

Data Centers in Snoqualmie

Local siting concerns, current zoning, and options for Council direction

Executive summary

- The electricity issue is real, but local opposition to data centers is usually about siting: constant operations, noise, large buildings, backup generators, water/cooling, traffic, infrastructure fairness, and a perceived mismatch between local impacts and local benefits.
- Snoqualmie regulates data centers through SMC 17.55.020 Table 1. Data centers are conditional uses only in Office Park (OP) and Planned Commercial/Industrial (PCI), and prohibited in the other listed districts.
- The City's official zoning map shows that OP and PCI areas are concentrated near major corridors and at the edges of the city, including areas near future growth/UGA boundaries. That means the zoning question is also a "where will this pressure show up?" question, not only a use-table question.
- The main city lever is zoning: changing the use table, tightening the definition, adding conditional-use criteria, and adopting data-center-specific development standards. SEPA/site-plan review and development agreements can also matter.
- Recommended starting point: request an evaluation of how data centers are treated in the zoning code with a zoning analysis and draft code amendment options that remove OP eligibility or create scale-based tiers, with enforceable standards if any conditional path remains in PCI.

Because the most permissive zoning is located at the edges of the city and near UGA boundaries, decisions about data centers are not only about whether the use is allowed, but where and when siting pressure is likely to emerge.

1. Council framing: regional issue vs. local decision

A useful frame is to acknowledge two truths at once: data centers are part of modern infrastructure and the energy system is largely a regional/statewide question; but siting, compatibility, and operating conditions are local land-use questions.

The decision should not be framed as simply for or against data centers. The practical local question is: under what conditions, if any, is a data center compatible with Snoqualmie, and should the zoning code allow those conditions at all?

2. Why local siting creates additional concern

- Noise and 24/7 operations: cooling equipment, fans, chillers, and generator testing can create continuous or intermittent noise that matters more near homes and parks.
- Scale and visual character: large windowless buildings, security fencing, lighting, substations, and utility equipment can industrialize an area even when the use is quiet from a customer perspective.
- Infrastructure fairness: residents often ask who pays for substation capacity, transmission upgrades, road wear, water/sewer capacity, and emergency response needs.
- Backup generators and fuel: diesel generators and fuel storage can drive concerns about emissions, fire risk, and hazardous materials, even when the operational risk is managed.

- Water/cooling and benefits: cooling technology can affect water demand, and facilities can involve large capital investment but relatively few permanent local jobs.

3. Current Snoqualmie zoning snapshot

Based on SMC 17.55.020 Table 1, data centers are conditional uses in Office Park (OP) and Planned Commercial/Industrial (PCI), and prohibited in the other listed districts.

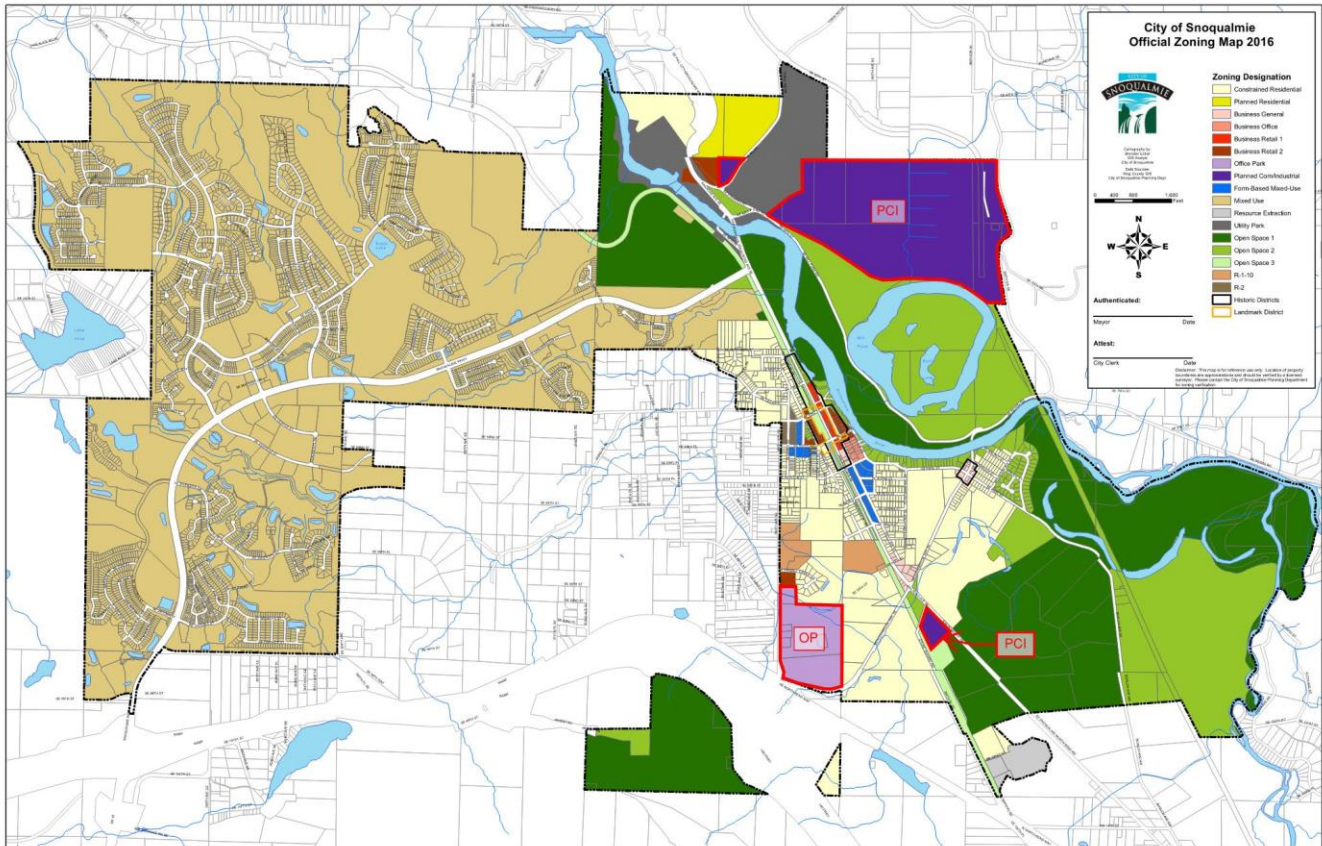


Figure 1. Snoqualmie Zoning Map – High-Intensity Zones and Siting Context

Office Park (OP) and Planned Commercial/Industrial (PCI) zones are concentrated along infrastructure corridors and at the edges of the city, often adjacent to the Urban Growth Area (UGA). These locations combine large parcels, access to power and transportation, and separation from residential areas, making them the most likely siting locations for data centers.

Map context: the official zoning map shows OP and PCI areas in larger, infrastructure-adjacent locations near the edges of the city. Those are the same kinds of locations that are most likely to attract data-center siting interest, and they are also the locations where city-limit and UGA timing issues matter most. These highlighted areas show where zoning allows this use and where site conditions make it more likely to occur .

The zoning map shows that the areas where the code is most permissive are also the areas where siting pressure is most likely because zoning allows it and site conditions make it more likely. Other smaller or less visible PCI-designated parcels may also exist, but the highlighted areas represent the most apparent and practically significant locations based on zoning and site characteristics.

District/category	Current data-center status	Policy implication
R-C, R-1, R-2, PR	Prohibited (X)	Residential districts; no data-center path in the use table.
BR-1, BR-2, FBMU, BO, BG	Prohibited (X)	Commercial/mixed business districts; no data-center path in the use table.
OP - Office Park	Conditional (C)	Primary near-term policy target if Council wants to limit data centers near sensitive uses.
PCI - Planned Commercial/Industrial	Conditional (C)	Likely the more industrial/planned pathway; check Mill Site PCI plan, development agreement, and vesting.
I - Industrial	Prohibited (X)	The table appears not to allow data centers in I, despite industrial compatibility assumptions.
OS-1, OS-2, OS-3, UP	Prohibited (X)	Open space and utility park categories; no data-center path in the use table.
MU - Mixed Use	Separate check needed	SMC 17.55 table excludes MU uses; review Chapter 17.30 before relying on this snapshot.

Table 1. Describes the zoning districts where data centers are permitted, conditionally permitted, and prohibited provided in SMC 17.55.020 Table 1, Table of Uses.

4. What the City can do

The city has several land-use tools to shape how and where data centers may locate. The right package depends on legal review, the parcels involved, and whether Council wants to prohibit, narrow, or condition the use.

- Amend the use table: change Data Centers from C to X in OP, PCI, or both; or create a more tailored use category.
- Tighten the definition: distinguish ordinary accessory server rooms from a principal-use data center, and define thresholds for large facilities.
- Add conditional-use criteria: require findings on compatibility, utilities, noise, backup generation, water/cooling, traffic, and emergency response.
- Adopt development standards: setbacks, buffers, acoustic limits, generator testing hours, emissions controls, screening, lighting, construction management, and decommissioning/reuse plans.
- Use SEPA/site-plan review: identify impacts and require mitigation through project review where applicable.
- Consider interim zoning or a moratorium if needed: Washington law allows interim controls, but timing, public hearing, findings, and work-plan requirements matter.

5. Zoning amendment options

Option	What it does	Use when
Option A - strengthen CUP standards	Keep OP/PCI conditional but add special findings and standards.	Moderate; reduces risk but still allows applications.
Option B - remove OP eligibility	Change the Data Centers row from C to X in OP; leave PCI conditional as a narrower pathway if desired.	Targeted; likely the cleanest limit if OP adjacency is the concern.
Option C - scale-based tiers	Define accessory IT rooms, small data centers, and large/high-load data	Nuanced; avoids accidentally capturing ordinary business server rooms.

	centers differently.	
Option D - prohibit as principal use citywide	Change OP and PCI to X, leaving any future pathway to a later overlay or development agreement.	Strict; most protective but requires careful legal/policy findings.
Option E - interim controls	Use a temporary moratorium or interim zoning while staff completes analysis.	Useful only if near-term applications are likely; must follow statutory process.

Table 2. Zoning amendment options for consideration.

6. UGA and timing risk

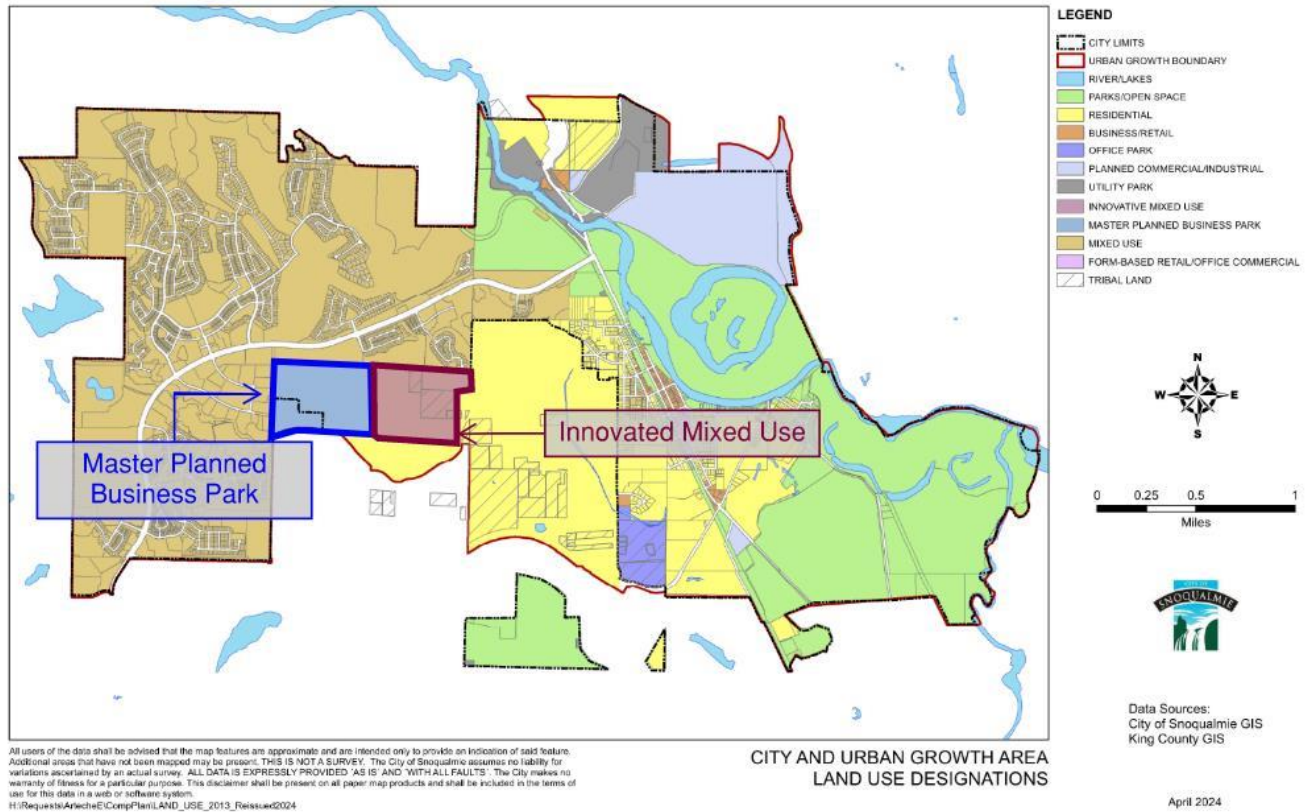


Figure 2. Future Land Use and UGA Context – Where Future Siting Pressure May Arise

Master Planned Business Park and Innovative Mixed-Use designations identify areas intended for employment and mixed-use activity within the Urban Growth Area. These areas may share characteristics that make them relevant to future data-center siting questions, including larger parcels, infrastructure access, and proximity to future urban development. Development that vests prior to annexation can establish land use patterns that the City later inherits.

These areas are similar to the City’s OP and PCI zones in the ways that matter for siting: they are intended for employment or mixed-use activity, include larger planned development areas, and are located where future urban growth is expected. That does not mean data centers would be appropriate there, but it does mean the UGA should be part of the same policy conversation about where this type of use could emerge before annexation.

The UGA question is separate from, but connected to, the city zoning question. Data centers are most likely to seek large, infrastructure-adjacent sites, which means pressure may arise both inside city limits and just outside them in areas planned for future urban growth.

This creates a timing risk: land use decisions in these areas may be made before annexation, limiting the City's ability to influence outcomes later. If development vests under King County jurisdiction before annexation, Snoqualmie may later inherit a land-use pattern and operating impacts that would be difficult to change after the fact. This makes early coordination, mapping, and Comprehensive Plan alignment important even before a specific city application is filed.

The practical policy question is whether the City wants future UGA lands to be planned in a way that is consistent with Snoqualmie's long-term land-use vision before those outcomes are locked in.

7. Recommended Council direction

Suggested motion language:

I move to request an evaluation of how data centers are treated in the zoning code and to bring back options for Council consideration.

Recommended sequencing:

- Map OP and PCI parcels and identify adjacency to homes, schools, parks, critical areas, roads, and utilities.
- Confirm how the Mixed Use chapter treats data centers and whether any applications are vested.
- Confirm whether the Snoqualmie Mill PCI plan/development agreement constrains amendments or mitigation.
- Bring back code amendment options: remove OP eligibility, keep or remove PCI eligibility, and add standards if any CUP pathway remains.
- If there is a credible near-term application risk, ask the City Attorney whether interim controls are warranted and defensible.

8. Public-facing language

Data centers are part of modern infrastructure, and the broader questions about regional energy demand are not decided at the city level. What we do control is where and how facilities operate locally. The concerns we are hearing - noise, building scale, construction impacts, backup generators, water/cooling, and infrastructure costs - are real local issues. The question before us is not simply for or against, but under what conditions a proposal would be compatible with Snoqualmie, and whether those conditions should be allowed in our zoning code at all. Residents deserve to understand the tradeoffs and to have input at the points where it can influence outcomes. Our role is to set clear standards, apply them consistently, and make decisions based on the record.

9. Source Materials and References

A. Snoqualmie Municipal Code and Local Materials

Snoqualmie Municipal Code – Title 17 (Zoning)

Use Table (SMC 17.55) and related provisions governing permitted and conditional uses

<https://www.codepublishing.com/WA/Snoqualmie/html/Snoqualmie17/Snoqualmie17.html>

SMC 17.55 – Use Table (Reference Copy)

https://www.zoneomics.com/code/snoqualmie-WA/chapter_12

City of Snoqualmie Official Zoning Map (2016)

https://www.snoqualmiewa.gov/DocumentCenter/View/31609/Official_2016_zoning_11x17

Snoqualmie Mill Planned Commercial/Industrial (PCI) Plan

<https://www.snoqualmiewa.gov/888/Snoqualmie-Mill-PCI-Plan>

B. Legislative and Planning Materials

City Council Ordinance Materials – Exhibit A (Use Table Amendments)

<https://mccmeetingspublic.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/snoqualmwa-meet-3456445dc6e046a990a267498e20e268/ITEM-Attachment-001-558a3e9c20664b54b23c759994e10126.pdf>

Planning Commission Packet – Data Center Definition and Discussion

<https://mccmeetings.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/snoqualmwa-pubu/MEET-Packet-f17b55ef834c4f9db7b1d1894a6fb232.pdf>

C. State Law (Washington)

RCW 36.70A.390 – Moratoria and Interim Zoning Controls

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=36.70A.390>

RCW 35A.63.220 – Interim Zoning for Code Cities

<https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=35A.63.220>