

Panel on proposed Pine Island data center says 'misinformation' is a big challenge

A Google official said the the project's naysayers are drowning out the supporters.



Ryan Parsons, president of the Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce, moderates a panel discussion with, from left, Halston Sleets, community engagement coordinator with Google, Jake Andre, manager of corporate economic development with Scel Energy, Brandi Veith Staloch, a Pine Island City Council member, and Jared Olson, vice president of site design with Ryan Companies, during a "Data Center Info Session" on Thursday, July 9, 2026, at Mayo Civic Center in Rochester. Joe Ahlquist / Post Bulletin



By **Matthew Stolle**

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ROCHESTER, N.Y. (Post-Bulletin) — A panel discussion on Thursday, July 9, 2026, at the Mayo Civic Center in Rochester, N.Y., focused on the proposed Pine Island data center project. The panelists, moderated by Ryan Parsons, president of the Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce, discussed the challenges of misinformation and the importance of community engagement. The panelists included Halston Sleets, community engagement coordinator with Google, Jake Andre, manager of corporate economic development with Scel Energy, Brandi Veith Staloch, a Pine Island City Council member, and Jared Olson, vice president of site design with Ryan Companies.



And it brought together a rare assemblage of representatives from Google, Xcel Energy, the Pine Island government and Ryan Companies all in the same public space. All are major players in the data center project in Pine Island.

The project is currently on hold after [a Goodhue County District judge issued a temporary restraining order halting construction.](https://www.postbulletin.com/news/local/court-grants-restraining-order-to-halt-project-skyway-progress-in-pine-island) (<https://www.postbulletin.com/news/local/court-grants-restraining-order-to-halt-project-skyway-progress-in-pine-island>)

The lawsuit was brought by the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, a nonprofit that is seeking a stronger environmental review of the project.

During the hour-long discussion, panelists highlighted how the "spread of misinformation" has made it difficult to keep the community informed about the project. Open houses have helped get the word out, but their impact hasn't always been lasting.

Project developers held two public open houses during an eight-month approval process, and feedback from those sessions was used to adjust planning documents, said Jared Olson, vice president of site design for Ryan Companies, the developer behind the Project Skyway data center project.

But then "a lot of opposition came out of the woodwork," he added, so a third open house was held.

When roughly 150 angry people showed up at the open house, developers were able to mollify concerns about water use and offer assurances that residents' water and electrical rates would not be impacted, Olson said. A higher standard was adopted for lighting, noise, green space areas because "we actually listened to the public," he said.

“Unfortunately, the misinformation out there does not give you the full picture,” said Brandi Veith Staloch, Pine Island city council member. “We do educational sessions out there, but people will hear what they want to hear.”

Olson said public feedback made clear how much the Pine Island public schools were valued by the community.

“He (Peter Fitzgerald, a vice president for Ryan Companies) learned very early on that the heartbeat of the community was the school district,” Olson said. “So one of the things (we did) with the business subsidy agreement. We did ask for some tax abatement, a small tax abatement, but we’re actually giving back more to the community as part of the agreement, because we did listen to the community.”

The total [tax abatement value approved by the Pine Island city council is \\$36 million](https://www.postbulletin.com/news/local/pine-island-council-hears-then-approves-financial-incentive-plan-for-project-skyway)(<https://www.postbulletin.com/news/local/pine-island-council-hears-then-approves-financial-incentive-plan-for-project-skyway>) to be reimbursed over a 28-year period.

In addition to Olson and Staloch, the panelists included Halston Sleets of Google and Jake Andre of Xcel Energy. Ryan Parsons, chamber president, served as moderator in front of the business-friendly audience at Mayo Civic Center. The panel did not include data center opponents.

Data center development is undergoing a massive boom primarily due to the explosive surge in generative AI, which requires immense power to train and run. What is often referred to as "the cloud" is in reference the large number of servers housed in data centers.

anchor tenant for the 480-acre industrial campus north of downtown Pine Island.

MCEA argues that Ryan Companies knew what kind of project — a hyperscale data center — was coming to Pine Island and who the client was — Google — long before an environmental evaluation called an Alternative Urban Areawide Review (AUAR) was started. MCEA argues that a more stringent environmental study should be conducted.

The fact that the project is currently stalled was not discussed during the panel discussion. Neither was the use of NDAs (non-disclosure agreements) by Pine Island public officials. NDAs are legally binding contracts between parties to keep sensitive information private. The contracts have been controversial in the data center development sector, because critics contend it undermines public participation and accountability.

In the Pine Island case, Elizabeth Howard, city administrator, and Steven Scheevel deputy city administrator, signed NDAs.

Staloch, the Pine Island council member, defended their use in an interview afterward.

“I feel that the way the NDAs were handled was really to protect the company that we were looking at having in the space,” Staloch said. “I don’t feel that any of the pertinent information that was out there was kept from anyone except for the name (Google).”

Staloch said if a city didn't protect the identity of the business that is "potentially coming to your area," the business could be poached by another municipality looking to boost its economic prospects. She doesn't believe that city officials who sign NDAs are put in an

During the discussion, Staloch said the data center would not just create new jobs, but sustain the ones that already exist in Pine Island. She said many new businesses in the city follow a predictable pattern. They thrive in the first six months to nine months after they open, then go into a slump when the sparkle has worn off.

“They struggle to get through the hump financially,” she said. “Now coming into Pine Island now, once this project starts, we are hoping to see new businesses and flourish with the influx of people.”

Officials say 700 jobs will be created by the data center’s construction. And dozens of positions will be created to operate the facility.

“If you are for the project, please vocally support it as well,” Slets said to the area business community. “I think we’re hearing from a loud group as well from different concerns about the project, but we’re really not seeing the support. And if we have the support of the business community, I think that would be really helpful.”

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Matthew Stolle has been a Post Bulletin reporter since 2000 and covered many of the beats that make up a newsroom. In his first several years, he covered K-12 education and higher education in Rochester before shifting to politics. He has also been a features writer. Today, Matt jumps from beat to beat, depending on what his editor and the Rochester area are producing in terms of news. Readers can reach Matthew at 507-281-7415 or mstolle@postbulletin.com. (<mailto:mstolle@postbulletin.com>)



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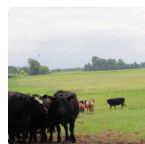
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