

Submission

TO: The Secretary, Government Administration Committee A, Inquiry into AI Data Centres in Tasmania, House of Assembly, Parliament House, Hobart, TAS, 7000

FROM: Samara McIlroy I [REDACTED]

I write as a resident of Launceston, where Firmus Technologies is currently building an AI data centre. The St Leonards site is on my daily commute. It is a vast construction site by Tasmanian standards, and it occupies a prime position overlooking the North Esk river. Yet I know that the site wasn't chosen for the views. It was chosen for its relatively cheap land and easy access to water and power.

I've been a professional archivist for over 30 years, specialising in digital information governance and electronic recordkeeping. So I spend a lot of time thinking about data, where it is stored, who uses it and why. And now workplaces have enthusiastically embraced AI, allowing computers to perform tasks that once required human intelligence.

The AI lives somewhere. It is not actually in the cloud (a conveniently weightless metaphor) but stored in buildings all over the planet. This includes St Leonards, and probably in Bell Bay and Wesley Vale. These buildings will house servers that require huge amounts of power and water to cool them. They are more likely to be built in places where people already live.

I appreciate the committee's question about tangible benefits for Tasmanians.

On public resources and transparency:

The St Leonards facility was able to do a commercial in confidence deal with Aurora Energy to use our clean energy. The deal makes it one potentially of the state's largest energy users, but the terms of the deal were not shared with Tasmanians. These are choices being made by elected politicians, without a public accounting of who is being allocated what, and on what terms. The public needs transparency to trust that the decisions are made in their best interests.

We need to treat disclosure as a baseline condition, not a courtesy. Power drawn, water used, the source of each, and the price paid for it all should be public, current, and legible to an ordinary person.

Planning permit conditions and any independent environmental assessments (these should be a requirement) need to be publicly available if water is being taken from our rivers (as it will be in St Leonards). Even if there will be no immediate net impact, the public must trust that any subsequent and future environmental issues will also be mitigated. The legacy of mining and other extractive industries in our state offers a cautionary lesson here.

On benefit:

Tasmania is being sold to the AI industry on its renewables, its land and its stable governance. All of these things are finite public goods. Claiming Tassie's green credentials is not the same as building renewable capacity and the difference is crucial.

AI data centres often are built in exactly those places where the local community is unable to access the benefits of them. This is not a partnership; it is a form of extraction from our state.

The guiding question should be: Does the local community end up measurably better off?

Tasmania consistently records the nation's poorest outcomes for adult literacy and numeracy. Many have no choice but to navigate systems that take digital fluency for granted. If this industry intends to consume our finite land and energy, it should be required to deliver something enduring in return. It could be directed toward improving adult literacy and digital inclusion. This is a metric of success that actually benefits Tasmania.

Underneath the question about community, I would also like you to consider that the AI training models consume and produce exponentially growing data stores. There is no thought to discarding any of it, because the expanding volume is the entire business model. And those companies are planning to build larger and larger buildings to house more of this data.

These data centres become the physical home of humanity's collective memory, with no thought to the people who are yet to come. The data centres are not like our archives, our libraries and our museums. They are not iconic public buildings or third places. They are vast warehouses built by private operators that actively exclude people.

Generations to come will not thank us for these buildings. They will not be proud of them either. Tasmania has a chance to slow down and consider these questions properly. Most places do not.

Proposed requirements for AI data centre operators in Tasmania could include:

- Tasmanian procurement processes and ongoing jobs for locals
- cheap and improved local digital services and infrastructure
- investments in local amenities and projects that deliver enduring community benefits
- buildings that minimise environmental impacts - renewable power, water re-use, reduced noise pollution and appropriate land use
- upfront remediation bonds that survive company insolvency, so an abandoned data centre never becomes the next legacy site
- iconic building design that adds to local landmarks rather than becoming an eyesore.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to contribute.

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