

AI-Era Infrastructure: Lessons from Shelby County's Experience

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Setting the Stage

- AI-era data centers are arriving faster than traditional planning cycles.
- Communities, utilities, and agencies are encountering new pressures.
- Shelby County's experience offers insights for peers nationwide.

The Site: A Legacy Industrial Property

- Former Electrolux manufacturing facility.
- Produced ovens, ranges, and kitchen appliances for national distribution.
- Employed over 1,000 workers at peak.
- Held an air permit for metal fabrication, coating, and assembly operations.
- Already zoned and serviced for large-scale industrial activity.

Why This Site Was Attractive

- Large footprint with existing infrastructure.
- Industrial zoning already in place.
- Road access, utilities, and site readiness.
- A natural candidate for redevelopment into next-generation infrastructure.

TVA: Regional Power Backbone

- TVA provides electricity to Memphis and the surrounding region.
- Long-standing transmission infrastructure and diverse generation portfolio.
- Stable, high-capacity power supply suitable for energy-intensive industries.
- A key factor in attracting digital-infrastructure investment.

The Pace of Modern Infrastructure

- AI-era projects move at unprecedented speed.
- Community expectations evolve rapidly.
- Agencies must adapt in real time.

Community Dynamics

- High public interest and strong emotions.
- Rapid spread of information and misinformation.
- Need for clear, consistent communication.

Public Meetings and Engagement

- Hundreds of attendees.
- Strong opinions, high tension.
- Importance of structure, security, and transparency.

What the Public Saw

- Meetings, hearings, statements, and news coverage.
- A fast-moving project with high visibility.
- A community trying to understand a new type of infrastructure.

Behind the Scenes: What our Air Agency Was Really Facing

- First-of-its-kind project for our agency.
- Overnight shift from decades of minimal comments to comments on nearly every permit.
- Highly technical comments requiring extensive research.
- Massive surge in legal requests: emails, messages, phone logs, computer files, official records.
- Thousands of pages produced; unclear or duplicative requests common.

Behind the Scenes: What our Air Agency Was Really Facing (Continued)

- Death threats, bomb threats, threatening emails and calls.
- Public meetings requiring tactical security teams with protective gear and rifles.
- Intense internal coordination with county legal, security, communications, and IT.
- Staff experienced significant mental and physical stress.
- Several staff members considered leaving due to the pressure.
- Substantial financial costs: venues, security, legal review, document production, overtime.

Institutional Lessons Learned

- Prepare for sudden public visibility.
- Build internal resilience before you need it.
- Strengthen communication channels.
- Expect operational strain beyond the project itself.
- Internal coordination (legal, security, communications, IT) is essential.

What This Means for Agencies Nationwide

- AI-era infrastructure will test institutional capacity.
- Technical challenges are only part of the story.
- Human and operational pressures can be greater than the project itself.

Closing Reflections

- This experience tested our institution and our people.
- Staff faced unprecedented hostility and personal risk.
- Resilience was built in moments of strain.
- The strength of an agency is measured by how it protects its people while staying true to its mission.

Thank You