

Montana Is Arguing About the Wrong Part of AI

Right now, much of Montana's public conversation about artificial intelligence is happening through the lens of data centers. We hear about uses of power, water and land. Those are familiar fights, and they are highly relevant.

But treating data centers as the AI debate is a critical error and misses the AI forest for the trees.

Data centers are industrial infrastructure. Artificial intelligence is decision infrastructure. When the two get rolled into one debate, Montana ends up spending its time on the most visible part of the issue while the part that actually changes how power is exercised moves quietly in the background.

A data center does not decide anything. It does not determine who gets hired, who qualifies for a benefit, who is flagged for enforcement, or which cases rise to the top of a workload. It stores and processes information. That matters for utilities and planning, but it is not where AI reshapes institutions or most of our lives.

The real impact of AI shows up quietly, more bureaucratic than insidious. It shows up in procurement contracts, software, and workflow changes that feel minor at first and then become normalized. It shows up in hiring screens, eligibility checks, document review, forecasting tools, prioritization systems, and so-called decision support software that slowly stops supporting and starts deciding.

None of that requires a single new building to go up in Montana to have real consequences for Montanans.

That is why the current focus is so comfortable and so wholly incomplete. Infrastructure debates are concrete. You can point at a map. You can attend a hearing. You can argue about costs and mitigation. You can virtue signal for whatever cause you want. Those are arguments this state has been having for a long time. Honestly, today's AI debate feels like the same old players with the same arguments yelling at each other the same way they have been for 40 years. These data center hearings and meetings feel like *déjà vu* all over again.

AI governance is different and so much more meaningful, impactful and potentially dangerous. Its insidiousness lies in its being epically boring. It does not arrive with a ribbon cutting. It arrives because someone is trying to clear a backlog, save staff time, or make a process more consistent. It arrives because it is convenient. Then, at some point, it becomes authoritative, and no one can quite remember when that line was crossed or who made that call.

The questions that will actually matter 40 years from now are governance questions. Who is accountable when an AI-assisted decision goes wrong. Whether the people affected can understand how that decision was made. Whether a human can override it. Whether discretion has been replaced by default. Whether efficiency has quietly turned into authority.

There is plenty of room for artificial intelligence to help without controversy. Summarizing records. Flagging missing information. Reducing clerical backlogs that burn people out. Used this way, AI gives people time back without taking judgment away.

The line gets crossed when AI is used to rank people, score risk, predict behavior, or quietly shape outcomes in policing, housing, benefits, or employment. At that point, the technology is no longer just making work easier. It is reallocating power, often without a clear public decision to do so. Do we as citizens even know where AI is being used in governance? Will it be too late when we do know?

Focusing on data centers makes it easier to avoid that conversation. Infrastructure fights feel manageable. Governance fights require clarity about responsibility, discretion, and accountability, and those are harder questions, especially in a state where people still expect to know who made a decision and why.

Montana is early enough to be deliberate. The state can continue to debate infrastructure on its merits while also asking harder questions about how AI tools are being introduced into government, what guardrails exist around their use, and where firm boundaries need to be drawn.

If Montana blocked every data center tomorrow, artificial intelligence would still change how decisions get made here. If Montana approved every data center tomorrow, it would still face the same governance questions.

The real AI story in Montana is not about facilities. It is about authority.

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