

The Butte Data Center Initiative Op-Ed, *by J.P. Gallagher, Chief Executive, Butte–Silver Bow*

Across Montana and the nation, communities are facing new questions about how to manage growth in digital infrastructure. As voters are being asked to sign a petition to consider a proposed local ballot initiative regarding data centers in Butte–Silver Bow, it is important that the public fully understands what is written in the measure and how its language would function if passed.

The initiative defines a “data center” in very broad terms. Under the proposal, any facility that constructs or expands a space containing electronic equipment used to process, store, or transmit digital information would fall under the definition. The intent may be to address large, specialized commercial data centers, but the language applies to far more than these facilities.

If enacted as written, the measure would require a special election, at county expense, any time a project meets that definition, and it would require approval from two-thirds of all registered voters in Butte–Silver Bow, not just those who cast a ballot.

Because digital equipment is part of nearly every modern institution, this definition could apply to a wide range of routine projects. Examples include:

- A bank constructing or expanding a building that contains servers supporting financial transactions
- A new academic building on the Montana Technological University campus, where classroom technology and research servers are standard
- School district improvements involving computer labs or network infrastructure
- Telecommunications companies upgrading switching or network facilities
- Hotels, convenience stores, and other retail locations installing or expanding back-office systems
- Health-care facilities updating digital records or imaging storage
- Local businesses adding servers or technical equipment as part of normal operations

Under the wording of the initiative, all of these types of projects could require a special countywide election before construction or expansion could take place.

Special elections carry real costs. They require staffing, ballot production, public notices, polling administration, and canvassing. These costs are not currently budgeted and would occur each time a qualifying project is proposed.

My role as Chief Executive is not to tell residents how to vote. It is to ensure that the public has clear, accurate information about how the language of a proposed measure would operate so that voters can make informed decisions. I encourage every voter to review the full text carefully, consider the range of facilities included in the definition, and understand the procedural requirements that would be triggered under the proposal.

Butte–Silver Bow has a long history of weighing complex questions thoughtfully, and I trust our community will continue that tradition as this issue moves forward.