

People in Ohio have several lawful ways to delay, condition, or sometimes stop an AI/data-center project—but the strongest route depends heavily on whether the site is in a city, village, unincorporated township, or under county zoning, and on what approvals the developer still needs.

The important point is that Ohio generally does **not** give residents a simple statewide “vote against a data center.” Instead, opponents can use **zoning, referendum, utility/infrastructure approvals, environmental permits, tax incentives, public-records laws, administrative appeals, and litigation.**

1. Fight the zoning approval

This is often the most important avenue.

For an **unincorporated area**, Ohio township zoning boards can regulate the location, size, and use of buildings and land, including industrial uses. A data center therefore may need to fit the existing zoning classification or obtain a rezoning/conditional-use approval.

If the county has **county rural zoning**, the county's zoning process can be critical. Ohio law requires public hearings for proposed zoning amendments, and residents can participate in those proceedings.

If the developer needs a rezoning, that can create a major opportunity to oppose the project before construction starts.

2. Use a zoning referendum

Ohio gives residents a particularly important tool when a county or township changes its zoning.

For **county zoning**, if the county commissioners adopt a zoning amendment, residents can petition for a referendum. Under current ORC §303.12, the petition generally requires signatures from at least **8% of the votes cast for governor in the affected unincorporated area**. If the referendum petition is valid, the zoning amendment does not take effect unless voters approve it.

For **township zoning**, ORC §519.12 currently provides a referendum mechanism requiring signatures from **15% of the votes cast for governor in the affected area**.

So if, for example, a developer needs agricultural/residential land rezoned to industrial specifically for a data center, **organizing immediately after the rezoning vote can potentially put that decision before voters.**

There is an important complication, however: Ohio law now contains an exception for certain **“megaprojects.”** A township zoning amendment concerning property involved in a qualifying megaproject can be exempt from the ordinary referendum procedure.

That makes it important to determine whether the particular data center has obtained or is seeking megaproject status.

3. Challenge a conditional-use/special-use approval

If the existing zoning allows a data center only as a **conditional or special use**, residents may be able to participate before the board of zoning appeals or other zoning body.

The key isn't simply saying “*we don't want a data center.*” The stronger arguments are things such as:

- the proposed use doesn't satisfy the zoning code;
- traffic requirements aren't met;
- setbacks aren't met;
- noise standards aren't met;
- landscaping/buffering requirements aren't met;
- stormwater requirements aren't met;
- required infrastructure isn't adequate;
- the application is incomplete;
- required findings weren't made;
- the zoning board exceeded its authority;
- the decision was arbitrary or contrary to the zoning resolution.

Ohio law also allows certain specially affected neighboring property owners to seek judicial remedies when property is being used in violation of zoning.

4. Make the developer obtain every required permit

A data center isn't just a building. Large facilities can involve substantial:

- electrical infrastructure;
- backup generators;
- cooling systems;
- water withdrawals;
- wastewater;
- stormwater;
- roads;
- substations/transmission infrastructure;
- fuel storage;
- wetlands or streams;
- air emissions.

Those separate approvals can create additional opportunities for public participation or legal challenges.

Water can be particularly significant in Ohio.

For example, a facility making a new or increased consumptive use of more than an average of **2 million gallons per day** can require a state water-withdrawal permit under ORC §1521.23.

If the facility is in the Lake Erie watershed, additional Great Lakes water-withdrawal rules can apply at substantially lower thresholds depending on the source and circumstances.

Ohio law also provides mechanisms for investigating impacts on existing groundwater supplies, including circumstances where residents' water supplies are diminished or interrupted.

So **“How much water will the data center actually consume, from what source, and what happens to nearby wells?”** can be a much more legally useful question than simply objecting to AI.

5. Oppose the project's utility infrastructure

This can be extremely important for a massive data center.

A huge data center may require new:

- substations;
- transmission lines;
- natural-gas infrastructure;
- utility easements;
- roads;
- water lines;
- sewer extensions.

Ohio's **SB 52** created a process involving county “restricted areas” for certain utility facilities. A county resolution designating a restricted area prohibiting construction of utility facilities can itself be subjected to a referendum if residents meet the statutory petition requirements.

But this is not a blanket “data-center ban.” Whether SB 52 applies depends on exactly what utility infrastructure is being proposed and which regulatory authority has jurisdiction.

6. Fight local tax incentives

This is another potentially powerful strategy that people sometimes overlook.

Ohio provides significant incentives for data centers. For example, ORC §122.175 establishes a tax exemption for qualifying computer-data-center equipment.

There can also be **local property-tax incentives**, including Community Reinvestment Area arrangements. For commercial or industrial property, Ohio law requires a written agreement before construction/remodeling begins, and in many circumstances the school district's board of education must approve the agreement.

That means residents can ask:

How much local and school-district tax revenue will be forgone, and who approved the incentive?

Even if residents cannot legally prevent the data center itself, they may be able to pressure local officials to **reject or modify discretionary incentives.**

7. Use Ohio public-records law aggressively

Before organizing, find out **what has already been promised to the developer.**

Residents can seek public records from the relevant:

- county commissioners;
- township trustees;
- zoning commission;
- board of zoning appeals;
- planning commission;
- economic-development organizations;
- county engineer;
- water/sewer authorities;
- local governments;
- school district;
- public utilities, where applicable;
- state agencies.

Useful requests include:

All applications, correspondence, meeting records, agreements, memoranda, presentations, studies, traffic studies, water studies, utility studies, incentive agreements, tax-abatement documents, zoning documents, site plans, environmental reports, and communications concerning [project].

This can reveal that a project is **much further along—or much less approved—than residents have been told.**

8. Demand the actual economic and environmental numbers

For a large AI data center, I'd want residents to obtain these numbers before deciding on strategy:

Issue	Question
Land	How many acres?
Power	How many MW initially and ultimately?
Water	Gallons/day, maximum and average?
Wells	Could nearby private wells be affected?
Cooling	Air cooling, evaporative, hybrid, etc.?
Generators	How many and what fuel?
Noise	Expected dBA at property boundaries?
Traffic	Construction and permanent traffic?
Taxes	Current vs. projected tax revenue?
Incentives	What exemptions/abatements are requested?
Jobs	Permanent jobs vs. construction jobs?
Grid	Who pays for substations/transmission upgrades?
Pollution	Expected emissions from backup generation?
Stormwater	How much impervious surface?
Emergency	Fire suppression/water demand?

Those facts can determine **which legal lever is actually available.**

One especially important distinction

If you're talking about a particular proposed AI data center in Ohio, **“the county” may not actually control the project.**

For example:

Unincorporated township + county zoning

→ county/township zoning and referendum mechanisms may matter.

Unincorporated township + township zoning

→ township zoning and its referendum rules may matter.

Inside a municipality

→ city/village zoning, planning commission, council, BZA, and municipal referendum rules become much more important.

Large utility project

→ Ohio Power Siting Board/PUCO jurisdiction may become important.

Major water withdrawal

→ Ohio Department of Natural Resources permitting can become important.

Air emissions

→ Ohio EPA permitting can become important.

Wetlands/streams

→ state/federal environmental permitting can become important.

So there isn't one Ohio procedure that works against every data center.

If you're trying to stop one specific project

If you give me **the Ohio county, township/city, and the name of the proposed data-center project (if known)**, I can research the actual project and give you a much more useful answer:

1. **Who currently owns the property**
2. **Current zoning**
3. **Whether rezoning is required**
4. **Which governmental bodies must approve it**
5. **Whether a zoning referendum is available**
6. **Whether SB 52 could apply**
7. **Water/power/environmental permits involved**
8. **Tax abatements and incentives being requested**
9. **What public hearings are scheduled**
10. **The exact petitions, objections, and appeals residents can legally use**
11. **Which deadlines are approaching**

That is where the answer can shift from general information to a **specific legal-action roadmap for that Ohio project**.