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CAN COMMUNITIES MITIGATE THEIR RISING CONCERNS ABOUT DATA CENTERS?

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MODERATOR

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FIRESIDE CHAT

REP. SUHAS SUBRAMANYAM (D-Va.)

U.S. House of Representatives

PANEL DISCUSSION

ABRE' CONNER (speaking virtually)

Director, Center for Environmental and Climate Justice, NAACP

RONALD NEWMAN

Senior Vice President of Distributed Power Solutions, Groundswell

ELENA SCHLOSSBERG

Grassroots Coordinator, The Coalition to Protect Prince William County

MARIE SCYLLA-DIXON

Founder and Principal, Tuckahoe Creek Strategies

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TURNER LEE: Well, good morning. Thank you for coming. I'm Dr. Nicol Turner Lee. I'm the senior fellow in Governance Studies here at the Brookings Institution and the director of the Center for Technology Innovation, almost celebrating my 10-year anniversary here at Brookings. I can't believe it. I'm excited about this conversation.

For those of you that are here with us in person, I know there was a lot of traffic today, so for those of you that made it in, thank you. And for those of you who are joining us online, we are equally appreciative of your presence. If you have questions I will direct you to the Brookings hashtag for those of you that follow us for questions.

But today is going to be a really interesting conversation. Data centers have become what many consider to be a kitchen table conversation. And in addition to that, you all have read the recent news about the doomsday that in about a decade we will all not be here. All of that combined, I think, is creating a great robust talk and chat that we're gonna have today on AI.

We're gonna focus on data centers, but I did tell the congressman I would be remiss if I didn't ask you if we're gonna be here at the end of the decade. And so maybe he has some commentary on that. But again, I'll ask you all to hold your questions. Once we're done with this fireside conversation, we'll go into a panel discussion as well.

So again, thank you all for being here. Let me introduce the congressman who has taken the time to be with us today. Congressman Suhas Subramanyam -- did I say it right?

SUBRAMANYAM: Manyam.

TURNER LEE: Manyam. Yep, I got it. Has represented Virginia's tenth congressional district since 2025. Prior to his election, he served in the Virginia Senate from 2024 to 2025 and the Virginia House of Delegates from 2020 to 2024. The representative also has served as a White House technology policy advisor in the Obama administration, informing much of the work around tech and data centers today, including on the Committee on Science, Space and Technology.

I'm a Virginia resident. I have had the opportunity to meet him a couple times when I've been on the Hill testifying, and I'm excited that you actually took the time to be with us today because I know that there's a lot going on.

So I want to jump right into the conversation, if you don't mind which is really to get into, if you don't mind, like, the first question that's on a lot of people's minds. What was your response to what we're seeing in the news about AI companies slowing down a little bit? And then we'll go into data centers because I think they're all kind of interconnected.

SUBRAMANYAM: Yeah, absolutely. First of all, thank you for having me. Usually, you're the one in the hot seat, so it's great to be in the hot seat with you questioning me. But I appreciate the conversation. I'm not surprised, and it's nothing I haven't heard before. In fact when I was in the White House ten years ago, had literally the exact same conversation some of the same people too.

So we had a roundtable at the Global Entrepreneurship Summit ten years ago on AI with senior officials in the Obama administration. And the same conversation was happening.

The difference was there's different players at the time. There was a concern that Google would have a monopoly, and that it wouldn't be good if DeepMind and Google had a monopoly over everything.

And so OpenAI was starting at the time, and it was supposed to be this nonprofit that would bust the monopoly and also make sure that we wouldn't put AI in the hands of one entity. There was also concern that China would advance and there was also concern that AI would, you know, lead to the demise of our planet and everyone. And so nothing I haven't heard before.

The difference is I believe the public now understands the sense of urgency that the same people were thinking about 10 years ago. And the other difference, of course, is that AI has advanced even further than some people thought it would, and even faster than some people thought it would.

And so, now there are no more excuses for Congress not to act. There are no more excuses for there not to be guardrails because at this point, the industry is even asking for it, and the industry is even saying, "We need to slow this down because I don't even know what we created." That's basically what they're saying.

And you know, good on them. But in the end, if we have standards that are voluntary, that's exactly what they're gonna be. They're gonna be voluntary, and it's gonna be up to the person who's creating that frontier model, whether they wanna follow that or whether they wanna unleash Pandora's box.

And we could hope that they do the right thing right now. And then we can hope that our adversaries will do the right thing. But there really needs to be, in my opinion, a mandatory standards at least. At least a baseline of common sense standards that aren't even that controversial. We're talking about better containment methods and strategies. We're talking about making sure that safety is embedded all along the way when it comes to development.

And so I don't know if I'm getting ahead of your next question, but you know, the long story short is we can do this, and it's not gonna be that controversial. And I'm puzzled by leaders in Congress saying that we can't agree on this because there's literally bipartisan legislation that's already been introduced that, not perfect, not comprehensive, but gets us a really long way. We just need to pass it.

TURNER LEE: Well, and I was actually gonna ask you that, so this is the last question I have on this.

You know, Speaker Johnson said it's gonna take a long time to do this, and the Democrats have said, "Hey, we can do this if we put our heads together." In fact, I'd kind of add on to what you said, I think we have did it, done it, right? Three years ago we were talking about these issues. So do you think the Democrats are gonna sort of take this on, or do you think it's gonna be something that we're gonna wait till after the November election?

SUBRAMANYAM: Well, the Democrats will take this on, but I believe it will be more successful if we have the Republicans join us because it will be more sustainable, and it will be, endure, different changes in the makeup of Congress or the White House. So the Democrats have to, and I've heard from Republican colleagues that they too are concerned about it. So, you know, the bill that I'm referring to is the Frontier Act with Representative

Obernolte and Trahan leading it. Not perfect, but it is gets us a really long way, and I really commend them.

And I love that you know, Obernolte's a, a very, he's an expert, a, a subject matter expert on this. And so he is trying to wrangle enough Republican support to support something like this. And the frustrating part is, I've heard from one staffer, this was last year, that the desire to do AI policy in Republican leadership is not really that high. And I don't know if anything has changed, but I asked why, and they said, "Well, they're waiting for the White House to send them their policy position on AI."

And that is not leadership. That is not how a co-equal branch of government works. How we work is we pass policy that the House wants, that members of the House want, and then it's in response to what the American people want. And then it goes and, you know, half the time it dies in the Senate, but we at least try to lobby our friends in the Senate to get it done.

And then you put it on the president's desk, and at that point you make them make a decision. That's, I think, how Congress should work, is we're a co-equal branch of government, how it would work next year if there's a change in leadership. But We can't sit back and hope and we've seen what the president said on this already, right?

Which is you know, he doesn't see this as a problem. He thinks that the only guardrail AI needs is himself and he's not much of a guardrail. Because even an executive order that I think some good people in his administration tried to put together around making some strong, more mandatory standards in place, got derailed.

And to me, we're not going to get where we need to be if we continue to just to show lack of leadership on this.

TURNER LEE: Yeah, no, and I agree, and I think the bill that was out on frontier models that was pretty bipartisan was out before this, right? So I think, again, there are some precedents that we can pull from.

SUBRAMANYAM: And one of the reasons why it wasn't introduced January of last year and introduced over the summer was because we want to get the policy right. But also, I mean, same with the data center legislation I've been putting together. I wanted more people to sign on. I wanted more Republicans and we wanted more consensus around this.

I think the-- people are afraid in Congress of doing tech policy sometimes because they don't always understand it completely and don't want to do the wrong thing. On the Republican side, they don't want to overregulate and stifle innovation. That's kind of the line. On the Democratic side they don't want to be seen as being beholden to the tech industry and you know, a total ban on something, you know, seems like the safest politics if you're facing a Democratic primary which is what most of our members face.

And so to me, the politics of it plus the lack of understanding sometimes gets in the way of actually getting something done. And so that needs to change quickly because we can't just sit back and be passengers on this ride. And this is something akin to nuclear energy, right? I know.

TURNER LEE: I know.

SUBRAMANYAM: This is-- this really can lead to a doomsday scenario. But I'm an optimist. I do not actually think it will lead to a doomsday scenario.

TURNER LEE: Yeah, I think we'll still be here.

SUBRAMANYAM: I think so too.

TURNER LEE: I think so too. So let's go back to the legislation that you put forth on the data centers, right? Because I think at the heart of this, and all of you in this room know, even if we have this conversation that has taken up a lot of the oxygen in the air, we still have to go back to data centers because the compute infrastructure is a requirement to do this in some way or form.

You put out a whole lot of bills last week, and I want to know more about those bills that you've introduced. I think they are additive to, I think, some of the ratepayer protection stuff that we're also seeing on the Hill.

SUBRAMANYAM: Yeah, there's a lot in there, so I'll just try to summarize it very quickly.

Like, so we have the discussion so far on data centers has been total ban, which I think probably has a lot of support at this point because people are so fed up and I don't blame them. And then there's you know, the golden goose side as I like to call it, where people are saying, "This is liquid gold. This is the golden goose." We are, well, "build, baby, build," whatever you wanna call it. Like, there, there doesn't need to be any regulations. Everything is going great, right?

And so my expertise on data centers comes from me living next to a lot of them and me seeing my utility bill go up. So when someone tells me data centers lower your utility bill I say, "What? What are you talking about? Look at my utility bill." And when I get the explanation from the experts, they say, "Yeah, it's the data centers," right? It's from-- And all the power lines you have to build in your community. And then I'm-- They're literally building a power line right through my community. They're literally building the data centers right in my community. They tried to build housing there, and the answer was no. And so they're like, "Well, I'm just gonna build data centers," and no one stopped them.

And so we have two big data centers going up, along with four other ones that are going on the other side of my community. And I live next to a place called Data Center Alley that has-- I mean, you get my drift. This is my expertise in this. It's living it. It's my life. So, and so when last year in January, I had members of Congress come to me and say, "You have got all those data centers. How do I get some in my community? This seems like a cash cow. It seems like a great idea. And they told me that your district has the most, so how, what's your secret?" And I was like, "Well, it's not 'cause of me."

But I will say that if you want, I can airlift a few to you. We'll figure out how to do that because we have way too many at this point. And I don't know what's going on in your community, but you should check with your community about whether they actually want it. Same people by January of this year were like, "Yeah, you're right. I don't... it's, it wasn't the best idea to be trying to promote these things. I'm trying to take a step back from that and you know, we're, you know, doing a little damage control here on..."

And so, but to me, siting has been a big part of this. We're putting them through schools. We're putting them through, when I say them, I mean not just the data centers themselves, but the infrastructure to power them. And we're putting that through schools, homes. We're putting them through parks. We have you know, Manassas has national battlefields, historic battlefields, and they're looking at putting power lines through them to power the data centers.

And we're-- Now the data centers people ask me about the number of data centers we need to build and say we need to double it. I actually don't know if it's the number as much as the size at this point. Like, they're becoming these giant towers of data centers that need a ton of power. And a lot of them are driven by AI.

Like, the majority in Virginia are cloud, is the reason behind them. But now AI is really, they're saying we're gonna have to double the amount of data capacity that we need. So it might show up in less actual buildings, but more the just need for power. But we just got an ominous sign, so I'll just go really quickly. Yeah. The so one is about siting and making sure we site them in the right place, and this ad hoc approach, going community to community, county to county, state to state, is not really working right now. It's just and it's all short-term profit driven. Sometimes it's a little predatory, and it's not working. So I want more national strategy that puts communities first. And if you're gonna need to build all these data centers, like, do it in a way that's sensible, not putting two or three hundred in Loudoun County alone.

The second part is about making sure we understand the real impact of it. The way we measure the power impact and water impact right now is not logical to me. We measure it by - it's like measuring a football team by the size of their players and not by the actual score or their record. We're measuring their potential or their efficiency, but not necessarily what their actual power impact is. And so then you end up getting into a place where you need more power than you thought you would, right? And the impact the communities thought they were signing up for ends up being far more. And so we need to make sure that there's real transparency.

Something that I didn't address in my legislation but it's a problem, is these NDAs that these localities have to sign where it's all secretive the impact is secretive and the deals are secretive, and that needs to change. So there just needs to be more transparency and accountability when it comes to what the public knows. And so that's another one.

And then there's, people need to stop having to subsidize the power of these, of this industry. I mean, my utility bills are going up, so is everyone else in our community, and everyone else in Virginia, and everyone else across the country who are seeing these data centers come. And so there's something just wrong or unfair about having to have a power line go through your community that you have to pay for to power data centers. And they say, you know, it's great for the locality 'cause it'll pay for schools and things like that, but you're paying for it. So would you rather have a little property tax increase, or would you rather have a giant utility bill increase and a power line going through your school or home? That, that's really important to remember when you're seeing the dollar signs with these data centers. And I say that to the local governments.

And so, and then the final thing is making sure that we keep the communities around them safe, because if you look at what's going on in the Middle East or in Ukraine, Russia, data centers are now a target. And so when we have a conversation of building things above ground or buried underground with power lines, we have to keep national security in concern

too. I want the Department of Homeland Security to actually do more of an assessment on how we protect data center infrastructure and the communities around them especially.

TURNER LEE: So I want to go a little bit to the affordability piece, right? So there's one part of it which is the data center companies paying for their own power. I know where I live in Virginia, they're looking at a new substation off of Edsell Road, so that'll be interesting to see. So they are coming closer to me. So I might be you in a few.

But I have a question, is the, is the solution to get more data center companies to do their own power and sort of extract that away from the power grid, or is the longer term solution to do more work on the grid itself? I'm just curious, like how do we solve this over time? Or are we gonna continue to have the same problems later in the future?

SUBRAMANYAM: Yeah, I'll tell you some solutions that have been presented that are not good ideas right now that sound like good ideas. So one thing that sounds like a good idea is SMRs and nuclear power. We're not there yet. And so if you do the math right now, you need like hundreds and hundreds of SMRs to power the data centers in my community, and we have yet to build one successfully in this country.

And so to tell me that, "Hey, we're gonna power these SMRs in a couple years," like that, that's not a real solution. I hope one day we have a miraculous SMR that... But I don't even know. I wanna make sure that it's safe and it's, the impact on the communities is such that it'd be okay to put there. And so as someone who lives next to the data centers, I don't want like four SMRs in my backyard either.

The the second thing that people say is bring your own power so you don't have to be on the power grid. But it's really important to understand what power you're bringing because if you're powering your data center through your backup generators, and you're just doing that all the time, these backup generators are diesel powered usually, and the particulates from this, these diesel powered generators are really bad for you, and really bad for kids, and really bad for your community.

And just one example is, there's a bring your own power data center now in, in Loudoun County, and it's a diesel powered generator. And the community next to it there's a a family of four, and where the, every kid now has a respiratory problem. And a gentleman who spoke at the launch of our data center legislation talked about how he's had health problems that he never thought he would have, don't run in his family, and because of the, the data center bringing its own power.

So, I think what would be better is to make sure that we have a system where they're paying for their own power that we're understanding what the impact of the power would be on the community, and that we use a little bit of common sense here and not just talking points.

TURNER LEE: And then like in places like Loudoun County, I mean, I know Mike Turner has said...

Microphone is falling apart. We'll just need a replacement.

So Mike Turner has said that, you know, the property discounts that have gone to people on their property taxes, right, have come through data centers. Here at Brookings, Darrell West and myself have written about community benefit agreements.

So I'm curious from you, like, what about community benefit agreements? Should they also be part of this suite of policies that we're putting in place so that communities are sure to get more from the data center than what it might be taking, power, water, and other things?

SUBRAMANYAM: Sure. Just again, I'll go back to my legislation because community benefit agreements can be good, but we need to understand what the benefit actually is and what the impact actually is.

And to me, the concern has been there's not a lot of transparency around what the impact will be. Again, we're not measuring it in a way I'd like to. There's, the localities themselves, sometimes the local leaders, but certainly the industry has not always been forthcoming about what the plans are.

Oftentimes, the public doesn't hear about a data center coming until after it's already been approved or it's, you know, the, the documents have already been signed at this point. And there's and so the, I think the industry and local leaders are rightfully afraid of the public at this point when it comes to data centers, and so... but the solution is not to jam them through either, 'cause don't jam them through and expect the community to be happy about that, right?

TURNER LEE: But then how do you reconcile, I'm not sure we'll have time for Q&A just because we're running behind. That's okay. But, like, how do you reconcile, though, the need that we have to have this infrastructure, while at the same time, you know, 72% of people do not trust AI, and that probably went up after the news cycle this weekend?

Like, how are we gonna get there, you know? I'm just curious to hear from you. The legislation will be good, but are there other, like, community perceptions that we have to change as well?

SUBRAMANYAM: Yeah, yeah. So again, not all the data centers are AI. It's some of them are cloud. But yes, a, a big driver of the of the need for data centers is because of AI. And so, but the reason why people don't trust AI is 'cause, also 'cause of the safety you know, and a lot of other things.

I would say on data centers, that's why I have the bill is to try to see if we can do this in a way that makes a lot more sense. If there's a place we can put them, like some, some have mentioned energy parks, for instance as one solution where we can generate a bunch of energy for a grid and then put the data centers next to those, away from homes, away from parks, away from, I think I just heard about zoos recently as an issue.

And so, away from places that that should not have data centers next to them. That could be a better solution longer term. If the goal is to double the number of data centers, though, we're gonna need to change the way we do things right now.

TURNER LEE: Yeah, no, I think land utilization is really important. I'm working on a blog right now. If communities decide, for example, urban communities, what about brownfields,

right? Those are about 285,000 across the country that are sitting vacant. You know, I love this idea of energy parks. But have some more conversation around land utilization, I think is what you're saying.

SUBRAMANYAM: Exactly.

TURNER LEE: The other thing I'll just ask in terms of these moratoriums.

So some of these communities state of New York has a moratorium. Time is running out, congressman, on what the moratorium will do. How do you see your legislation blending with the conversations that are now happening across the country, you know, under these moratoriums where communities wanted more time to do things like measuring the impacts, understanding other co- policy guardrails?

SUBRAMANYAM: Yeah. You know, the data center industry is not happy with me right now. I'll start there. And, but the, my legislation is not a moratorium because we already have a moratorium proposed, right?

TURNER LEE: And there's tons of moratoriums. I think 14 across the country right now.

SUBRAMANYAM: By, by like famous people like AOC and Bernie, right?

Like, and then we already have the administration position, right? And so to me, my I look at what I'm trying to propose as like, if you, if a moratorium is not gonna pass, and if you don't want a moratorium, and if people are not happy with the golden goose side, then what are we gonna do? Are we just gonna sit back and argue between all or nothing? Or are we gonna see if this is possible to build out in a way that makes more sense, in a way that puts communities first? That, that's what I'm trying to propose to people.

And so, you know, I tell the data center industry and anyone else that'll listen to me that if we do nothing I think that moratorium will win. I think national moratorium will win. And I think it won't be a national moratorium passed by Congress. It'll be every state basically passing a moratorium because of the politics, or pretty much every state, right? And it'll be up to the, the politicians to decide what's more important, me building a data center or keeping my job, right? And we know which one they'll choose. So at this point, to me, if the... where we're headed is more moratorium than not moratorium. And if you want to do this right, then you need to put communities first. .

TURNER LEE: No, this is great. Okay, we have time for one or two questions before... Oh, we've got to let him go?

Okay. I guess I have one last-

SUBRAMANYAM: Sorry, you can call my office if you want.

TURNER LEE: Any other comments before we go into the community panel, before you get off the stage? I'm really excited about what's gonna follow. Actual people who have been working in this space trying to figure out how to make this community first, make it community driven. Any other comments to them before you leave the stage?

SUBRAMANYAM: If you have ideas, maybe if I said something wrong, please come follow up with me and I'd love to... Again, my expertise is just having a lot of data centers around me, and so I'm still learning as I go. You're gonna, about to talk to the actual experts.

But I also love stealing good ideas, so please reach out to my office with good ideas and we'll give you credit on the back end. You can come to the press conference when we introduce your bill. But thank you so much for having me.

TURNER LEE: Thank you. Let's give the congressman a hand. Thank you.

All right, we're gonna switch into the panel. You know, the timing was impeccable, so please pardon me if I had to ask those questions of the member about his response to what's been going on in the last 24 to 48 hours. So I'm glad we got that insight. And the timing's impeccable for all of you because you've heard the congressman talk about the bills that he's introduced, and I think I heard that there will be another bill going to the floor maybe next week on data centers. So we're gonna get into a conversation on data centers. I found that to be a good primer for the conversation we're going to have.

Let me introduce all of the panelists, and then again, we'll have some time this time for Q&A. Elena Schlossberg, who's in the middle, is the founder of the Coalition to Protect Prince William County, where she's worked to highlight community concerns about the data center industry. She was born and raised in the DMV and has been interviewed in dozens of publications about her work. She is busy, is all I can say.

Maria - Marie Sylla-Dixon has over 20 years of experience in corporate and affairs and public policy, and is currently the founder and principal of Tuckahoe Creek Strategies. Her expertise, and so you're gonna bring a different voice to the panel, is in telecom and energy regulatory strategy, and that has informed her work as she has formerly worked with companies like Exelon, Amazon, T-Mobile and others.

Abre', hey, how are you? I see you. Conner, who wanted to be here but she slipped us in between something that she had that she couldn't break, is the director of the Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at the NAACP, where her work centers on dismantling environmental racism. She's a graduate of American University Washington College of Law, and has a wide range of experience in government and nonprofit sectors.

And Ronnie Newman is not Michelle Moore, but Michelle had something come up, but he works with her as the senior vice president of distributed power solutions at Groundswell, an organization focused on supporting local resilience, particularly in rural communities. Originally from Memphis, he has experience in the federal government at the White House, State Department, Treasury, and in several nonprofits. Let's give everyone a round of applause for being here.

So I want to start with you, Elena. We heard a little bit from the congressman on the legislation that he's putting together. I think you were active in that process when he solicited feedback, so he was telling the truth that he does listen to people.

I'd like to start with what's shaped your experiences. I found the congressman's just living in the moment to be very informative for people who are watching this play out, you know, outside of a data center community. Tell me a little bit more about what shaped your experience and why this issue has become such a kitchen table conversation.

SCHLOSSBERG: So first of all, thank you for inviting me and for allowing me to be with these amazing guests. And I was just with Abre' in Nashville on a panel, so, it's great to see you again. So let me just give a little bit of history about who I am. I'm a Virginia native. I moved to Prince William County to build our dream home on a piece of property that looked like an Addams Family lot.

So everything went into our home, and I realized then that the intersection of land use and natural preservation was inexorably linked. Fast-forward to 2014, a transmission line goes to cross my property, and if you've never been in a transmission line fight, you have not seen the community activated. And so what what I realized was that it was for an Amazon data center campus that our elected leaders had signed NDAs for. And not only was it threatening private property, it was also gonna be paid for by all the rate payers.

And so at my kitchen table, I formed the coalition to protect Prince William. We're a little teeny, tiny 501(c)4, nobody gets paid. But we for the first time ever disclosed that this industry of data centers was triggering the kind of infrastructure that had never been seen before, and that we were paying for it. And so this journey evolved from this small thirty-eight acre campus that needed a transmission line for a hundred and twenty megawatts to now the biggest data center campus in the world that was defeated, which was the digital gateway on two thousand acres that required three thousand megawatts of power, twelve substations, multiple transmission lines, threatened a drinking water supply watershed on hallowed ground.

And that has been the journey of the community. And so, my role has been to help the community understand the resource demand is simply too much. Too much water, too much power, too much land, too much fossil fuel. Does that pretty much-?

TURNER LEE: No, I mean, yeah, that is-- it, it starts the conversation, I think, right, on this.

You know, Ronnie, I want to talk to you because, you know, Elena's talking about Prince William County in Virginia. Your organization deals across rural areas. And in particular, this conversation obviously comes up because as we talked about in the prior conversation, the enticement is there. And particularly for rural communities, I think, who have been severely disinvested, this provides an incentive.

So I found it interesting you said at the beginning, everybody was like, "How do I get more data centers like you?" Now obviously we see a lot more across the aisle concern. But talk to us a little bit about rural decision-making when it comes to data centers and what you're seeing.

NEWMAN: So again, my name is Ronnie, and like Elena, thankful to be a part of this conversation this morning. A sort of quick note on Groundswell, my organization. We build energy projects, we run energy programs that are cheaply designed to increase energy affordability. So one of our mantras is we cut electricity bills in half. And so this issue comes along, this data center issue comes along, and everybody is deeply concerned about utility bills, electricity bills spiking. And so it felt like, to us, an organizational imperative to be a part of this discussion and see if we could push back in the other direction.

As Nicol noted, we've historically done most of our work in rural areas, places like LaGrange, Georgia, Monroe, Louisiana, West Memphis, Arkansas. And as data centers have looked for more land, they've started to look increasingly to rural areas. As Nicol stated, areas that

have suffered through disinvestment for decades. And so their instinct when somebody comes to town and says, "I want to build here," is to say, "Yes, do it right now, please. Thank you." But as the congressman noted, and as you all understand, these decisions are deeply complicated.

And one of the things that we've tried to do is work with some of these local communities to make sure that they are considering the full spectrum of considerations. And we at least approach solutions and outcomes that are closer to a win-win over the long term. And that is a extraordinarily pressing conversation for lots of rural communities across the country.

TURNER LEE: And just to stay on you for just a second, has that tenor changed since, you know, six months ago this conversation was maybe percolating. Now Elena's been in it for decades so I'm not gonna even talk about the fervent rigor that she's been in this conversation. I know where you stood in this. But I'm thinking like with rural communities, six months ago the data center debate started to percolate, and now it's just, like, out of control on the side of all types of communities. It's showing up in town halls, meetings, filling up gymnasiums, high schools. Just curious from you, have we seen a shift that quickly, and why?

NEWMAN: Yeah, we've definitely seen the dynamics shift. So you talk to the congressmen about property taxes and sales taxes, and when this issue first started, data center companies were essentially receiving abatements and cuts everywhere they went. The answer was, "Please come and we will allow you to avoid all taxation if you just show up in town."

As people have gotten to understand, again, how complex these issues are, that dynamic has changed significantly. And now we're more in the world of, as you stated, community benefits agreements, and actually ensuring that there's something tangible and concrete that is benefiting the residents and the homeowners and the people of that community.

To give you just one example, you know, we are working right now in a place, Covington, Georgia, where we are doing energy efficiency retrofits on hundreds of homes. The funds for those retrofits have been provided by a data center company as part of the broader arrangement for, again, ensuring that these projects are at least trending towards an outcome that's more of a win-win for everybody involved.

So you've seen a massive amount of change in just the last 18 months.

TURNER LEE: Yeah, you have, and it's been hard for us to sort of detail, I think, some of these examples. But we're gonna talk about that in just a moment. Abre', how are you? Again, I'm looking at you right from the screen, and people can see you. You have done some work around data center development in urban communities, and it's clear from the recent report that the NAACP did on Stop Dirty Data that what you've been arguing is around data center development as it relates to environmental justice and data exploitation.

Talk to us a little bit about data center development for communities of color, Black communities, Latino communities, and why do you think the backlash in particular has become even stronger, as we've discussed with rural communities?

CONNER: Yeah. Well, very appreciative to be a part of this panel, and as you mentioned, I wish I could be there in person, but I'm grateful to be here with you all virtually.

One of the things that I think is really interesting about the data center conversation is that communities and urban communities frontline communities that are in rural places the, the pattern is more about the places that have been disinvested in and that have been sacrifice zones for a number of years.

And what we saw when we first decided that this was going to be a national campaign was a cycle of what we've seen in the past. Communities that have not been able to get investment or have had investment pulled away from them because of this Trump administration pulling back the necessary funds that we finally started to see during the Biden administration to allow for communities to be able to rebuild.

And I think that what was concerning for us and for the, and with the communities that we work very deeply and closely with is that we've seen this pattern before. When I first started my work over a decade and a half ago, I was working on fracking issues, and we were talking at that point around energy dominance and untested solutions that were going to somehow come in and fix all the energy concerns that we had across the country.

And a lot of the places where they were going at that time in migrant farm communities in urban communities that had predominantly communities of color there were these promises that didn't seem to line up with what was actually being put into their communities. There were no decommissioning plans.

There didn't seem to be an end to what the pollution was going to bring, and I think that people are just sick of it. And now, you know, there are billions of dollars that are being discussed, but the communities themselves are not going to see the realization of those billions of dollars. But what they do know is that this is an industry that is going to bring more air pollution, more water scarcity and water contamination bring quality of life concerns, and it's going to impact the bills and affordability for individuals at a local level, as we heard before.

And so we have, we're at this really critical moment where we can either repeat the past or we have the opportunity to not deepen environmental injustice that we've seen for decades, and really centuries in this country.

TURNER LEE: And what I, I just wanna stay on you again, Aubrey, on that. When you think about what Ronnie talked about in terms of, you know, just having more people involved with the conversation, how has this been also interesting because it's been a uniting force across urban, across rural.

I think with the political polarization that we have in this country, this seems to be a consensus issue. And again, why do you think that is that this has just grown in such consensus around the fact that people are concerned about this?

CONNER: Yeah. Well, as in the past, typically it's just the communities that have been sacrifice zones. And so there's always been, you know, the drumbeat from the communities where they start at and say, "We'll just test out whatever the thing is that we're doing in those places." But what we've always said is that environmental and climate justice is about recognizing is that if we get the solutions right for the places that have faced disinvestment for decades and for centuries, that will be solutions that will help all of us.

And we're just seeing a reckoning of what we have been fighting for so long, because now all communities are starting to see data center build-outs regardless of if they were actually

sacrifice zones in the past, regardless of if they were places where, you know, there had been untested solutions.

And those communities are now turning to the places where people know how to organize, people have been organizing around environmental and climate concerns in the past because they're like, "Oh my gosh, I never thought this was going to come to my community, but now I need to figure out how I can show up at my city council meeting, at my planning and zoning commission meeting," and that's great.

And I think that because we now are seeing that this conversation is showing up regardless of where people live you know. And interestingly enough, this was similar to what happened at the, at beginning of where we had environmental laws back in the early 1970s. And what happened at that time was that everyone was getting pollution equally, and we built out the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Safe Drinking Water Act, and a number of different laws to ensure that people were protected.

But then we had NIMBYism, not in my own backyard, that was also happening at the same time. And we have an opportunity to ensure that we don't have NIMBYism as it relates to data centers, because the history is there. We see what happens whenever we have equal pollution that goes to communities, and then only certain communities are able to fight back. That is how we had sacrifice zones created in the first place, but this is an opportunity for us to mitigate the harm from the past as well.

TURNER LEE: So this is so interesting 'cause I think when we hear data center discussions, we just think it's about one thing, right? But it's actually a few things that are actually going on, whether it's property, whether it's related to environment, whether it's related to just the geolocation or the locations where people are at and how they affect them in terms of proximity or it's affordability, right? So there's a lot of different factors.

I want people in this audience to hear this because we often think that this is a one size fits all issue. But the reason I wanted to have this panel is I want us to unpack that there are multiple things that are happening in these conversations on behalf of communities that are showing up at meetings, really starting to have, you know, a lot of resistance in placing these moratoriums and bans.

So Marie, I had you on because I thought it was good to have some balance and not necessarily have someone from industry on the panel, but someone who understands what's going on. And I know you have a track record of working with communities in issues like this.

You've heard consistently power generation sits at the heart of this as well. One of those other issues that I can place, you know, on that full stack sandwich that I'm building here. Talk to us a little bit about were utilities, like energy utilities, prepared for this stuff? You've worked in energy, you've worked in telecom. I mean, was this something that they could have prepared for in terms of discussion?

And honestly, how close to this issue do they think they are? Is it real still the blame is still on AI companies versus the energy companies?

SYLLA-DIXON: So first of all, thank you for having this discussion, but also more importantly, thank you for putting communities first in this conversation, because oftentimes

that's not the case. And so thank you, Nicol and Brookings and my panelists for putting people first.

Energy is the lifeblood of what is going on with data centers and now these data factories, okay? They are the lifeblood of all of this. And there has been, I know that, you know, the rate and speed of this new evolution of the digital transformation has really expedited everything. I mean, five years ago, we probably would not have even thought that this technology would come out and that it would be at warp speed the way that it is. And for utility providers across the country the real issue right now is really about reliability, resiliency, and ensuring protection of the grid.

One of the biggest issues that's facing a lot of utilities, and when you think about the layer cake of AI infrastructure, utility really is, it's at the bottom of the cake, and it really is at that core. A big issue that we're facing right now in this country is the issue of energy security or resource adequacy, so making sure that there is enough generation to power up and sustain all of this build.

And so what you're seeing in the utility market, and this becomes a little complex because there's different markets across the country for this infrastructure. And in certain markets, I'm just gonna say you-- like for the PJM market, I'm sure some of you all live here in the DC area you're seeing, you have seen in the past couple of years a spike in your bill going up. And so that has caused, you know, a lot of pain for consumers, all of us. And it's not good.

And so what has happened is the generation side of where we need to get the energy has more than, I think it's more than doubled. So when you look at your bill, you'll have, you know, distribution, what you pay for distribution, what you pay for generation and transmission. But if you look at the generation of the, the supply cost has gone up exponentially. And so that has really put a strain on consumers.

And then at the same time, you have a number of utilities trying to upgrade the grid. In a lot of parts of the country, the grid is over a hundred, hundred fifty, two hundred years old, and you have that going on. And then on top of that, you have more, you know, people trying to do more transmission build out to sustain this growth.

So what utility providers are trying to do is, again, transmission planning-- extremely important. You know, working to find more ways to get more generation on the market. In the PJM market a number of utilities are not vertically integrated like in certain parts of the country. So if you look at in places like Georgia, certain places in the Southeast, those utility providers who are vertically integrated have actually been able to freeze or lower some of their rates from some of the, the deals that they have been working with with some of the data factories. But in other parts where it isn't a vertically integrated market, it becomes very challenging because you don't have enough generation that has come online, and that has really driven a lot of the prices up.

And so it just becomes important for, again, for utility providers to have the tools that they need to modernize the grid, to also have customer you know, assistant programs in place and really putting the rate payer first and foremost, protecting the rate payer from these costs that are going up. And some of it is in part because of the increase of energy needed and what is going on with some of the data factories. And we can talk a little bit about what --

TURNER LEE: Yeah, no, we'll go, we'll talk about telecom next, right?

Anybody want to respond to that? I'm thinking, yeah, so Elena and Ronnie, I want you to talk about that. 'Cause we, you know, one thing we haven't talked about, and I'm looking at Abre' right now, is clean energy buys, right? We talked about with the congressman nuclear, but we haven't really talked in this conversation about clean. So I'd also like somebody comment on that. Elena.

SCHLOSSBERG: So in 2018, Virginia passed the grid modernization act. Dominion was approved this grid modernization act. Virginia also passed the Virginia Clean Economy Act. Let me explain what is happening in Virginia so everybody has a clear picture of what your future is until there is real innovation.

First of all the Pandora's box is already opened. I love Congressman Suhas. It's already been opened. We have campuses that are running on gas turbines. Those are jet engines, and those people living next to those microgrids are suffering. On a purple day, is-- do you know there's no air quality worse than purple? Does everybody know that? Okay. On a purple day, that campus, those gas turbines, which are not intended to act as microgrids, broke.

Do you know what was running that campus on that purple day? Diesel generators. In early July, Dominion Energy finally disclosed a few weeks ago to Loudoun County we were minutes away from every single diesel generator turning on in Data Center Alley. Do you know how many diesel generators that is? That's ten thousand five hundred. Do you know how large those diesel generators are? The size of tractor trailers.

The PM 2.5 particulate is toxic. It is dangerous, and people are breathing that in. The system in Virginia is broken. And we, on July 22, what is happening is-- because think of your transmission infrastructure as a highway, and when there's too much pressure on that highway, it gets clogged and it starts to overheat. Data centers remove themselves, and then there is a surge in energy. For the first time ever, there was a near collapse, and the lights flickered from Northern Virginia to Chicago. It is not a question of if there is a grid collapse and a cascading blackout. It is simply when.

In 2020, the forecast by Dominion Energy in 2027 was eight gigawatts of power. Do you know what it is today? You don't know, I'm gonna tell you. 92 gigawatts. Do you know how much one nuclear reactor produces in energy? Give or take about a gigawatt. Are we supposed to build 92 gigawatts of power? Dominion Energy never had a plan. There is no way to meet this unprecedented amount of power without a significant fossil fuel.

And in fact, Virginia is at risk of a grid takeover by NextEra, which we fear will accelerate more gas plants, more diesel generators, more property being taken, and the state of Virginia will be lost to massive transmission line infrastructure the size of superhighways, at least twenty-five of them. The solution is less power, and with less power, there's less water and less land.

TURNER LEE: So I wanna jump to you, Ronnie, and I wanna stay on the energy piece for just a second. I mean, what Elena has laid out is I think we have to put more money in the investment in the grid. We've gotta find the money to do that.

I've been doing this work for a long time. I wanna say, Marie, I'm thinking maybe about 10, 15 years ago when Scott Pace was at the Department of Energy, we actually talked about

modernizing the grid. That's not happened, which is actually causing these strains. But again, is clean energy a solution? Some of the AI companies are using clean energy.

I'm just curious from you in rural, I've seen clean energy come up. And Abre' I'll bring you in, and then we'll move on to the next question.

NEWMAN: So we've seen it multiple ways. I think the theme that we've come back to a couple of times of engaging communities, energy sourcing is another place where communities must be engaged. We are working in various places where communities have more or less decided that it is okay for the data center to come, and they've taken at least preliminary steps to try to mitigate against energy spikes. But even if you take those first two steps, there is a question of how do you produce that energy?

And we're working in some communities where the answer is natural gas. We're working in other communities where the answer has been solar. That's a choice point that people should have the opportunity to weigh in on because that choice has implications for how those folks live in that community. And so it's something that we talk about constantly with the local leaders that we engage with.

There are also key choices about how that energy is built out. Is it all designed and constructed in a single location, or is it constructed in a more distributed way? And so Elena made the point about energy grid reliability and resilience. And so another conversation we have with local communities is about the value of distributed generation, ensuring that the energy that you're sourcing is placed in various different locations.

So if you have a problem in the Northwest, everybody isn't without electricity for two weeks because you've distributed that energy in lots of different places, including at the local levels. And so again, it just highlights how many choice points there actually are and why it is essential that communities have a voice in how these decisions are made.

TURNER LEE: Abre', you wanna contribute?

CONNER: Yeah, no I'll just quickly say that I 100% agree that the communities themselves need to be at the, in the driver's seat for figuring out what makes sense, and that the information needs to be shared fully transparently regarding what that infrastructure is going to look like.

There are a lot of build-outs that are promising, you know, clean energy, but then they're still using diesel backup. And so, and oftentimes communities, the, a lot of times the way that information is presented, it's not clear that there's still going to be fossil fuels that are used. And I think that, you know, continues to erode trust at the local level as well.

TURNER LEE: So this is interesting. I mean, I think at the heart of this has a lot to do with transparency. I mean, the congress had mentioned it, everyone here has mentioned it. Clearly when we get into the energy conversation, there are different ways that people can do it, but there are also different ways that the community has to be involved and the transparency has to be there.

What I struggle with is that I think Congress is addressing some of the rate payer protections. I think Congress has the ability in some of the draft legislation to look at ways to

provide safety when it comes to environmental concerns, measurement. But what I want to hear from all of you, and this is a throw ball question, I know I didn't give it to you, but I do have to ask this question. How do you, can you legislate community participation? Right? That's the first question. So everybody seems to have a shaking head. No, yes, maybe.

And the other question is, what does community governance look like to be able to get communities much more engaged at the start of the process? Because I think that's where, as I listen to this conversation and the many conversations that I'm having across the country, it's where do communities come in?

I wanna start first with Marie, if you don't mind. And I'm gonna go to a familiar area on the telecom side that I shared recently with someone, which was 5G and the installation of of the different antennas that had to go up, and the conversations that had to be had with utilities. So for people who may or may not know this, when we got to the 5G point, there was a huge debate among community folks as to whether or not these antennas were going to create health concerns, if they were going to be you know, crowding the space for utilities. You know, if they were gonna get in the way. And the telecom industry had a pathway, and I'm just curious from your insight, to actually bring more communities to the table to make this a win-win. And as a result, we now have 5G.

I'm not sure about whether or not we're gonna have data centers. I'm still trying to figure out if that's gonna happen with the resistance, but just curious what lessons can be gleaned from that.

SYLLA-DIXON: So telecom providers were very entrenched in the community and had been for a while, and they were doing that before there was even a project on the table. And so going in the community, listening to the concerns of the community. Also, telecom, part of it is state regulated, but utilities is highly regulated on the rate payer side.

But they were entrenched. And even before there was a feasibility study, they would be on the ground listening to the community, forming consumer advisory boards, bringing different groups, consumer groups, civil rights groups, other partners in the community in to hear their concerns. But more importantly, to talk about the benefits of what 5G looked like with lower latency, higher, faster speeds. And what it also meant for small businesses.

And right now what we're seeing, you know, with telecom, and especially with fiber, that really is the backbone of what we're seeing with AI. And if had it not been for these faster fiber data speeds, there would be no Amazon, there would be no Meta, there would be none of these tech companies who have benefited from this faster speeds in technology.

And so I really think lessons learned, especially during 5G, because it did become contentious when towers were being built in the community, even before then. And there were concerns. But again, they came to the table, they worked with the groups early on, and more importantly, there was a factor of a trust.

And so that trust really has to be earned in the community, and you also have to make the conversation inclusive. The energy and the grid is ... it can be very complex. But you have to talk to people and really talk about it in a human way so that they understand the benefits and what that means for their everyday lives and how that impacts them, and that's what you need to do.

TURNER LEE: No, I like that because-- and I've stuck on this example, so thank you for bringing that up. Because for me it seems like community engagement is coming lower down the line when it comes to the data center debate.

NAACP put together some type of framework with regards to community engagement. What does that look like for you and what the NAACP has started to put together, Abre'?

CONNER: Absolutely. So and I guess also, just to answer the question, I do think that there is a way that you can ensure that communities are at the table. And obviously this administration does it as well, because they're trying to find ways to remove communities from the table, from the EPA's proposed rules to make it so that minor source, minor sources of pollution don't have to have public participation, to the the number of ways it is also showing up with FERC. So I think that, you know, there is an understanding and a recognition that there has to be community engagement now. And that is, you know, this administration is trying to get rid of those those ways that exists.

But over a year ago we pulled together the Frontline Framework and we had over 100 different organizations and activist coalitions who we work with and folks who were doing data center work in different places across the country come together and we built out this Frontline Framework. And the reason we did that is because, again, this goes to the patterns and the cycles that we've seen. Oftentimes what happens is industry will say, "Well, we're not really sure what, you know, communities want. Well, if we're not sure where to start." And then the frameworks that end up being built out by companies and industries are less than comprehensive than for what the communities are actually asking for.

And so we met in Memphis, Tennessee at LeMoyne-Owen and we built out the Frontline Framework based on the 1991 EJ principles. And the first is that our health and the environment are sacred, that communities most affected must lead, that jobs cannot justify harm, accountability must be enforceable, that we reject false solutions and fossil fuel dependency, infrastructure must be community led, interconnected harms require interconnected solutions, solidarity builds power, and that we walk our talk.

And I think that's, you know, really a, a good starting point as well for legislators when they're thinking about how they want to build out legislation that actually feels community centered

TURNER LEE: Ronnie?

NEWMAN: So I'll do two quick anecdotes because we see this question of community engagement and community involvement in our work every week. We went through it all summer long in different places that we're working in Alabama and Florida and Louisiana and so on and so forth. I don't think there is actually a, a one-size-fits-all approach here, but you can generally figure out where you are on the spectrum.

So to give you an example that I think is not where we wanna be, you know, there's a small town in Louisiana, small town, few thousand people, and they were approached a couple of months back by a data center developer. And what the data center developer did was it took the town's land use and zoning regs and marked them up and sent them a red line and said, "Pass this." and do it under the cover of this NDA that we have signed with you. And so send it to your planning commission, get it done, and let us know when you're finished."

And because we engage with lots of mayors and city councils and county commissions, we said, as you, you know, what probably won't surprise you, "This seems like a bad idea, Mr. Mayor." And I think it goes to a point about how local communities can address these issues. I do think there are certain types of decisions, like decisions relating to land use and zoning, that should always happen in the context of a public hearing. There should be an opportunity for the communities to hear, learn, ask questions. And when you're walking down a path that doesn't include that checkpoint you're probably on the wrong path.

You know, on the other end of the spectrum, we've worked in communities where members of the city council have been more affirmatively engaged. I'm thinking about a couple of towns where city council members do open public town halls every couple of months, where members of the public set the agenda, and they sit there for as long as people want them to sit there, and they field questions. And you can make those engagements even better if you actually get industry involved too.

And so one of the things that we have recommended and have gotten yes in a few instances is tech company X, tech company Y, Tuesday evening at six PM, we'll be at this church. You should send people. And in a couple of cases, that has happened, and they've pulled up their chairs, and they've answered questions for as long as people wanted to pose questions.

And so hopefully that gives you a flavor of what is actually happening, some on the bad end and some closer to the good end. But I think it's unquestionably true that the more community engagement you can get into the mix, the better. Because often members of the community just want to be informed. They actually may not oppose if you don't ignore them. And so that's you know, that's the sort of mantra that we continue to foot stomp as we go around the country working on these projects.

TURNER LEE: Elena, in terms of community governance?

SCHLOSSBERG: Well, the experience in Virginia I think is replicated across the country, which is there is a distortion of democracy with the influence of money at every level of government. And this industry has an endless supply of money they are willing to throw around.

I just-- I wanna talk about really what is data center development. Data center development comes to your community- We were sold it was gonna be 700, you know, million dollars in revenue a year. And then when it was finally passed, it was 100 million over the lifetime.

So lots of promises, lots of jobs. Only the jobs are mostly temporary, and they bring their own teams. And the problem is your local leadership may approve a project, but if that project has a large peak load demand, an extensive water, or is built in a watershed, the impacts ripple. In the state of Virginia, we're bringing in transmission infrastructure generation from West Virginia coal. Let me tell you something, those people in West Virginia, they are angry. It's a 500-kilovolt transmission line taking their property for data center development and data center alley. And there's another one coming from Maryland. Actually, it starts in Pennsylvania, Peach Bottom Nuclear, goes through Maryland, picks up some gas, ends up where? Northern Virginia.

Those people are angry. The gas plants being built in Virginia, those are in those at-risk communities. They don't have a voice They have to live next to these massive gas plants.

The ripple effect is wide. And so those community benefits, I'm gonna tell you where I see the community benefits.

I have friends regardless of political ideology. I have friends regardless of socioeconomic status. And we are coming together, and it has been that way since that very first transmission line fight when somebody saw me hugging a very conservative Republican on the House floor and they said, "Hell has frozen over. Elena and Bob are hugging?"

And the reality is that in a time when we are so fractured, this is bringing people together. That's the community benefit. Until these resource problems are resolved, I do not believe there is a way to move through this industry that doesn't harm somebody down the line. And I'll tell you, I am NIMBY. You know what else I am? I am NOTE. I'm "not over there either." I do not just care about where I live. I care about where everybody lives because we are all interconnected, and that is the solution.

When Congressman Subramanyam sat up here and he said, you know, he needs Republicans, he's right. We cannot get through this. This is not an electoral win or lose game. This is the biggest threat we have ever faced, and we need people working together

TURNER LEE: So the question I have, I'm just gonna play devil's advocate for just a minute. I can't help it. No, I love that. I can't help it. So it is a threat, but I wanna just ask the audience, how many of you use generative AI? Raise your hand. It's not a threat to all of us 'cause we still use the products. Exactly. For those of you who are watching online, people raised their hand.

We sit in this space though, panelists, where people still use these tools, and we also know that compute is at the heart of this. I mean, I think should we be thinking as communities, and I want you all to open it up, and then I'm gonna open it up for Q&A from the audience.

If you have questions online, please go to events@brookings.edu to submit your questions. But this is just a, I mean, this is real talk. Is the question that if we're going to continue to use AI, that we have to find a way to do this in a responsible way that is driven community first, as you said, Marie. And if that's the case, I personally believe that not all the communities have to say yes.

But for the communities that do decide to say yes, you know, I think what I'm hearing from all of you, there should be transparency. I think that Congress had mentioned get rid of the NDAs. I think, Elena, that gets at many of the things that you're talking about that happen under the hood. Sounds like what Abre' has talked about, give communities sort of a charter in which they can begin the conversations around the things that they value. Because I do think that this data center thing t- popped up and some communities just weren't ready, right?

And then I think the third thing that I've heard from Ronnie, is make sure you have the right stakeholders at the table, and do not try to wholesale community engagement. It still has to have a grassroots organizing aspect of it. And then Marie, I think what you've heard is the other issues that are adjacent to this conversation around modernization of our grid, being sure that we build fiber, those conversations still have to happen, and communities have to still be all in for those conversations as well. I'm just trying to put my head on it before we go to Q&A.

SYLLA-DIXON: And not only when you're, when you're building fiber, but making sure that you're building it in the communities who don't have access to-

TURNER LEE: Oh yeah, I would assume to what the NAACP is doing. If you don't have broadband, you might as well forget it's gonna be, right.

SYLLA-DIXON: Making sure that there's broadband and, and-

SCHLOSSBERG: And they have to pay.

SYLLA-DIXON: Yeah,

TURNER LEE: Right, and they have to pay.

SCHLOSSBERG: They have to pay for their transmission infrastructure. It must be buried so they don't take other people's property. They have to pay for all their own generation. That's the solution.

TURNER LEE: Right. So pay for it, be transparent.

SCHLOSSBERG: The, the solution is if they had to pay for all of their energy infrastructure, they would innovate.

SYLLA-DIXON: Right. Yeah. And I'm actually gonna jump in for a second because there are-

TURNER LEE: And I'm gonna go to Q&A

SYLLA-DIXON: next, I promise.

- there are some good actors-

TURNER LEE: So start getting your questions ready ...

SYLLA-DIXON: -there are some good actors who are saying, "Hey, I'm gonna bring my own energy"

TURNER LEE: Right. I mean, Microsoft is not doing NDA anymore, so.

SYLLA-DIXON: Exactly. And they're replenishing with water and they are doing these community benefits. And there are some innovative technologies, I think, that are coming down the pike that we also need to look at, invest in. You know, there's a couple of companies right now who have technology where they don't need to use water. And so we also need to look at giving opportunities to these new innovative technologies that help to cut back on some of the environmental concerns as well in this world.

TURNER LEE: Yeah, I mean, these are interesting. I mean, look, Abre', I'm looking at you. I'm not sure if it's gonna get communities to a full yes, right? But it sounds like we have ingredients of what should be part of a community governance conversation and engagement. And it also sounds like, companies, AI companies, if you're listening, you gotta start from scratch, right? And build those relationships before you make the deal. I'll just leave it at that.

Okay. I wanna go to some Q&A. Please raise your... I knew there was gonna be a lot of questions. I was trying to be mindful of time. Thank you, Maryam. So the way we're gonna do this, if you can, please keep it to a question and not commentary. For the panelists, if you can answer in a brief, short period of time. We'll try to get to as many questions as possible. And when we get towards the end, I may possibly sort of fire hose it and take as many as possible.

So I'm gonna kind of do a wave. I'll start with you, sir, first. And then again, keep your question to a question, not commentary. I'll go to you second, my friend in the blue shirt, and then we will go to the man in the glasses, and then I'll start from this side and go again.

Go ahead.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you. My question is, would we benefit from not just more transparency in terms of the impact, but transparency in terms of the use? Because if we think about AI, one of the things that gets us is better cancer diagnosis, which everyone would support. But the crunch of energy is not so much about getting that better diagnosis.

It's about latency, and it's about performance. It's about... And all of that doesn't affect the health outcome. All of that gives profitability to big tech better. So if you want me to pay higher rates to get a better cancer diagnosis, yes. Don't waste my time talking about enriching big tech.

TURNER LEE: You sound like something I said one time on a panel. If, what would have happened if the conversation was, we're bringing a data center to improve upon health outcomes in your community? Would we have seen a different response? Any questions on that? Yep.

SYLLA-DIXON: Yeah. No, I agree with that. And I believe telecom, this was one thing that we talked about a lot, was talking about how this digital technology was gonna help, you know, kids in schools who are neurodivergent.

I mean, there are benefits, and I think the companies and, or industry needs to talk more about that and how those benefits could level the playing field for kids who are neurodivergent in schools that may not have the access. That could also help with healthcare, to your point, diagnosing cancer early.

And so, and even things like the grid resiliency, ensuring, you know, a lot of this technology is being used to protect the grid even. You know? And so we need to start talking more about that, but also from a viewpoint of talking about it from humanity. How this is going to benefit human beings in our everyday lives to make it better.

TURNER LEE: Elena, would that have changed your mind?

SCHLOSSBERG: Okay. I think that's a false- I mean, straw man, like we either cure cancer or we have data centers. I don't believe that. The reality is that people are being harmed right now. We are accelerating. Has anybody noticed an entire glacier shaved off a cliff? And caused catastrophic results. So the reality is, for people who believe that there is a climate problem, we are accelerating that. The grid is not under threat because suddenly we need to modernize it. I'm telling you, the Virginia Clean Economy Act, we were there. Now we have blown it out of the water, and we're ruining other states just to get our data center demand met. We have got to be able to chew gum and walk at the same time, and we are not doing that.

TURNER LEE: Right. Well, that's, and that's my point. You have to walk and chew gum at the same time, 'cause you can't solve just the data center development issue without solving these other issues. I mean, utility bills are an issue because people are paying high in gas and they're paying high in groceries. So I think that's something. It's a complicated matter, but it's also very compounded.

So, but let's stick on that too, and hopefully we have more questions on that. This gentleman right here.

CONNER: Can I... Oh, I'm sorry. Can I add?

TURNER LEE: Oh, go ahead, Abre'. Go, Abre'.

CONNER: Yeah. I 100% agree with Elena. I think that, you know, one of the things that we unfortunately have seen is that there, you know, a lot of AI is kind of being forced on people.

TURNER LEE: Of course. Of course.

CONNER: And so we are we are using it because every time you open up an app that didn't, that you didn't ask for AI to be a part of, it's like now a part of something that you literally did not ask for, or you can't use the service anymore unless you have the AI service as a part of it. And I think that, you know, if we're gonna talk about, like, the you know, are we using it we have to talk about the the comprehensive nature of, like, why.

But I also think that, to Elena's point, you know, many of the communities that are, you know, going to be suffering right now, the American Lung Association has already done state of the air reports. Many of those places have, you know, grade F quality air, some of the worst air already that exists. And that is more likely to cause more cancer, to cause more, you know, health related concerns in the communities, and that's tangible, and that's right now.

AI, as you know, is also not all generative. We are using a lot of generative AI because that is what has been offered to us, but there are other types of AI that don't necessarily seem to be a part of the conversation or the infrastructure builds that are being put into communities. And so it does have to be a more comprehensive conversation for us to really think about are we just regurgitating what's already there, or are we actually innovating?

TURNER LEE: Yeah, no, well taken. Let's go to this man. Thank you, Abre'. Go to this guy right here.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Well, well, the, the challenge is bigger than that in many ways because even if you were to stop AI today, there's enough innovation that you can implement to companies that will last 10 years. And even if you were to take out the AI companies, you will move that inference about development into a on-prem data center. So still in the next 10 years, there's gonna be way more demand.

And to Marie's point, I was there a long time ago when we were going to do, modernize the electricity grid 25 years ago. They haven't been done. So when you look at the market, and you look at the global economy, and you see transmissions, they won't be get there until, like, three to five years, and I know I'll get to the point on this. The reality is that all of these challenges are gonna continue. We're gonna have more demand because AI is gonna come into different levels, and whether it is in the cloud or whether it is in a prem that is gonna be here, inference does affect in how quick a response you get.

So these data centers are still gonna come into big metro centers because that's where the economic development is gonna come. And when we talk about money, it's not like the money is going everywhere. There's a huge investment with the hope that there is going to be a return, but that is not there yet.

TURNER LEE: That's right.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: And a data center investment, because I have been looking also into brown sites, you have a 16 to 8 months to do a return and have to reinvest again. So the profits are very slow, is small.

And I also feel here that the government have failed us in many ways because we could have had this investment. The, the problem of cost and energy is there because we don't have the infrastructure, and it's gonna take us five to 10 years to get there, and the demand will continue to be there and is going to increase.

TURNER LEE: Now, did you have a question or you just wanted to tell us that?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Well, no, I just... The the, the-

TURNER LEE: I'm all for you. I, I have had... I mean, look. No. It's all good. You actually summarized a lot of, I think, some of the conversation, but it's okay if you don't have a question. I don't need you to make another one up.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: No, my que- my question to this is, like, is that I understand I hear everything in the community- and I want to get to an answer, and it seems to be that the answer, and I hear you, Elena. I hear you, Ronnie. I hear you, Marie. I hear you, Abre'. But at the other side is the, also the economy the... and I know that it's gonna sound like an straw man, but if we stop, China's not gonna stop, and we have a lot of economies, and a lot of jobs, and a lot of growth that is dependent on this, and there's a lot of risk.

So what is we actually do there? I wanted to ask the, the congressman is, like, shouldn't we... and I remember there was a joke with the infrastructure week every week at the-Trump one.

SCHLOSSBERG: We have more data centers in Virginia than China has all at-- I mean, we have-- If there's a race, we have already beat them 10 times around the planet. And my question is always: Well, what are you willing to sacrifice? Do you want to give up your home? Do you want to give up your property? Do you want to breathe in diesel particulates? Do you want to listen to gas turbines that sound like jet engines 24-7?

I live my life trying to understand what other people are going through. I'm not willing-- I'm not anti-data. I'm really not. And I'm not really anti-AI. I am anti taking my property, anti taking my clean air. Right now, there's a Potomac River Basin study. There's there's no way there can be one more data center built east of 95 because the aquifer is depleted. So you tell me, what are you willing to sacrifice? How many people are supposed to be burdened? We can make this happen, but not the way it is happening now.

TURNER LEE: Yeah. And I think you're just-- and we'll get to this. I gotta make sure a couple people ask questions. They've heard from you guys for so give me just one sec. I know you want to respond. Let's just go.

My friend in the blue shirt gave a lot of commentary, so I got to make sure I get to a couple of other questions before we wrap up. Oh, I'll get to you next. Let me go to the gentleman back there with the nice suit on. The nice jacket.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Thank you.

TURNER LEE: We're kind of matching today.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Very quickly, you all have already started moving down this pathway of a conversation around what is AI supposed to do for us? Data centers are part of the infrastructure. What is that infrastructure being built for? It's not clear to me what that purpose is. Who's having that conversation right now?

I've seen-- It seems as if there are a number of discussions out there, groups popping up all over the place, but they're very siloed. And those conversations aren't bringing communities with political leaders, developers and companies, philanthropy, which needs to be a part of this conversation as well, and the NGO community. Who's having those larger conversations to have that discussion about what is AI, what does it mean to us as a society, and what infrastructure do we really need in order to make that work?

TURNER LEE: You want to answer that one, Ronnie?

NEWMAN: I think you raise a great and obvious point, and I do think it's a place where we don't, at least to date, we haven't had the right leadership or the leadership we need on this.

So we've talked a lot about local level engagement with the public, but I think your point hits at the, the fact that we need it all the way up and down the spectrum. We should be having a conversation about what the macro level benefits and costs are, right? It may be the case that AI helps us cure diseases that we've been struggling with for decades. It also may be the case that AI leaves 40% of us unemployed. But those are all conversations that we're not having, and the people that have the bully pulpit that could grab the mic and lead us in that conversation aren't doing it.

And so when Elena talks about how we must do a better job of, like, setting the terms and controlling the pace and designing the guardrails for data center development, that also has to be informed by a collective understanding of what we're driving for and whether we actually wanna be driving there. And that's a place where we desperately need better leadership.

TURNER LEE: That's right. And this is actually a space where policy infrastructure has to come into place. I mean, let me remind all of you that just two years ago, under the Biden-Harris administration, these conversations were happening very actively.

The consumer AI, Consumer Bill of Rights came out. There were several AI safety commissions, many of which I sat on. There were many people talking about this, but that was at a time when independent agencies actually felt the need to actually take this on as a policy topic.

So to your question, sir, I think part of the challenge is the data center deals have come in the midst of a lot of confusion and distrust. I mean, 72% of people right now have strong feelings about AI, and you have to reconcile, I see John here, those attitudes with what's is happening in real time, which I think feels differently than other industrial revolutions in which we've had, like the internet, like the railroad, and other policies that have come across because those had actually guardrails instituted into them.

I wanna make sure before I get to this last question over here, if there are any other questions in the blue wave over here. I saw, okay, there was one guy here, and then we will go to this gentleman, and we'll wrap up, okay? I was spending so much of my time over here, I had to make sure I came over here.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Well, thank you very much. Mike Nicholson. I work about 100 feet behind you in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

TURNER LEE: And we're birthday twins.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yes, we are. Happy birthday, a week late. I do technology issues, and I'm curious, as you look around the world, do you see other countries that are doing data center location better? And in particular in China, where I think they have more data centers, if not, they have bigger data centers. They're doing a concentrated effort. They have a data center 20 times bigger than Loudoun County in Mongolia, away from everybody.

So as you look around, do you see whether we can learn from anybody? Can we learn from the Europeans who have really stalled on data center development?

SYLLA-DIXON: I have been trying to study this myself for quite some time, and I even looked at Ireland because they had so many data centers, but at that time they weren't the AI factories. And I know like Australia has done a lot in this area. But I will tell you one constant theme across all of the countries is, you know, the environmental concerns, the affordability concerns. I mean, that, that is across all of them.

Now, there are companies in different countries who now have, there is a data center company, I'm not gonna say the name, but they have a technology where what they're doing is they're taking data, like the regular cloud data centers, and they're repurposing them. So

they're not going to like rural areas or brown fields. They're actually repurposing the data centers that they have, and they have a technology where they're not using water to do the cooling. And so that's where I think we really need to give these opportunities to these more, these innovative companies that are coming up.

There's also data centers that are now coming with their own energy and they're getting around. I think what you're gonna see in the future is, you know, people are gonna be using more renewables and they're gonna be bypassing, they could bypass the grid for their energy needs. So I think you're going to see more of that, but I am looking for, you know, for some of the, I guess, the stories in some of the other countries.

Yeah. So if anybody has --

TURNER LEE: Yeah. No, I mean, you're right on, We gotta start wrapping up. But Australia, Michael, has a strong governmental response to data centers. I've been on a couple of panels and shows with those guys. But what's so interesting too is they also have a huge demand, and I didn't hear anybody say it here in terms of community benefit agreements, for housing.

So, they are saying to the tech companies, you know, "Build housing," and address some of our affordability and basic needs as part of the data center structure of that data center deal. Again, outside of the United States, I think we are gonna be a marker for how this movement is 'cause they're paying attention.

20 seconds, sir, and then we're gonna wrap up and say thank you to everybody.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Yeah, sure. Thank you. My question is about what has worked to get companies off our backs? I mean, I think the idea that Microsoft is a good actor is ridiculous based on all the lying, cheating, and stealing they've done in communities. The idea that we should give new, these companies who are innovating opportunities when we've given hundreds of millions of dollars to them is also, you know, disconnected from the facts on the ground.

But my question to Abre' and Elena is, what has worked that has actually gotten companies to respond to not screw over communities and make people's lives miserable? When have they responded and come to you? What actions have you taken that have gotten them to actually sit down with you since there are so few laws on the books regulating these companies?

TURNER LEE: Abre'?

CONNER: Yeah. I think it's to your point it's about not try... It's about staying true to your principles from start to the end. At the end of the day, you know, I think that there were a lot of people who were skeptical about taking a stance that we needed to hold these companies accountable when we first started our campaign. And there were a lot of people who were saying, "Well, like, I don't know, like, we're not gonna be able to slow anything."

Well, we have. We have been able to slow down development. We have, you know, in our 2026 playbook, part of our strategy was to call for moratoriums, and not necessarily to say that we're gonna be able to stop them everywhere. But the timeline for many of these

companies is short. They are on a really strict timeline, and if there are any changes to that, that makes a big difference for them as to what development looks like.

And so making sure that, you know, people are showing up to every single meeting, showing up to the city council meetings, showing up to planning and zoning commission meetings showing up and asking for there to be more guardrails, that has made a difference. Because oftentimes, you know, I think that companies are used to going into certain places and being able to have conversations just with elected officials and thinking that the community is not going to be holding them accountable.

And that has led to success and the opportunity to have really, you know, deeper conversations with companies as well.

TURNER LEE: Yeah. So, we've gotta wrap up, but what I would say as a summation of this event is, first and foremost, let's give everyone a round of applause. And that round of applause is also for all of you for sticking around, right, and having this conversation. But I'll... Yes, please, let's give them a round of applause for listening to us, right?

But I do want to end on, like, because I sit in this space very often, like Abre', Elena, Marie, and Ronnie, and I find it to be fascinating as a sociologist whose work intersects technology and justice, that at the end of the day, this is a conversation about sharing power. And what's happened thus far is that this power imbalance has created, I think, a lot of tension to get to a space where the innovation can be fully realized and democratized.

And so as we continue to have these conversations, I urge all of you to think about the organizing models that are being applied. I've, I have been paying attention to the environment justice organizing models, which are sort of taking over in terms of how we are organizing people, again, around data centers. Think about the templates or the community benefit agreements that need to be developed and shared among communities. Think about the placement of communities and the processes that are actually happening in data centers and where do they actually fit, and maybe at the beginning and not towards the end.

And then the last thing I would say is, as we heard from the congressman, the policy shifts. And how do you get policy that's less disjointed and more comprehensive so that you can at least get to a place of consensus, but not necessarily a full yes? You get people talking.

Because I do agree with this gentleman right here. Today it's data centers. Next year it's going to be quantum labs. Next year after that it's going to be something that is even more power generating that we're going to have to face the same concerns. So Elena, put your boots on here, honey, because you got more work to do in the next five to 10 years.

So with that, I would say thank you, and thank you. And follow the Center for Technology Innovation and Tech Tank for more information on this subject. Thanks everybody. We'll share the resources. Thank you, Aubre'. I appreciate you.