traveling the country to share information about data centers; the public was encouraged to attend as part of the collective learning process.

The next scheduled town-hall meeting is Monday, November 9, 2026, at 7:00 PM at the Salix Community Center, 317 Tipton Street, Salix, IA 51052. Additional meetings may be scheduled in other communities as needed.

Adjournment

There being no further business, a motion was made by Corey Meister and seconded by Steve Corey to adjourn. All in favor said “aye.” The motion carried unanimously (5-0). The meeting was adjourned.