Mayor of Providence

Brett P. Smiley

Executive Order 2026-05

November 23, 2026

Addressing the Environmental, Infrastructure, and Community Impacts of Data Center Development

Whereas, the rapid growth of data centers across the country, including facilities supporting artificial intelligence and cloud computing, have led to data center development outpacing municipal and state regulatory changes;

Whereas, for the purposes of this Executive Order, "data center" is defined as a facility that is used for the storage, processing, management and transmission of digital data. This includes, but is not limited to, the delivery of artificial intelligence services and/or cloud computing services. This definition shall not include wireless telecommunications or facilities in which data processing activities are accessory to a principal use and occupy no more than 10% of the gross square footage of the principal use.

Whereas, Providence's Zoning Ordinance does not define data center as a principal use and does not include data centers as an allowable use in the use matrix; and

Whereas, Providence's Zoning Ordinance and other existing laws and regulations were adopted before the emergence of modern data centers and do not address the impacts of these facilities on the built environment, the regional electric systems, and municipal infrastructure; and

Whereas, data centers can require significant amounts of water for cooling, generate constant noise due to cooling equipment and backup generators, and contribute to greenhouse gas emissions; and

Whereas, a data center can have significant impacts on demands on infrastructure, threats to the quality of the environment and negative effects on the quality-of-life for surrounding communities; and

Whereas, development of large data centers in other Rhode Island municipalities would also impact Providence residents and ratepayers; and

Whereas, the City of Providence is a densely developed city with limited available land and the location of a data center may place additional environmental burdens on communities already disproportionately impacted by industrial use and data centers can take up a large area of land and may compete with housing development and other land-use priorities; and

Whereas, the City of Providence's Comprehensive Plan establishes goals and priorities around housing, responsible land use and environmental sustainability; and

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Whereas, the City of Providence's Climate Justice Plan establishes the City's goals and priorities around reducing greenhouse gas emissions, climate resiliency, and addressing the environmental impacts already faced by Providence communities; and

Whereas, responsible municipal planning requires that any future considerations of policies impacting data center development should be informed by the City's priorities and should account for the potential impacts on residents, infrastructure, and the environment;

Whereas, the City of Providence recognizes that data center development in other parts of Rhode Island may also impact Providence residents and rate payers. Local zoning regulations on data center development may not be enough to address certain impacts of the development, and

Whereas, the City of Providence recognizes the need for comprehensive city and state policies addressing data center development and its potential impacts;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that I, Brett P. Smiley, Mayor of the City of Providence, hereby declare as follows:

Section 1: Existing Zoning Restrictions on Data Centers

Data center as a principal use is currently a prohibited use in the City of Providence because data centers are not identified as an allowed principal use in the City of Providence's Zoning Ordinance.

Section 2: Development of Policy on Data Centers

Any future policies on the development of data centers in Providence should:

- Consider the size, scale, type and location of the facility as well as any potential impacts on electricity and water demand, noise, emissions, air quality and residents; and
- Be consistent with the City's goals and priorities established in the Comprehensive Plan and the Climate Justice Plan, including those related to environmental justice, land use, sustainability and climate resiliency.

The Director of Planning in consultation with the Sustainability Department, the Department of Inspection and Standards, the Providence Fire Department, and other relevant departments shall develop a comprehensive policy to guide any future consideration of data center development.

Any policy impacting data center development should address:

- Whether and under what circumstances data centers should be permitted in Providence including any necessary limitations on the scale of development,
- A clear definition of data centers,
- Potential impacts on residents, electricity demand, water resources, municipal infrastructure, noise, air quality and greenhouse gas emissions,
- Appropriate zoning regulations, development standards, permitting procedures, and enforcement mechanisms to address these concerns, and
- Any State action necessary to support policy implementation.

The development of this policy should include opportunities for community input, particularly from residents and communities likely to be directly impacted by data center development.

Section 3: Providence City Council Action on Data Center Development Policy

The Administration recognizes the Providence City Council's role in establishing land-use and zoning regulations and asks the City Council to work with the appropriate staff to consider the potential impacts of data center development and a comprehensive policy to address these concerns before making changes to the Zoning Ordinance that would allow data centers. Any such policy should address the location, scale and potential impacts of a data center facility and include appropriate safeguards for residents and surrounding neighborhoods.

The City encourages continued coordination between the City Council, Mayor's Office and relevant City departments in considering any future zoning changes related to data centers.

Section 4: State of Rhode Island Policies and Regulatory Actions

The City calls on the Governor, the Rhode Island General Assembly current and future leadership, and appropriate state agencies to develop policies and regulations addressing data center development including environmental impacts, utility demand, and fair labor standards. These policies should address the costs of new electric infrastructure, ensure that existing ratepayers do not shoulder the increased costs associated with data centers, and that the State and host municipalities share in any revenue.

The City encourages coordination among municipalities, state agencies and other stakeholders to develop a standard, statewide approach to addressing the regional impacts associated with data center development.

So Ordered:

Brett P. Smiley, Mayor