

Questions from Our AI Data Centers Discussion

Guy Brunt

Question: Shouldn't we be suspicious of data centers when their approaches to community governments are often kept under wraps and not discussed with the affected populations from the outset?

Answer:

This has become one of the biggest concerns surrounding new AI data centers. In the past, some companies negotiated with local governments under non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), which meant residents often learned about a project only after many important decisions had already been made. That lack of transparency created distrust, even in communities that might otherwise have supported the project.

In fact, growing public opposition has delayed or blocked billions of dollars' worth of data center projects across the United States. As a result, some companies have changed their approach. Microsoft announced in 2026 that it would no longer use NDAs with local governments for data center projects because it concluded that transparency with communities leads to better outcomes. The lesson is that involving residents early is becoming increasingly important.

Terry Enfield

Question: I heard that China is using sodium batteries for cars.

Answer:

Yes. China has taken a leading global role in the development and early commercialization of sodium-ion batteries, with major manufacturers such as CATL and BYD investing heavily in the technology and already deploying it in select low-cost electric vehicles and energy storage systems. Backed by strong government support for battery innovation and supply-chain security, China has been able to move sodium-ion technology from the laboratory into real-world pilot applications faster than most other countries.

Anna Don

Question: Are these coolants to use instead of water actually in existence now?

Answer:

Yes. They are no longer experimental.

Many of today's newest AI data centers are beginning to use liquid cooling systems instead of relying primarily on air cooling. Some circulate liquid through cold plates attached directly to computer chips. Others use "immersion cooling," where servers are submerged in a special non-conductive liquid that safely removes heat.

These systems can reduce water consumption, improve energy efficiency, and allow much more powerful AI computers to operate without overheating. They are becoming increasingly common as AI systems continue to grow in size and power.

Guy Brunt

Question: Why are they consuming precious green spaces instead of reusing old factories or brownfield sites? Won't today's data centers become tomorrow's brownfields?

Answer:

This is an excellent question because many communities ask the same thing.

One reason is legal liability. Under U.S. environmental law—specifically CERCLA (the federal Superfund law)—current site owners or operators can be held responsible for contamination that was released by prior owners, even if they did not cause it. That means data center developers face heightened liability exposure when acquiring or constructing facilities on Superfund or brownfield sites, because they may inherit decades-old environmental problems along with the land.

In practical terms, a company can build clean and fast on empty farmland with basically zero legacy risk, or it can take on someone else's historical contamination liability in order to reuse an existing industrial site and potentially save some construction time or land costs. Framed that way, greenfield development is often the legally safer and more predictable option, even when it is the worse land-use outcome for the surrounding community and contributes to continued sprawl.

Developers therefore often find it faster, cheaper, and legally less risky to build on undeveloped land, even though many people would prefer that existing industrial sites be reused first.

As for today's data centers becoming tomorrow's brownfields, that is much less likely. Data centers generally do not use the hazardous chemicals associated with heavy manufacturing plants, steel mills, or refineries. If a data center closes, the building can

often be renovated and reused for another industrial or commercial purpose rather than requiring major environmental cleanup.

Steven Meisel

Question: Hasn't Sam Altman floated the idea of the federal government buying a 5% stake in OpenAI? In other words, isn't that a government bailout?

Answer:

Sam Altman has discussed the idea of a U.S. sovereign wealth fund investing in major AI companies, including the possibility of public ownership in the future. The idea is not a bailout in the traditional sense, where a failing company receives emergency government money to survive.

Instead, supporters argue that if AI becomes one of the world's most valuable industries, the American public should share in some of that financial upside through public investment. Critics, however, worry that taxpayers could end up taking on risks while private investors continue to receive most of the rewards. Whether it is viewed as a smart national investment or a form of corporate subsidy depends largely on one's perspective.

Guy Brunt

Question: What is the expected useful life of an AI data center?

Answer:

The building itself is usually designed to last about **15 to 25 years**, and in many cases even longer with renovations.

The computers inside are a different story. AI servers become outdated very quickly and are often replaced every **three to five years** as newer chips become dramatically faster and more energy efficient.

For that reason, most data centers undergo continuous upgrades throughout their lives. While the building remains in place, the technology inside is constantly being modernized to keep pace with advances in artificial intelligence.