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Pine Island City Council approves preliminary plat and development plan for data center technology park

Nearly a dozen residents stepped forward to voice their concerns on the proposed technology park.



Pine Island City Council members listen to community members voice their concerns over the new Project Skyway data center development during a meeting on Tuesday, Dec. 16, 2025, at Pine Island City Hall. Maya Giron / Post Bulletin



By **Brian Todd**

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PINE ISLAND, Minn. — A dozen individuals stood up to voice concerns Tuesday about a proposed data center for Pine Island — one getting kicked out of the city council's meeting for not following the rules for the public comment portion of the meeting.

At stake during the regular Pine Island City Council meeting were three separate agenda items that impacted Project Skyway, the

proposed development by Ryan Companies that would bring a large data center to the north side of Pine Island.

The public comment period also saw one former resident, who was also a former Pine Island City Council member, speak in favor of the proposed development.

Most of those opposed to the project talked about noise issues, water and electricity usage, and the concern over whether the project should be classified as light industrial or heavy industrial.

Loren Simpson — the person who was later asked to leave the council meeting — said he felt the project should be classified as heavy industrial due to it being a 3 million-square-foot data center. He compared it in size to the Lindbergh Terminal in Minneapolis, "a whopping 2.8 million square feet."

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"With the vast footprint of this proposed data center, expected consumption of electricity will be enormous," Simpson said.

While energy and water usage are concerns with data centers, the preliminary plat description highlighted a phase I data center of 300,000 square feet — one-tenth the size claimed by Simpson — with a 30,000-square-foot office space.

Simpson, much like the first speaker, Darcie Simpson, ran long over the two-minute time limit for speakers set by Mayor David Friese at the start of the meeting.

When Loren Simpson would not stop speaking after Friese banged his gavel for Simpson to stop, Friese admonished Simpson, who argued the rules.

"Sir, I need you to leave," Friese said. "You can't follow the rules."

Other speakers argued that the city should put the project on hold to get more information or that the developers should look for a site farther from the city limits due to perceived issues of noise, light or air pollution.

Through it all, several more speakers went over the time limit or continued to applaud those who spoke in opposition — something both Friese and City Attorney Bob Vose argued against for the sake of people who might feel pressure to stay silent if they hold pro-development views.

Friese, who grew up in Pine Island and went to public school in the city, said he was disappointed to see four of his former teachers not following rules to be respectful of others. One of whom, he said, he had to admonish for disruptive behavior.

"These are the people who taught me to be respectful growing up," he said.

The division, he said, led to a first for him as mayor. "This is my first time," Friese said, of having to kick someone out of the meeting.

The City Council approved the preliminary plat for the 482-acre development on a 5-0 vote. The same 5-0 vote approved the preliminary development plan. That plan includes setting restrictions on issues such as minimum use of greenspace within the development, maximum noise levels, lighting, setbacks, approved building materials, building heights and allowable uses within the development area.

City Administrator Elizabeth Howard said the developer has 120 days to submit a final plat and final development plan. From that point, the city has 60 days to hold a vote on those final resolutions.

All of this happened with two court dates looming over the city's head.

On Dec. 12, the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy filed a motion for a temporary restraining order(<https://www.postbulletin.com/news/local/environmental-groups-lawsuit-seeks-immediate-halt-to-proposed-pine-island-data-center>) — asking for a decision without a hearing — to prohibit the city of Pine Island and Ryan Companies from making any decisions on the project "until this Court makes a determination on Plaintiff's motion for a temporary injunction." Goodhue County District Court has set a hearing for the temporary restraining order for 10 a.m. Dec. 23, 2025, via Zoom.

A hearing for the temporary injunction — a separate motion filed on Oct. 16, 2025, that focuses on the environmental review process — will take place at 1 p.m. Feb. 2, 2026, in Goodhue County District Court.

Friese said that because the court set a hearing date for the temporary restraining order, the City Council was free to vote on agenda items Tuesday night.

"If the court had (granted the restraining order) there would have been no conversation on this project tonight," Friese said.

Friese said city staff has been working diligently to respond to questions from the public about data centers in general and the process and plans being moved forward by the city and Ryan Companies.

"Every legitimate question that's come forward about this project, the city has turned around, done their research, got that information and made it available," Friese said. "What I am finding is if we're getting information they don't agree with or don't like, then it's an issue of transparency or we're not answering their questions."

Friese said Howard has sat down one-on-one with every person who has asked for a meeting to discuss the project.

Howard went farther than that. Both she and City Engineer Craig Britton visited cities with existing data centers — West Des Moines, Iowa, and Omaha, Nebraska — to talk to city leaders about the impact of data centers on their towns, take noise measurements and gather other information.

Howard and Britton both said none of the environmental issues being brought up concerning data centers were evident in their investigations. Howard added that in West Des Moines, new housing has grown up around the existing data centers, meaning the concern that data centers will cause property values to plummet is false.

In other business, the City Council voted to turn down a petition to conduct an environmental assessment worksheet on Project Skyway since it had already conducted a more stringent Alternative Urban Areawide Review, which has been accepted by the state.

The City Council also approved the city's final budget and property tax levy for 2026, the latter of which was 4.25% higher than the 2025 levy.

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The Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy is asking for a temporary restraining order.