

# DATA CENTERS: Meta Got the Tax Break. Oklahoma Residents Got the Shaft

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## STORY HIGHLIGHTS:

1. Meta: Tulsa City Council grants 25-year property tax break.
2. Even some elected officials were kept in the dark.
3. Why there is nothing good about the data centers for Oklahomans.
4. Senators Grant & Gollihare stick it to Oklahomans.
5. Tulsa County Commissioner Stan Sallee knew...
6. Claremore arrests citizen for protesting and attempts to charge \$16K
7. Two Tulsa City Councilors join the protest--but is it authentic?
8. Why taxpayers could be left to cover infrastructure obligations.

**Is there a data center being built or proposed near you? Most likely.** Why are these projects kept secret from the public? Read on and find out.

For months, the public was told very little about Project Anthem in the Tulsa area. Only *after* the votes were cast and the incentives approved was the company at the center of the project finally revealed: Meta.

It's not the only project in which details are being kept hidden from the public.

Secrecy, non-disclosure agreements, blocked FOIA requests are happening across the state with other data center projects, intentionally keeping citizens in the dark as contracts are inked in secret.

According to the notes and supporting documents, the Tulsa City Council had been moving toward approval of a major data center project since at least November 15, 2023, when it passed a resolution to facilitate the development of a "data center." Then, on May 1, 2024, the council unanimously approved an incentive district granting Project Anthem an 85% **property tax break for 25 years.**

Supporting documents reportedly show that **an unnamed data center** was at the core of the project all along.

**The public, however, had little idea what was coming.**

But evidently, that was also true for *some* of the elected officials who were required and or pressured to sign off on the project with only limited information. For example, a vote to rezone an area to a commercial light industrial zone—without transparent information of what the rezoning was for.

To get it passed required sign-offs from city council members and county commissions, with the goal of approval for the relatively unknown project. But it also required tax entities to sign off and sign away some of their ad valorem tax money for the long-term funding of the project. **Many were never given transparent information for what it was really for.**

So, where do ad valorem taxes come from, and how do they affect us? It is the “millage” rate you see on your property tax assessment. The “entities” that were needed to sign over some of their money for the data centers are called taxing authorities.

These are independent governmental units created for a specific purpose, such as 911 emergency services, fire rescue, library districts, school districts, and cities, towns, and county commissions.

Each of these authorities has the power to levy ad valorem taxes and sets its own millage rate (tax rate per \$1,000 of assessed value) to generate the revenue needed for its specific services. But make no mistake, WE are the ones who get taxed to fund them, and then they have the right to sign over some of our tax money, while citizens have no say.

Regarding Project Anthem, tax authorities were asked to turn over some of their revenue for the data center—without full disclosure what it was.

### **Nothing Good About the Data Centers**

Let’s look what we have so far: Data centers are not paying full property taxes, but given incentives. They aren’t producing many long-term jobs. The construction jobs are most often given to out-of-state firms and they gobble up our electricity and water while increasing the utility bills for residents who didn’t want them in the first place. AND we also know, our Oklahoma legislators have been helping provide these data centers with even more incentives.

### **Grant & Gollihare Stick it to Oklahomans**

Just recently Oklahoma senators Grant Green and Todd Gollihare authored and co-authored SB998. The bill allows PSO, OG&E and American Electric Power to put the infrastructure build-out charges for data centers on the taxpayers. It also provides no limit to the number of projects these companies can submit to the corporation commission for approval, and no limit to the amount they will cost or how much our rates will increase because of it!

Why are these incentives being given that are so horrible for Oklahoma residents?

According to [Consumer Reports 90](#), “Giants like Amazon, Google, Meta, and Microsoft have been investing billions to build immense new facilities packed with servers and other equipment. Known as hyperscale data centers, they are far bigger than earlier versions, and are often built in sprawling industrial parks.

Meta alone [has dozens of these mega facilities](#) in various stages of development...”

In Oklahoma, Google has the largest presence in the state with 17 sites (8 operational, 1 under construction, 8 planned). This includes a large campus in Pryor (described as its second-largest in the world), a facility in Mayes County, and new campuses planned near Summit, Council Hill, Muskogee, and Stillwater.

And now the Meta Data center in the Tulsa area.

As the data center developers are getting huge tax breaks and incentives, Oklahomans are getting stuck with increasing bills.

### **SECRECY BEHIND THE DATA CENTERS**

The first news account of Project Anthem reportedly did not show up until **April 17, 2024**, when Channel 2 covered it after it appeared on the council’s agenda for its first reading. One of the project’s two public hearings was already listed at that point. In practical terms, that meant citizens had almost no time to understand the scope of the proposal before the process was already underway.

## **TULSA COUNTY COMMISSIONER STAN SALLEE KNEW**

In Tulsa County, insider sources revealed Tulsa County Commissioner Stan Sallee was the point person behind the project, who knew what was really going on and was assisting the developers in getting it approved. While other elected officials, in various capacities, were not told the full scope of the project and given only pieces of information on which to approve what was needed in their area, rather than given all the information on the project as a whole. If they attempted to ask questions, lawyers, guarding the project's true identity, objected and blocked the answers.

## **COWETA DATA CENTER FIASCO**

Other data centers that have received citizen pushback include the Beale Infrastructure Project Atlas, which had been slated for Coweta in Wagoner County. Citizens repeatedly showed up to protest the lack of transparency regarding the project, especially from City Manager Julie Casteen. As citizen protests continued, she was caught saying residents who protested the data center were "not very smart." She also made fun of one of the residents, who had a supplemental oxygen tank with him due to a recent lung transplant. Casteen joked about it saying it was louder than a data center! Although she has since apologized for those statements, residents are still demanding her resignation. They simply don't trust her after Freedom of Information Act requests to the city revealed multiple non-disclosure agreements signed by Casteen and city council members over the project.

## **CLAREMORE ARRESTS CITIZEN & ATTEMPTS TO CHARGE THEM \$16,000!**

The scenario was similar in Claremore, Oklahoma, after Darren Blanchard went to a public meeting to share concerns regarding "Project Mustang" yet another data center surrounded in secrecy. Blanchard [was arrested](#) after he spoke approximately 30 seconds longer than the allotted time given to public commentators. Note, there were others that night that spoke past their allotted time and received no consequences. When time was called, Blanchard asked to reclaim part of his time, which had been lost due to public applause. Evidently the city leaders didn't care, and Blanchard was fined \$200 for trespassing (it was a public meeting) and **then the city tried to charge Blanchard \$16,000 to provide the documents requested for his lawyer.**

Is there any wonder citizens are outraged by these antics?

**His lawyer, Colleen McCarty**, who is running for Tulsa County DA, issued the following statement, "Mr. Blanchard was arrested for exercising his First Amendment right to free speech against the data center. This was a retaliatory arrest due to the content of Mr. Blanchard's speech. In addition, the City Prosecutor, Adam Heavin, was present and a witness to the arrest. It is against Mr. Heavin's prosecutorial ethics to prosecute a case where he is also a witness. Despite this, Mr. Heavin refuses to recuse from the case. The municipal court in Claremore is currently considering two motions, one asking for Mr. Heavin to recuse and one to dismiss the trespass charges altogether. The Court recently canceled our pending hearing on May 8th and will rule on the pleadings. It is our hope that the court will simply dismiss these unconstitutional charges and allow Mr. Blanchard to go on with his life."

Patriots like Blanchard and those regularly showing up to protest these data centers and speak out, have paid a price for their courage. We need to circle around them and increase our numbers, and remind elected officials that this kind of heavy-handed actions against citizens isn't hidden from view as the non-disclosures were!

## **TULSA CITY COUNCILORS JOIN PROTEST**

Once the story and details broke on the Tulsa area Meta Data Center, citizens were outraged. But so were some elected officials who claimed they were kept in the dark.

Tulsa City Councilor Laura Bellis, who voted for the project twice, and Jackie Dutton, who was not in office at the time of those votes, joined protestors outside Tulsa City Hall regarding the data center announcement. On March 26, Tulsa City Councilors unanimously voted in a [9 month moratorium](#) on construction of any more data centers through the end of the year.

Was Bellis and Dutton's protest because the Meta Data Center announcement will violate that moratorium? For Bellis because she really didn't know what she was voting for when she voted twice to approve the data center? OR, was it just to make it look like that knowing Tulsa citizens were furious at the revelation on Meta being Project Anthem?

## **WHY THESE ARE BAD DEALS**

According to, [KJRH News](#), the City of Tulsa will receive \$62.5 million in infrastructure funding from Meta, **instead of taxes**, as part of a 25-year tax-incentive district (TID) agreement. That should be great until you realize **Meta will only pay 15% of its property tax bill during that time**. A great deal for Meta, but bad for Tulsa.

AND the fifteen-year sweetheart deal can be extended another fifteen years if Meta decides to expand!

**Why would the city agree to allow one of the biggest companies in the nation, off the hook for paying taxes, which is what truly brings benefit to the city? Who pays the taxes on these properties if not the developers?**

That would be us.

Why are we giving away everything, but receiving very little?

The projects DON'T produce any significant number of jobs. There are the initial construction jobs to build the centers, but out-of-state crews are usually hired, which steals any proposed benefit. After the centers are built, they often employ 50 people or less. That matters because job creation is one of the main justifications used to sell these incentive packages.

That is why this has become a grassroots issue, not just a developing story.

Residents are asking basic questions. Why was a project of this size and significance handled with so little transparency? Why were taxpayers expected to accept a long-term tax break without clear public discussion of what the project really was? And why did the public story change once Meta's name finally became public?

These concerns are not minor.

Citizens are also concerned that the City of Tulsa would be on the hook for maintenance of public infrastructure and improvements tied to the project. In plain English, **taxpayers could be left to cover infrastructure obligations while one of the largest corporations in America receives a major tax break**.

**That is not a small detail. That is the deal. And how many of these other data center deals are being secretly negotiated in Oklahoma?**

The bottom line is simple. There has been a complete lack of transparency to citizens as additional taxes are being placed on their shoulders for data centers they never wanted.

And that is exactly why citizens are upset.

This is bigger than Meta. It is about whether local government deals of this size are being handled openly, honestly, and with real public accountability. If taxpayers are expected to subsidize major corporate development for decades, they should not have to piece together the truth after the fact.

That is not transparency. This is now simply damage control.