

Submission to the Inquiry on the construction and operation of AI data centres in Tasmania

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The following submission outlines my concerns regarding the construction and operation of AI data centres in Tasmania.

This inquiry is timely in a global context as since the inquiry was initiated, there has been an international call from major AI company representatives (Anthropic, Open AI, X) to slow down the development of AI and for governments to create guardrails so that humans remain in control. Alarming public statements by previous AI company staff are saying that within a decade humans could face extinction due to AI.

Community conversation has increased since these announcements with a genuine fear of how far AI will go, the benefits and disadvantages of AI as well as the huge impact of data centres on communities, the environment and resources.

Data centres are major projects have statewide impacts, that process data for Artificial Intelligence, far larger than current, significantly smaller operating data centres. These mega data factories consume vast amounts of Tasmania's energy (e.g. Firmus Bell Bay will consume 240MW of power) and require large, unspecified volumes of water, without adequate consideration of the economic social and environmental impacts.

Overall, I wish to convey my strong concern about the lack of adequate planning controls to provide informed and transparent assessment of applications for AI data centres in Tasmania. The development of data centres is happening rapidly before there has been time or will for the Tasmanian government to develop adequate assessment processes.

The Tasmanian Planning Scheme (TPS) is currently inadequate to assess data centres. I nevertheless suggest the TPS is the best tool to use, but only if it is improved and modified. In accordance with planning laws, local governments must assess development applications for these mega data centres using planning controls that have not been drafted to assess data centres (Local Provisions and Statewide provisions). Local governments can refer the applications to the Minister for consideration as a Project of State significance.

It is my view that the TPS remains the preferred platform for assessment, as it provides for a merit-based appeals system that allows third party appeal rights. There are no appeal rights in other assessment avenues.

A moratorium on the assessment of Data Centres is essential to allow time to clearly identify the best assessment pathway. This would be developed quickly and implemented.

The development of the right assessment approach requires the drafting of a succinct definition of what constitutes a data centre. There is currently no clear definition for this use in the Tasmanian Planning Scheme.

The appropriate zones then need to be clearly identified for data centres and in those Zones data centres would be defined as discretionary. The General Industrial zone is the most appropriate zone for this use. In the range of residential zones, data centres would be listed as prohibited due their impact on nearby neighbours and communities. There also needs to be development of new use standards for data centres.

Additionally, data centres must be called in as a Level 2 activity under EMPCA where the broader issues of the huge impact on water and energy can be assessed.

Within this context the development of State policies on water and energy is urgently needed to deal with the comprehensive assessment of the impact on these resources. There is currently no State policy on energy and a restricted state policy on water quality. The water quality policy needs to be expanded to consider the overall supply and availability of water for drinking water and other uses as a high order priority.

I hope these comments assist the committee in its deliberations.

Thank you

Jill Hickie

