

Elina Jadhav

Stone Bridge High School

Grade 12

The Cloud Has Neighbors

Vicky Hu had lived with the trees for 25 years. Then, on Friday the 13th, [Dominion Energy called.](#)

Behind Hu's home in Loudoun Valley Estates, a wooded stream valley separates rows of houses from the industrial landscape that increasingly defines eastern Loudoun County. It was part of why her family chose the house. They raised their children there and cared for elderly parents there.

The caller told Hu that one proposed route for Dominion Energy's Golden to Mars transmission line could cross her property. An 185-foot transmission structure could rise in her backyard.

[“We never visualized what was really going on until it hit our home.”](#) Hu later said.

What hit Hu's home was not technically a data center. It was something data centers needed.

[Golden to Mars is part of a broader effort to reinforce Northern Virginia's electrical grid.](#) In June, Virginia's State Corporation Commission [selected a route through Loudoun Valley Estates and near local schools.](#) For decades, Loudoun built an unusually profitable relationship with the infrastructure of the internet. Now, that infrastructure is escaping the windowless buildings that once contained it, appearing in substations, transmission corridors, zoning fights and, for residents like Hu, backyards.

The question facing Loudoun is no longer simply whether data centers are economically valuable. They are. It is whether the county built so much of the cloud before deciding how that infrastructure should coexist with the people living underneath it.

Virginia Delegate JJ Singh (D-Loudoun) said the county's early embrace of data centers was driven by a compelling economic logic.

As Singh described it, the equation for local government was compelling. Data centers brought valuable land, buildings, servers, and computer equipment into the tax base without bringing thousands of children into schools or commuters onto roads.

“For many years, it was thought of to be this...economic development panacea,” Singh said in an interview. “Unfortunately, that has not turned out to be the reality.” Then he offered a simpler diagnosis: “There’s no such thing as a free lunch. And now the bill is due.”

The size of the check Loudoun has already received makes that skepticism complicated. Data centers generate an [enormous share of county tax revenue](#), helping fund schools and public services while keeping property-tax rates comparatively low.

At the [March 18, 2025, Board of Supervisors meeting](#), Maria Saab, speaking for Amazon Web Services, pointed to the billions AWS has invested in Loudoun and argued that flexibility in the county’s zoning rules remains essential to the industry’s growth.

That tradeoff, Singh said, is precisely what makes the politics difficult. “Economic benefits are dispersed.” Someone living miles away from a data center may appreciate better-funded schools or lower taxes. “But the minute the data center comes to your neighborhood, they’re gonna mind pretty significantly.”

The contradiction has become obvious enough to inspire internet satire. [In July, rapper and TikTok creator Hovey Benjamin released an EP called *Data Center*](#) and traveled to Ashburn—the heart of “Data Center Alley”—to perform in front of the buildings themselves.

[“I need a data center in my neighborhood.”](#) Benjamin raps, before joking that its arrival might at least make nearby rent cheaper.

The joke works because it flips Loudoun’s economic argument. A data center can make a county wealthier without making the person living beside it feel richer.

But not every resident sees the industry as an intrusion. Tvisha Dass, 19, has spent most of her life in Loudoun, watching data centers become an increasingly ordinary part of the landscape.

“They’ve been here my whole life, so I barely notice them,” Dass said. “It’s just hypocritical to hate data centers when everything we do is online—our data has to live somewhere.”

For Dass, the question is less whether the infrastructure should exist than where, and around whom, it should be built.

[For much of Loudoun’s data-center boom, residents did not necessarily get an up-or-down public debate over every project.](#)

Until March 2025, data centers were [allowed “by right”](#) in several industrial zoning districts. If a project complied with the zoning already attached to a property, it could proceed through administrative review without receiving a Special Exception from the Board of Supervisors.

On March 18, 2025, the Board changed that. New projects in several districts would generally have to [go before the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors](#), giving residents more opportunity to weigh in.

To Singh, the reasoning was straightforward: “People are realizing that we have enough.”

But changing the rules for tomorrow does not erase the infrastructure required by projects approved yesterday.

The term “cloud” makes all of this infrastructure sound almost weightless. Emily Tucker, executive director of Georgetown Law’s Center on Privacy & Technology, placed Loudoun’s conflict within a more spread out debate over the physical costs of digital life. There is already “so much digital infrastructure” embedded into society, she said. She went further: “No corporation should be able to use X amount of natural resources in order to train their data products.”

Few places make that tension more visible than Loudoun. Here, the digital world requires land, electricity, generators, substations, and transmission corridors.

The cloud may exist online. Its consequences do not.

Golden to Mars made that reality difficult to ignore.

Residents have packed government meetings opposing overhead routes and demanding alternatives. At a [March Board of Supervisors meeting](#), Bhavna Chendok captured the tension surrounding Loudoun's data-center debate.

[“We are not opposing the project,”](#) she said. Residents were asking that it “be built responsibly.”

Victor Block, president of the Loudoun Valley Estates homeowners association, told supervisors that the fight had mobilized people who had rarely participated in local government before.

[“The community has come together in a way I don't think Loudoun's ever seen before,”](#) he said.

That mobilization has produced political change. Loudoun [ended by-right data-center development](#) and is considering additional standards addressing substations, onsite energy generation, building height, and noise.

[Yet Golden to Mars also exposes the limits of local control.](#) The Board of Supervisors does not choose the final route of a high-voltage transmission line; that authority rests with Virginia's State Corporation Commission. Loudoun can advocate and participate in proceedings, but it cannot simply order a transmission line underground.

Asked what Loudoun might have done differently if policymakers 15 years ago possessed today's knowledge, Singh did not say the county should have rejected the industry altogether.

He imagined something more deliberate: designated infrastructure corridors, greater separation between industrial facilities and homes, earlier planning for substations and transmission lines, and alternative sources of energy.

“Maybe have fewer of them,” he added.

That may be the most revealing part of Loudoun’s change of heart. The county that helped build the cloud is not trying to disconnect from it. Residents stream movies, store photographs, shop online, and use artificial intelligence, relying on the same servers humming behind the walls they increasingly question.

The fight is over where those walls end—and where somebody’s neighborhood begins.

For Hu, that boundary is no longer theoretical. It is visible through the trees behind her house.

“If it can happen to me,” she wrote this summer, “it can happen to anybody.”

Sources

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