

## Holyoke City Council advances data center ban after heated debate

- Jun. 18, 2026, By [Aprell May Munford](#) [Story source: MassLive.com](#)

HOLYOKE — The City Council advanced a zoning change Tuesday that would ban data centers citywide, after hours of debate by councilors and residents raising concerns about environmental impacts, infrastructure strain and equity.

The measure, which amends the zoning ordinance to define “data center” and prohibit [new data centers](#) in the city, passed 9–4, the minimum required for zoning changes.

The proposal includes an amendment allowing the Massachusetts Green High-Performance Computing Center to continue operating “up to 12 MW (megawatts).”

Councilors Michael Sullivan, Linda Vacon, Howard Greaney Jr., and Council President Tessa Murphy-Romboletti opposed the measure.

Councilors also sent a separate proposal to create a temporary ad hoc committee to study potential impacts of data center development — including energy demand, water consumption, environmental impacts and economic effects — through June 30, 2027, back to a City Council subcommittee for further discussion.

Much of the debate followed hours of public comment focused on environmental and equity concerns.

### Residents raise environmental concerns

More than two dozen residents signed up to speak during the meeting.

Ward 6 resident Richard Kornitsky, an electrical power engineer, warned about the scale of a proposed facility at the former Hampden Papers facility.

Kornitsky said a proposed data center would use 20 megawatts, while Holyoke Gas & Electric’s all-time summer peak load is 75 megawatts.

“This is not a small data center for Holyoke,” he said. “This is a 26.7% increase in our peak load that energy has to come from somewhere.”

He added that increased demand could shift costs onto residents and raise environmental concerns tied to backup diesel generation.

“That means that if they are to be using some sort of peak shaving methodology,” Kornitsky said. “And more likely they won’t have natural gas.”

He said the added demand could raise costs and increase reliance on backup diesel generation, which produces harmful air pollutants.

Kornitsky also pointed to environmental justice concerns, noting the surrounding census tracts include predominantly low-income and minority communities.

“The average income is \$16,111, it put it at 19.1% of the mean household median income within the state and 27.1% of the households are within it,” he said.

William “Billy” Myers, a Ward 7 resident, said he has lived in Holyoke for 30 years. Myers is a conservator and an enrolled member of the Mohawk community and is also on the Haudenosaunee environmental task force in New York.

“I can tell folk stories about cows drowned in oil,” he said. “I really know what goes on with PFAS, and we can’t even eat fish out of any of the rivers in New York City because of power plants.”

“We also have a mantra in my community and most of the Mohawk community that what we do now will affect the next seven generations,” Myers said.

Myers said his work focuses on children and long-term community health, urging leaders to “look within” themselves and put profit aside.

### **Council divided: ban vs. moratorium**

After hours of testimony, the debate shifted sharply to the council floor, where divisions quickly emerged over how — or whether — to regulate data centers.

Ordinance Committee Chair and City Council Vice President Meg Magrath-Smith opened with a report to the full council, describing what she called a [complicated path](#) to the proposed ban.

She said the measure moved through hearings, gained Planning Board support and [returned](#) to committee for legal revisions under a tight timeline that limited further public input.

The committee ultimately advanced a revised ban, including language allowing the existing computing center to continue operating at a set capacity, while a moratorium failed in committee.

Councilor Israel Rivera backed a full ban, pointing to long-standing inequities in where industrial uses are located.

“It’s already a significant burden for those two communities to be carrying on a lot of the industrial activity ...,” Rivera said.

He said residents are already noticing changes in their neighborhoods and questioned how information about development is shared.

“I’m hearing how things are looking different for them ... where sound issues are now issues for them that were never issues before,” he said.

Vacon, delivering the minority report, opposed the ban and criticized the process, arguing the moratorium should not have moved forward after failing in committee and that the legal draft was incomplete. She said more public input was needed and that she could support a moratorium, but not a ban.

Greaney said he does not yet feel prepared to decide.

“I need more information,” he said, adding that a moratorium would allow time to research both sides, “which is my obligation to the people of Holyoke.”

Councilor Patti Devine echoed that concern and pointed to a separate proposal to study environmental and economic impacts before taking action. She cautioned against rushing into a ban, noting it could be difficult to reverse.

Sullivan pushed back on what he described as misinformation, particularly about water use, saying current data show the system has capacity. He also warned that broad definitions could unintentionally include hospitals and other essential infrastructure.

“I don’t buy that at all,” he said. “It’s critical that we do it right.”

Ward 4 Councilor Richard Purcell said the debate should center on environmental justice, arguing lower-income neighborhoods have long borne the burden of industrial development.

He pointed to his experience during the Mount Tom era when a coal-fired power plant operated until 2014, saying communities accepted pollution for tax revenue but paid health costs, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Purcell said he supports a ban but would consider a moratorium if necessary to ensure action.

Councilor Juan Anderson-Burgos urged councilors to act, framing the issue as protecting residents and natural resources.

“They’re all warning us so please do not sit in these chairs and just assume that a business came to our city is our friend,” he said. “I did not get elected to be someone’s buddy at some business.”

“I do not care how much money you throw in my face because that only shows desperation,” Anderson-Burgos added. He said the city should prioritize residents over outside companies.

Councilor Mimi Panitch said the city currently lacks a clear regulatory framework to evaluate data center proposals and needs time to build one. Without action, she said, the city would have no protections in place.

Councilor Anne Thalheimer agreed, emphasizing the need to act.

Vacon added that testimony suggested no PFAS contamination had been found in Holyoke’s water despite a data center having operated for more than a decade, raising questions about the actual level of risk.

She also noted no formal application for a new facility has been filed.

The council ultimately advanced the ban with an amendment after a roll-call vote.

In previous [reporting](#) by The Republican, developers behind the proposed project said the former Hampden Papers site offered key advantages for a data center, including access to existing power infrastructure and available water capacity.

They described the project as relatively small — about 20 megawatts — and said it would have minimal impact on city systems while helping redevelop a long-vacant industrial property.

Developers also said the facility could generate roughly \$2 million annually in property taxes and support local utilities by spreading costs across more users.

They argued that newer technology would limit environmental impacts and said that backup generators would be used only for testing or emergencies.

“I’m not sure that’s the message Holyoke wants to send,” James Lavin, chief technology officer of Chestnut River Power and Infrastructure, told reporters on Monday.