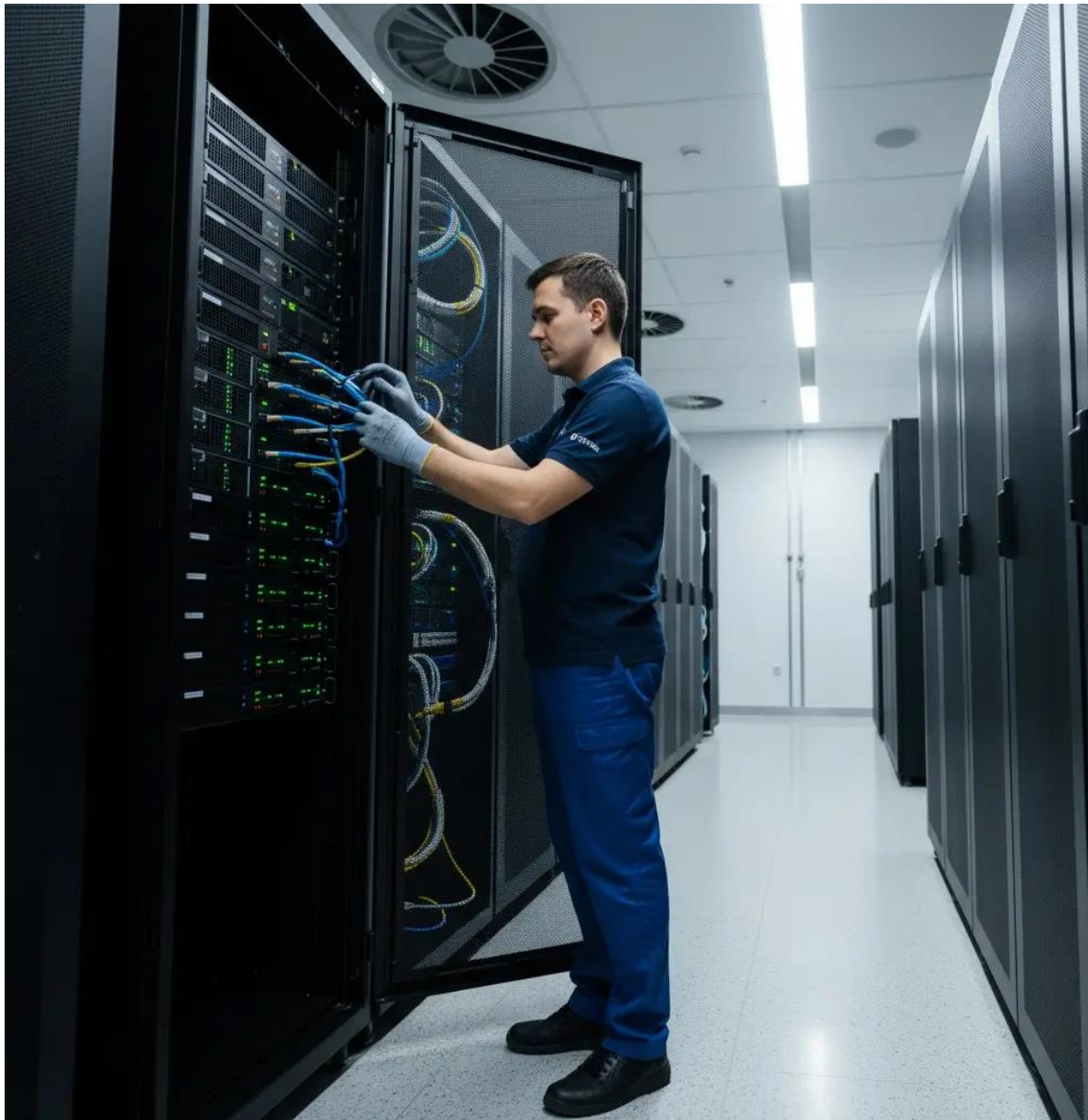




APRIL 30, 2026

Data centers need space, but above all trust

The question of how much space data centers in the Netherlands can have is more topical than ever. In a recent [article in Het Financieele Dagblad](#) (free to read), DDA director Stijn Grove and climate activist and scientist Guus Dix discuss this with each other. At first glance, they represent two extremes in the debate. Grove emphasizes the importance of data centers for the economy, digital infrastructure and geopolitical resilience. Dix warns of unbridled growth, extra energy consumption and

the climate impact of a sector that, according to him, is too driven by expansion. Yet they touch each other on one essential point: the Netherlands lacks a clear vision on digital infrastructure.

And that is exactly where the core of the problem lies. Data centers are not just buildings full of servers. They are the backbone of our digital society. Without data centers, there would be no cloud, no digital government, no healthcare systems, no payment transactions, no AI, no cybersecurity and no modern business operations. But precisely because data centers have become so important, the sector can no longer hide behind general statements about innovation, green energy or economic value.

The social resistance to data centers did not come out of the blue. This resistance has partly arisen because the sector has not been sufficiently transparent about its actual impact for years. Too little real data has been shared about energy consumption, water consumption, residual heat, grid load and the actual utilization of IT capacity. As a result, the debate has increasingly been conducted on the basis of sentiment, incidents and mistrust.

The example of Zeewolde plays an important role in this. Facebook's plans for a hyperscale data center made it clear that a local decision could have major national consequences for energy use, land use and public acceptance. The fact that one municipality could take such a decision without a solid national framework was experienced by many as administratively incomprehensible. It was not just a discussion about one data center, but about the question of who decides how the Netherlands uses its scarce space, energy and digital infrastructure.

Grove is right when he states that the Netherlands and Europe must remain digitally relevant. In a world where the United States and China dominate digital infrastructure, it is risky to approach data centers solely as an energy problem. Digital sovereignty, cloud capacity, AI development and cybersecurity require their own infrastructure. But Dix also has a valid point when he states that growth should not be presented as inevitable as a matter of course. Not every workload has the same social value. A data center for healthcare data, scientific research or public services is different from infrastructure for endless social media, crypto mining or purely commercial AI applications without demonstrable public interest.

Therefore, the question should not be: do we want data centers or not? The better question is: which data centers do we want, where do we want them, under what conditions, and with what social compensation?

This requires national direction. Spatial planning, energy planning, digital strategy and climate policy can no longer be viewed in isolation. Data centers require power, water, fiber optics, space and cooling. At the same time, if properly integrated, they can also contribute to energy hubs, residual heat utilisation, battery storage and investments in

sustainable infrastructure. But that doesn't happen by itself. Without clear frameworks, there is still a risk that data centers mainly claim capacity, while the social added value is insufficiently visible.

That's where the transparency problem comes in. The sector often states that it purchases 100% green electricity and is at the forefront of energy efficiency. That may be true, but it is insufficient if those claims are not substantiated with comparable, verifiable and understandable data. Green electricity contracts do not automatically say anything about local grid loads. A low PUE does not automatically say anything about useful IT output. And sustainability ambitions mean little if absolute energy demand grows faster than savings.

In a time of grid congestion, drinking water pressure and climate goals, every major energy user must be able to explain what they use, when they use it, why it is necessary and what they supply back to society. For data centers, this means that transparency is no longer a communication tool, but a prerequisite for legitimacy.

The European reporting obligation under the Energy Efficiency Directive is therefore an important step. Data centers must report more information about energy performance, water use, energy reuse and other sustainability indicators. But statutory reporting alone is not enough. If data is mainly aggregated or shared at sector level, it helps policymakers, but not automatically municipalities, local residents or grid operators who want to understand the local impact.

The sector should therefore go beyond minimum compliance. Publish real data on energy consumption, peak load, water consumption, residual heat utilization, IT efficiency and utilization rates. Distinguish between design values and real-world performance. Let independent parties look at definitions, measurements and reports. And link that to the question of what public or economic value the capacity used provides.

That is not an attack on data centers. It is precisely the route to maturity of the sector.

Data centers will only remain socially accepted if they demonstrate that they handle scarce resources carefully. Not with general promises, but with facts. Not only with technical efficiency, but with social relevance. Not only by saying that they are important, but by making visible why, for what and under what conditions.

The Netherlands needs digital infrastructure. But the Netherlands also needs space, energy, water and trust. The future of data centers therefore does not only depend on permits, power connections and investment capital. It depends mainly on the willingness of the sector to provide transparency.

Because anyone who asks for space in a scarce country must also provide insight into their real impact. Data centers certainly have a place in the Netherlands. But that place must be earned with transparency, real data and demonstrable social value.