

**AGENDA REPORT
PLANNING AND ZONING COMMISSION MEETING
February 19, 2026**

SUMMARY

A request by the City of Columbia to amend Sections 29-1.11 [Definitions] and 29-3.2 [Permitted Use Table] of Chapter 29 of the City Code (Unified Development Code) pertaining to the regulation of data centers. The amendments propose revisions to the definitions section of the code to include a definition of the term “data center”, and revisions to the permitted use table indicating what zoning districts allow data centers. Defining this use and establishing where it may be pursued is the first step in regulating data centers as a use. Use-specific standards and specific conditional use permit criteria for data centers are necessary as well and will be developed at a later date.

DISCUSSION

Following a denied request for the rezoning of approximately 63-acres from the A (Agriculture) district to the IG (Industrial) district on November 17, 2025, Council directed staff to consider developing regulations for data centers. The rezoning request was denied due to concerns about development of a data center on the site, which staff indicated would likely be defined as “light industry” given the absence of a specific definition for data centers within the Unified Development Code (UDC). This report describes proposed text amendments to the UDC that would establish a specific definition for “data centers” and places the newly defined use within the UDC’s Permitted Use Table as a “conditional use” in the IG zoning district only.

If adopted, these amendments would remove ambiguity relating to what a “data center” is and how development of such a center would be evaluated should a proposal to construct one be submitted to the city. It is important to note that the proposed amendments constitute the first step of a two-step process aimed at addressing possible impacts that could arise with the construction of a “data center”. The second step to be pursued following adoption of the proposed definition and Permitted Use Table placement is to develop supplemental conditional use review criteria relating specifically to “data centers” that would be tailored to the City of Columbia and intended to reduce possible negative externalities associated with the land use.

In addition to the above objectives for proposing the attached amendments and their anticipated outcomes, the revisions are also intended to address concerns about generally rezoning property to the IG district. There is demand for IG zoned land within the community that has access to sufficient utility services to accommodate an expansion of the City’s commercial and light industrial land inventory. However, given the expressed community concerns about potential uses in the IG district, particularly data centers, staff believes without the proposed amendments it is possible that future rezoning request seeking IG zoning could be curtailed.

The concerns surrounding potential development opportunities in the IG district create difficult decisions for City Council, which involve balancing constituent concerns with demand for additional IG zoned land to meet industrial needs. Defining data centers as a specific use and placing it within the Permitted Use Table as a “conditional use” could reduce the present uncertainty around IG rezoning decisions. Having “data centers” required to secure a conditional use permit prior to being permissible within the IG district would not only require a standard public hearing before the Planning Commission and Council to secure IG zoning, but also require a public hearing before both bodies to obtain approval of the conditional use permit.

For context surrounding the demand for industrial uses in the City, the 2026 Plaza Commercial Market Report notes that industrial structures have around a 2.5% vacancy rate, where the national average is 7.5%, and a typical “healthy” vacancy rate is between 5% and 8%. Anything under 5% vacancy implies

limited supply relative to demand. It is of note that this report does not consider the zoning of a property, rather its use, and that IG land may be functionally used by non-industrial users. As a result, low industrial vacancy may indicate that land zoned IG is not consistently being used for industrial purposes, further limiting the supply of true industrial space. Because most industrial uses are only permitted in the IG district, with exceptions in the M-BP district, zoning more land into the IG district remains the most direct mechanism for accommodating industrial demand.

Staff presented the proposed definition to the Planning and Zoning Commission during the January 22, 2026 work session. Following the presentation, staff was directed by the Commission to hold the necessary public hearing. The following is a summary of the changes made to the Sec. 29-1.11 [Definitions] and Sec. 29-3.2 [Permitted Use Table] of the Unified Development Code (Chapter 29) of the City Code.

Sec. 29-1.11 [Definitions] Revisions

The following definitions are to be **added**: “Data Center”

The suggested definition is as follows:

Data Center. A building, facility, or premise used for the storage, management, processing and/or transmission of digital data that typically contains computers, network equipment, systems, servers, appliances, and other accessory components necessary for digital data operations. A facility may also include air handlers, power generators, water cooling and storage facilities, utility substations, and other associated utility infrastructure to support the operation. This definition does not include facilities in which data storage, management, processing and/or transmission is incidental to the primary use.

This definition was derived following review of several adopted “data center” definitions from various comparable municipalities/counties across the country and consideration of the respective elements contained within those adopted definitions. The following paragraphs provide a sentence-by-sentence analysis and rationale for why the particular language within the proposed definition is being recommended.

A building, facility, or premise used for the storage, management, processing and/or transmission of digital data...

The use occurs within or on a building, facility, or premise. The use requires storage, management, processing, and/or transmission of digital data. **Storage, management, processing and/or transmission** are the most frequently used verbs to describe what is occurring with the digital data, and these verbs are consistently present, in whole or in part, in adopted definitions of “data center” from other municipalities/counties across the country. Staff believes the verbs included in this definition pertaining to the use of digital data are adequate for defining the use.

... that typically contains computers, network equipment, systems, servers, appliances, and other accessory components necessary for digital data operations.

In order to more clearly determine what would or would not meet the definition of a data center, equipment necessary for the storage, management, processing and/or transmission of data should be included in the definition. These specific nouns describing the necessary equipment for digital data operations are also included in whole or in part in adopted definitions for data centers in municipalities/counties across the country.

A facility may also include air handlers, power generators, water cooling and storage facilities, utility substations, and other associated utility infrastructure to support the operation.

The second sentence of this definition provides specificity with respect to accessory infrastructure that may be necessary to support the use, but is not directly related to digital data operations. These facilities enable digital data operations to function properly but may not independently constitute digital data operations. Utility substations, for example, would be defined under public utility services, major, which is currently permissible in the IG district. However, including such facilities in the data center definition is important as they are integral, accessory components to support the storage, management, processing and/or transmission of digital data.

This definition does not include facilities in which data storage, management, processing and/or transmission is incidental to the primary use.

This provision clarifies that the definition does not apply to facilities in which data storage, management, processing, and/or transmission **is incidental** to a primary use. This allows data center facilities to be developed as an accessory component of a primary use without triggering classification as a principal data center use. The exclusion is intended to ensure that accessory data infrastructure may be developed without requiring a CUP, provided it remains subordinate to the primary use. For example, a hospital may require on-site data storage, management, processing and/or transmission for patient information systems. Such facilities would be considered incidental to the hospital's primary use and would not constitute a separate or noncompliant data center use under this definition.

Sec. 29-3.2 [Permitted Use Table] Revisions

The Permitted Use Table has been modified by the insertion of the use of "data center". The use will be allowed only as a conditional use in the IG zoning district.

Staff believe the IG zoning district to be the most appropriate for data centers as a use, but believes it is necessary to establish the use as **conditional only** to avoid denial of IG rezoning requests on the grounds that it may be developed with a data center. If approved, this text amendment would require a CUP, approved by City Council, prior to issuance of any construction permits for a data center in the IG district. The request would be subject to the general criteria for CUPs, defined in Sec. 29-6.4(m)(2)(i) of the UDC as follows:

- (A) The proposed conditional use complies with all standards and provisions in this chapter applicable to the base and overlay zone district where the property is located;*
- (B) The proposed conditional use is consistent with the city's adopted comprehensive plan;*
- (C) The proposed conditional use will be in conformance with the character of the adjacent area, within the same zoning district, in which it is located. In making such a determination, consideration may be given to the location, type and height of buildings or structures and the type and extent of landscaping and screening on the site;*
- (D) Adequate access is provided and is designed to prevent traffic hazards and minimize traffic congestion;*
- (E) Sufficient infrastructure and services exist to support the proposed use, including, but not limited to, adequate utilities, storm drainage, water, sanitary sewer, electricity, and other infrastructure facilities are provided; and*
- (F) The proposed conditional use will not cause significant adverse impacts to surrounding properties.*

These general CUP criteria provide broad discretion to the Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council when evaluating CUP requests. While staff intends to develop specific CUP criteria for data centers at a later date, it is believed that adopting a definition and placement of the use in the use table is an imperative first step.

Conclusion

The proposed definition of “data center” and its inclusion in Permitted Use Table of the UDC as requiring a conditional use in the IG district is the necessary first step in regulating data centers in the city. Creation of use-specific standards and specific CUP criteria relating to “data centers” will be developed in collaboration with other relevant City departments to ensure mitigation of data center impacts, notably regarding utilities. However, these standards and criteria are not believed essential prior to adoption of a definition for the use and placement of the use in the use table. The proposed amendments assure that City Council can be responsive to requests seeking to rezone land to the IG district without losing an opportunity to further review and approve site-specific plans for “data center” development.

RECOMMENDATION

Approve the proposed text change as presented.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS (ATTACHED)

- Proposed Text Amendment
- Types of Data Centers
- Data Center Definitions

PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

Public hearing ad published within the Columbia Tribune on February 3, 2026. No correspondence has been received.

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Approved by Patrick Zenner