



City of Ashtabula

Ashtabula City Council

Community Development/Economic Development/Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting

Wednesday, August 5, 2026 at 5:30 PM

Council Chambers

4230 Lake Avenue, Ashtabula, OH 44004

Minutes

Opening of Committee Meeting

Call to Order

The meeting of the Ashtabula City Council Community Development/ Economic Development/ Parks & Recreation Committee was called to order at 5:30 p.m. by Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo.

Roll Call

Members Present: Chair: Ward 5 Councilor Jane DiGiacomo, Vice Chair: Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman, Member: Vice President Russell Simeone

Absent: Clerk of Council Stacy Millberg

Officers Present: City Manager James Timonere, Assistant City Solicitor Catherine Colgan

Parks & Recreation Board Members Present:

Visitors:

Sunshine Law Certification

A quorum was established as defined by the Ashtabula City Council Rules of Order. The meeting met the requirements of the Ohio Sunshine Laws Open Meetings Act.

Welcome and Acknowledgement of Visitors

Special Guest Presentation

Molly Bryden, Policy Matters Ohio - Data Center Impacts

Molly Bryden, Climate Sustainability Researcher with Policy Matters Ohio, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, presented an overview of data center development trends in Ohio and the associated policy, fiscal, environmental, and public health concerns. She explained that the organization's platform for responsible data center development centered on limiting or eliminating state and local taxpayer subsidies; upholding community benefits and establishing strong guardrails; maintaining good jobs and labor standards; increasing transparency and democratic participation; and supporting energy affordability and environmental protections.

Ms. Bryden highlighted the significant fiscal cost of Ohio's sales tax exemption on data center construction. The exemption cost the state approximately \$555 million in 2024, a figure that soared to \$1.6 billion in 2025. For context, she noted that fully funding Ohio's Fair School Funding Plan would have cost approximately \$1.4 billion per year, less than the revenue foregone through data center subsidies in 2025. She emphasized that many tech companies have indicated publicly that tax incentives are not a decisive factor in their siting decision, and cautioned against continued subsidization of some of the wealthiest corporations in the world. At the local level, Ms. Bryden noted that tax abatement agreements, some running 15 to 30 years, often contain copy-paste language with no meaningful clawbacks if job creation commitments are not met. She also raised concerns about the use of shell companies, which introduce uncertainty around long-term infrastructure obligations.

Ohio ranks among the top ten states nationally for existing and planned data center facilities. Ms. Bryden described

the growth of hyperscale and AI-oriented data centers, massive facilities capable of consuming as much electricity as 70,000 Ohio households per 100 megawatts of capacity.

Ms. Bryden reported that residents and local officials across Ohio have raised concerns spanning water quality and availability, air quality, energy affordability, public health, noise pollution, and taxation. A consistent theme emerging from local coalitions has been the lack of transparency in development decisions, with local officials frequently entering into nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) with developers and making decisions behind closed doors before communities have meaningful opportunity for input. Ms. Brighton advocated for prohibiting or significantly limiting NDAs between data center developers and local or state economic development entities, and for uniform transparency and reporting requirements.

Ms. Bryden described growing concerns about electricity supply shortfalls in the PJM grid region, which serves Ohio and 12 other states. Commercial electricity demand has increased approximately 24 percent over the past decade while residential bills rose roughly 35 percent. Anticipated load growth in AEP's service territory alone is projected to surpass 12,000 megawatts, more than the combined annual residential electricity consumption of all Ohio households. Transmission infrastructure costs to accommodate this demand are spread across the entire rate base, potentially leaving everyday Ohioans responsible for costs driven by data center growth. She noted that some cost inflation may result from data center developers submitting duplicative load requests to multiple utilities.

Ms. Bryden explained that many data center developers are bypassing the regional grid entirely through behind-the-meter (on-site) generation. She discussed how House Bill 15, passed in 2025, streamlined the approval process for such facilities through the Ohio Power Siting Board (OPSB), which has sole authority over project approval, limiting local control. Since HB 15 passed, the OPSB has approved over 2,000 megawatts of natural gas-powered behind-the-meter generation, with an additional 3,000 megawatts under active consideration as of July 2026. She connected this trend to a parallel surge in fracking activity on Ohio public and state lands, noting that acreage approved by the Ohio Department of Natural Resources for oil and gas development in the first quarter of 2026 already exceeded double the annual average of the prior three years.

A hyperscale data center using evaporative cooling can consume between one and two million gallons of water per day. A Columbus Dispatch analysis found that Columbus-area data centers used 1.2 billion gallons of water between May 2025 and May 2026. Ms. Bryden raised concerns about PFAS ("forever chemical") contamination from cooling systems, wastewater discharge management, and the indirect water consumption associated with power generation, which she noted is largely untracked, making comprehensive impact assessment difficult.

Ms. Bryden presented community benefits agreements (CBAs) as a legally binding tool through which developers can be required to make meaningful financial commitments to host communities, including infrastructure investment, renewable energy sourcing, emission controls, and strong labor standards. She referenced a CBA in Pennsylvania as one existing model.

For local officials, she recommended integrating pre- and post-approval transparency and reporting requirements into the permitting process (covering electricity demand, water use, noise, emissions, and environmental impact); creating a distinct zoning classification for data centers with a more robust conditional use approval process; requiring meaningful public engagement prior to approval; and leveraging the industry's financial capacity to secure long-term community benefits rather than subsidizing development at residents' expense.

Ms. Bryden noted that moratoria can be effective when paired with substantive policy development, giving decision-makers time to build a more robust regulatory framework. She committed to following up with written resources, including model ordinances, toolkit materials, and information on Fair Shake Environmental Legal Services' resources on community benefits agreements.

City Manager James Timonere noted that under the City's current zoning code, data centers already fall under conditional use, requiring at least one public hearing and Planning Commission approval with conditions attached, and that Ashtabula's ongoing master plan and zoning update process presents an ideal opportunity to address data center development proactively. He stated clearly for the record that he does not wish to see a data center in the City of Ashtabula given the City's land constraints and many preferable uses for available acreage, while acknowledging that if one were to come, zoning conditions could be crafted to meet community standards. He referenced New Albany, Ohio, as an innovative example, noting their requirements that data center structures be designed for adaptive reuse, and their practice of calculating an expected income tax contribution based on average employment density per square foot.

City Manager James Timonere cautioned that the current moratorium proposal may have unintended consequences for other industries considering investment in Ashtabula, a concern he noted had been raised by economic development professionals. He characterized the moratorium as largely procedural given that the zoning update, which will address data centers regardless, is expected to be completed within six to eight months.

Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman asked about environmental justice implications, including existing elevated cancer rates and long-term health consequences of toxic chemicals in the water system. Ms. Bryden confirmed that there are no adequate regulations in place for PFAS contaminants. She noted that the EPA is working on setting maximum contaminant levels that local public water systems will have to adhere to by 2029. She stated that PJM has already ordered data centers with backup generation to disconnect from the grid and deploy diesel generators on at least three occasions in 2026. Ward 3 Councilor RoLesia Holman also asked about high bacteria levels in the lake that prohibited people from swimming in it. City Manager James Timonere explained it was caused by high levels of E. Coli in the beaches, usually after large rain events, and sanitary sewer overflows typically coming from the west.

Vice President Russell Simeone raised the question of whether the City could adopt an ordinance prohibiting City employees and elected officials from signing NDAs. Assistant City Solicitor Catherine Colgan advised that there are numerous considerations, including public records law and open meetings requirements, that intersect with such a policy, and offered to research the matter under attorney-client privilege and report back to the committee.

City Manager's Report

City Manager James Timonere provided the following project updates:

The Main Avenue Sidewalk Project is substantially complete, with the final concrete poured, and decorative lights installed, pending final electrical connections. A remaining section in front of Soirée Event Center requires additional work due to a basement issue. The City is working with the property owner to resolve this before completing the sidewalk in that area.

Several facade grant recipients have commenced work, including some roofs and facades.

Collins Boulevard work is ongoing, with sidewalk issues under active remediation.

City Manager James Timonere addressed an issue with the Center Street Overpass that occurred earlier that day, reporting that a railing on the western bridge, which carries no active rail traffic, fell from the structure. Despite rumors circulating, the bridge's structural components were not compromised. A witness reported observing three to four individuals on the bridge at the time of the incident, and the Police Department is investigating. City Manager James Timonere noted that Norfolk Southern responded promptly and that the City has been in communication with the railroad regarding the bridge's condition since November. Norfolk Southern has indicated that final replacement plans are anticipated in late September, with a public bid process to follow. City Manager James Timonere noted that the City intends to use the planned bridge work as an opportunity to address nearby storm drain and sewer line infrastructure.

The paving project is well underway. Sub-base deficiencies were identified on several streets, requiring patch repairs prior to final paving. The intermediate course has been applied to most project roads.

Parks & Recreation Committee Report

The Parks & Recreation Committee Report was read into the record by the Chair in the absence of Mr. Dibble.

Hometown Heroes Banner Program: The board has begun exploring a banner program to honor veterans and first responders — including police officers, firefighters, EMS personnel, and dispatchers — modeled after the successful program operated by Ashtabula Township. The newly installed decorative downtown light poles, which are city-owned, were identified as a potential pilot location that avoids utility-related restrictions. The board discussed utilizing local printers and suppliers, developing an online application process, and encouraging sponsorships from veterans organizations, civic groups, and businesses. The program's goals include creating visual appeal, driving foot traffic downtown, and fostering civic pride.

Cornelius Park Programming: The board discussed expanding community programming into Cornelius Park, including concerts, community movie nights, food trucks, and family-oriented events — similar to the successful

summer concert series at Walnut Beach. The board noted that active park programming naturally discourages vandalism and undesirable activity by increasing positive public use. It was stated that active parks are safer parks, and that Cornelius Park has significant untapped potential as a gathering place that can complement existing downtown events.

Both initiatives remain in an exploratory stage. No formal funding recommendations have been made. The board indicated its intent to collaborate with the Ashtabula Downtown Development Association, veteran organizations, and other community partners.

Park Improvements: The flowers planted at Veterans and Cornelius Parks through the partnership with A-Tech's Horticulture Program, under the direction of Mr. Ken Noble, have flourished since installation prior to Memorial Day. Permanent cenotaph markers for Ashtabula Honorary Civil War Medal of Honor recipient Isaiah Hayes and Montford Point Marine and Congressional Gold Medalist have arrived and will be installed at Veterans Park.

Unfinished Business

New Business

There was consensus that the moratorium, while potentially symbolic in effect given the pending zoning update, should ideally be strengthened with substantive policy language addressing specific harms and guardrails before advancing to Council.

The committee also briefly discussed a report on the City's homeless outreach task force. City Manager James Timonere noted that a "sweep" of the gulf on the Ashtabula Township side without coordination with the City had displaced individuals into the City. He described the City's practice of accompanying any park enforcement actions with representatives from Signature Health, BrightView, the hospitals, and Glenbeigh to connect individuals with services. The committee agreed that a formal task force report would be most appropriately presented at a future committee meeting, given that the format allows for televised public reporting.

City Manager James Timonere also noted that a revisit of the tax abatement policy is anticipated for the September or October meeting.

Data Center Moratorium

Next Meeting

September 2, 2026

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:03 p.m. by Committee Chair Jane DiGiacomo.