OHIO COMMON GROUND RESEARCH CENTER

CANDIDATE SNAPSHOT

Fact-Checking Amy Acton's Ohio Data Center Pledge

in "Plain Language" — what the pledge claims, claim by claim, and what the record actually shows

Published August 16, 2026

Candidate Snapshot No. 003 • Research Library ID: RL-2026-026 • Version 1.0

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Suggested citation

Ohio Common Ground Research Center. "Fact-Checking Amy Acton's Ohio Data Center Pledge." Candidate Snapshot No. 003, RL-2026-026. Version 1.0. Dublin, Ohio: Ohio Common Ground, August 16, 2026.

Publication record

Series:	Candidate Snapshot
Publication number:	Candidate Snapshot No. 003
Research Library ID:	RL-2026-026
Version:	1.0 (see Revision History)
Publication date:	August 16, 2026
Prepared by:	Ohio Common Ground Research Center
Subject:	Claims made in the data-center policy pledge published by Amy Acton, gubernatorial candidate (actonforgovernor.com/issue/data-centers)
Companion piece:	OCG Candidate Snapshot fact-checking Vivek Ramaswamy's data-center pledge
Review:	Internal editorial review and two rounds of external peer review; all resulting factual corrections were independently verified by OCG against the primary sources cited in this report before adoption.

What This Snapshot Covers

Amy Acton, one of the 2026 Ohio gubernatorial candidates, has published a data-center policy pledge on her campaign website. Ohio Common Ground reviewed nine major claims and proposals in that pledge — covering local secrecy agreements, rising electricity bills, utility-cost coverage, union labor, tax incentives, transparency, environmental standards, and where new data centers should be built — against Ohio law, utility filings, state fiscal data, and independent reporting. The pledge contains additional statements not separately addressed here, such as claims about regional grid reliability and requirements that workers be Ohio-trained; a future revision may expand this review to cover them.

Some of what's in the pledge are factual claims that can be checked as accurate or not. Others are policy proposals — things Acton says should happen — which this Snapshot does not grade as right or wrong, only explains in plain terms, including how they compare to what's already in place.

1. “Data centers are moving into Ohio's communities in secrecy”

The claim: Data centers are being built in Ohio communities without residents or, in some cases, even local officials knowing the details.

What checks out: This is real and documented in multiple places. In Wilmington, officials signed a secrecy agreement in January 2024 and kept project details hidden for over a year and a half. In Mt. Orab, the mayor, tax administrator, fire chief, engineer, and several council members all signed similar agreements. Scioto County commissioners and an Adams County economic-development official did too (Adams County's commissioners say they didn't). In Piqua, a project called “Project Klondike” was pursued through an entity called J5 LLC, whose connection to Meta was not publicly disclosed; investigative reporting later traced J5 to Meta through Nevada corporate filings, though Meta itself hadn't confirmed ownership at the time.

What's the nuance: These are several well-documented examples of a real pattern — they don't prove secrecy happens in every single Ohio data-center deal. The pattern was serious enough to prompt a bipartisan bill, House Bill 695, which would bar certain local officials from signing these secrecy agreements in the first place, with fines for violations.

Bottom line: *The secrecy problem is real and well documented, though the claim as worded (“data centers are moving in secrecy”) reads as broader than what's been proven for every project.*

2. “...raising costs...”

The claim: Data centers are raising Ohioans' electricity costs.

What checks out: Electricity bills have gone up. AEP Ohio's own June 2025 notice said many customers would see the generation portion of their bill rise about $27 a month, attributing that specific increase to a regional power-auction price spike and demand outpacing available supply — without itself naming data centers in that notice. Separately, AEP has documented extraordinary new electricity demand tied to data centers — far exceeding the state's historical peak demand — making them an important part of the broader load-growth picture straining the grid.

What's the nuance: A separate April 2026 change is more of a wash: delivery charges went up about $7.90 a month, but that was mostly offset by lower generation and distribution costs, for a net increase of about 22 cents a month for AEP's standard customers. Customers who buy their electricity from a separate competitive supplier instead of AEP directly didn't get that offset, so their bills likely rose closer to $7 a month from this particular change — though AEP didn't publish that figure directly; it's calculated from AEP's other published numbers.

Data centers aren't the only factor. Regional power-market pricing, transmission and distribution investment needed to keep up with new demand, and general growth in electricity use all play a role too.

Bottom line: *Data centers are a well-documented part of Ohio's growing electricity demand, but the specific $27-a-month increase AEP has publicly explained was attributed to a regional capacity-auction price spike, not data centers by name. Both things are true and don't contradict each other — they're just not the same fact.*

3. Data centers should "cover 100 percent of their utility costs"

The claim: Data centers, not ordinary ratepayers, should pay the full cost of the gas, water, and electricity they use.

This is a policy proposal, not a fact to verify: Ohio already has a related rule for electricity: state regulators approved a requirement that large data centers pay for at least 85% of the power capacity they've reserved, even when their actual usage falls below that level — meant to stop unused reserved power from being paid for by everyone else.

What's the nuance: That existing rule isn't the same thing as covering 100% of total utility costs — it's a minimum-payment floor on reserved electric capacity, not a full-cost guarantee, and the electricity tariff doesn't establish comparable statewide requirements for gas or water. Acton's proposal goes further than the current rule and covers more ground.

Bottom line: *There's a real, related rule already on the books for electricity, but it's narrower than what's being proposed, and no comparable statewide electricity-tariff rule currently exists for gas or water.*

4. Data centers must be "exclusively built with union labor"

The claim: New data-center construction in Ohio should be required to use only unionized construction workers.

This is a policy proposal, not a fact to verify: There's no existing Ohio requirement like this to compare it against.

What's the nuance: It's worth knowing that supporting a union-labor requirement doesn't mean organized labor broadly opposes data-center development. When Ohio's governor paused a major data-center tax break in 2026, both business groups and building-trades union leaders raised concerns that it could cost construction jobs — building-trades unions have also defended the investment and jobs these projects create.

Bottom line: *This is a proposed condition, not a claim that can be checked true or false.*

5. “Ohio's out-of-control long-term tax incentives must be reined in”

The claim: Ohio's tax breaks for data centers run for a very long time and cost far more than expected.

What checks out: This holds up well. State law sets no cap on how long these tax breaks can last — that's left entirely to a state board's discretion. In practice, some of Ohio's largest deals (with Amazon, Meta, and Google) run around 40 years; Amazon's could last until 2055. On cost: the state projected this tax break — more precisely, foregone state sales-tax revenue, since no cash changes hands — would total about $136 million in one recent year. The actual foregone revenue came in near $1.6 billion — roughly 11 to 12 times higher than projected. That unexpectedly high cost was among the factors Ohio's governor cited when pausing new approvals for the program in May 2026, alongside a broader legislative review of the program already underway.

What's the nuance: “Out-of-control” is Acton's characterization, not a measurable fact — but the underlying numbers behind that characterization (the open-ended duration and the large cost overrun) are well documented.

Bottom line: *The facts behind this claim check out clearly. The “out-of-control” label itself is a judgment call, not something to fact-check.*

6. Acton would “add clawback provisions”

The claim: Ohio needs new authority to take back tax breaks from data centers that don't hold up their end of the deal.

What checks out: Ohio actually already has this authority. State law lets regulators reduce or shorten a data center's tax break if it falls out of compliance, and lets them cancel the deal and demand back-taxes if the company stops meeting the program's requirements.

What's the nuance: Since Ohio already has this authority, the clearest documented gap is transparency, rather than an absence of enforcement authority: state law exempts specified financial statements and other information submitted under the program from Ohio's public-records law, and Policy Matters Ohio — an advocacy-oriented policy research organization — reports it has been unable to obtain these records despite asking. Whether existing enforcement is used consistently or aggressively enough is a separate question this report did not independently verify. Because the pledge doesn't say exactly what “adding” clawback provisions would mean — new authority, mandatory rather than discretionary use, broader triggers, or something else — this claim is more imprecise than incorrect.

Bottom line: *Ohio isn't starting from zero on clawback power the way this claim implies. The clearest demonstrated gap is public transparency about compliance; the pledge doesn't explain what additional authority it would add to powers Ohio already has.*

7. Acton would “end the secrecy and data center NDAs in Ohio”

The claim: As governor, Acton would put a stop to the local secrecy agreements described in Claim 1.

What checks out: The underlying problem this responds to is real and documented (see Claim 1).

What's the nuance: This is a promised fix, not itself a fact to check. Ohio already has House Bill 695 pending, which would prohibit certain local officials from signing these agreements — giving this pledge a concrete bipartisan legislative parallel already pending in Ohio. A separate claim that at least ten other states are considering similar restrictions traces back to a national advocacy group's research, not an independent count by this report.

Bottom line: *The problem being addressed is real. Whether or how Acton's approach differs from the bill already moving through the Ohio legislature isn't spelled out in the pledge.*

8. Data centers must maintain “zero environmental impact”

The claim: New data centers should have no environmental impact at all.

What checks out: Taken literally, no large facility of this kind has zero environmental impact once you count construction, land use, water and energy consumption, emissions, and eventual decommissioning.

What's the nuance: The pledge doesn't define what “zero impact” would actually mean or how it would be measured or enforced. The more concrete commitments nearby in the same pledge — holding the line on existing air- and water-quality standards — are things that can actually be tracked. “Zero environmental impact” on its own reads more as an aspirational goal than a specific, enforceable standard.

Bottom line: *As written, this reads more as an aspiration than a defined regulatory standard regulators could actually apply.*

9. New data centers should go on “the thousands of vacant brownfield sites” already zoned for industrial use

The claim: Ohio has thousands of vacant, already-industrial-zoned sites (old industrial land, known as brownfields) that could host new data centers instead of undeveloped land.

What checks out: Directing new development toward former industrial land instead of undeveloped land is a real siting approach with precedent in Ohio, and the state does have a substantial number of former industrial and potentially contaminated sites.

What's the nuance: The “thousands” figure doesn't hold up the way it might first appear — but not for the reason it might seem. Ohio EPA's Brownfield Inventory, which has historically listed roughly 250 to 300 sites, is not an official census of Ohio's brownfields; Ohio EPA describes it as a voluntary, opt-in listing that property owners choose to submit, not a mandatory statewide count. So that smaller number can't be used to conclude Ohio only has a few hundred brownfields — it just means only a few hundred have been voluntarily listed.

Separately, the Greater Ohio Policy Center, an advocacy nonprofit focused on urban revitalization, estimates Ohio has more than 9,000 former industrial and commercial sites that are unusable in their current condition.

That figure is broader than Acton's specific claim, however — it covers all such sites, not specifically ones that are vacant, already zoned for industrial use, and sized and equipped to support a data center.

In short: there is no authoritative, complete statewide count of sites meeting all of the pledge's own criteria — vacant, brownfield or former-industrial, appropriately zoned, and practically capable of hosting a data center. Neither available figure establishes how many sites are vacant, clearly owned, properly zoned, and large enough with the electric capacity (often 100–500+ megawatts), water access, and fiber connectivity a modern hyperscale data center requires.

Bottom line: *Acton's "thousands" figure is plausible under some broad estimates of Ohio's former industrial and commercial properties, but it isn't independently established in the specific, narrower form the pledge states it — and no source in the public record establishes how many such sites could actually support a large data center.*

So, Does the Pledge Hold Up?

Several of the pledge's core factual claims check out well: local secrecy agreements are real and documented, Ohio's data-center tax breaks really do run for decades and really did cost far more than projected, and rising electricity bills really are connected, in part, to data-center demand.

A couple of claims are less precise than they sound. Ohio already has legal authority to claw back tax breaks from noncompliant data centers, so a call to "add" that authority undersells what's already on the books — the clearest documented gap is public transparency about compliance, not an absence of enforcement power. And Acton's "thousands of vacant brownfield sites" figure is plausible under some broad estimates of Ohio's former industrial land, but no authoritative statewide count establishes that thousands of sites meet the pledge's narrower description — vacant, brownfield, and already zoned for industrial use.

The pledge's policy proposals — 100% utility-cost coverage, union-only labor, and "zero environmental impact" — aren't things to grade true or false. They're goals Acton says she'd pursue as governor, and in most cases they go further than anything currently in Ohio law.

How OCG Prepares Fact-Check Snapshots

- Each claim is checked against primary sources: statutes, agency filings, utility tariffs, government data, and the pledge's own text.
- Factual claims are separated from policy proposals; proposals are explained, not scored as true or false.
- Where a claim is accurate but simplifies a more complicated picture, this Snapshot states both the accurate part and the added context — rather than reducing it to a single true/false rating.
- Figures traced to advocacy organizations are identified as such, on any side of an issue.
- OCG does not score, rank, or endorse candidates, officials, or policy proposals in its Research Center publications.

Revision History

Version 1.0 — August 16, 2026. Initial publication, consolidating OCG's three-part claim-by-claim review of the pledge (Claims 1–3, 4–6, and 7–9) into a single plain-language Candidate Snapshot.

Sources

Primary

- Amy Acton for Governor, “Data Centers” issue page (actonforgovernor.com/issue/data-centers).
- Ohio Revised Code § 122.175, codes.ohio.gov (data-center sales-and-use tax exemption, including term-setting, compliance, recapture, and confidentiality provisions).
- Ohio General Assembly, House Bill 695 (136th General Assembly), legislature.ohio.gov/legislation/136/hb695, as introduced, and official Status and Committee Activity pages.
- AEP Ohio, “Upcoming Adjustments to Your Electric Bill,” aepohiowire.com, on the June 2025 Standard Service Offer generation-cost change (~$27/month) and its attribution to a regional capacity-auction price increase.
- AEP Ohio, 2025 Residential Base Case Request and related filings, aepohio.com, and AEP Ohio press release on data-center load under contract, documenting data-center demand growth separately from the June 2025 SSO notice.
- AEP Ohio, Data Center Tariff (Schedule DCT) page, aepohio.com/company/about/rates/data-center-tariff, and AEP Ohio press release describing the tariff's ratepayer-protection purpose.
- Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, Case No. 24-508-EL-ATA (AEP Ohio data-center tariff, Schedule DCT), approved July 2025.
- Office of the Governor of Ohio, “Governor DeWine Announces Pause of Data Center Tax Exemption,” governor.ohio.gov, May 27, 2026.
- Ohio Department of Taxation, data-center sales-tax exemption FY2025 projected cost (~$136 million) and reported actual foregone revenue (~$1.569 billion), as reported in Associated Press coverage of state tax data.
- Ohio EPA, Ohio Brownfield Inventory, epa.ohio.gov, explicitly describing the inventory as a voluntary, opt-in statewide listing rather than a mandatory census.

Independent reporting

- Reporting on local nondisclosure-agreement controversies: Wilmington (NDA signed January 2024); Mt. Orab (mayor, tax administrator, fire chief, engineer, and council members); Scioto County (commissioners); Adams County (economic-development director; commissioners dispute signing).
- Hunterbrook, investigative reporting connecting Piqua's “Project Klondike” and entity J5 LLC to Meta through Nevada corporate filings, April 2026 (hntrbrk.com).

- Associated Press, “Ohio data center tax break cost $1.4 billion more than projected” and related coverage of the FY2025 exemption cost overrun.
- Associated Press, reporting on Governor DeWine's May 2026 pause of new data-center tax-exemption approvals and building-trades and business-group reaction.
- Signal Ohio, reporting on the duration of Ohio's largest data-center sales-tax exemption agreements (Amazon, Meta, Google), including Amazon's agreement extending through approximately 2055.

Advocacy-affiliated

- Policy Matters Ohio, an advocacy-oriented policy research organization, on data-center tax exemptions and its reported inability to obtain compliance filings under § 122.175(H).
- Public Citizen, research on state-level data-center NDA legislation, cited for the claim that at least ten states have introduced similar measures.
- Greater Ohio Policy Center, an urban-revitalization advocacy nonprofit, estimate of 9,000+ former industrial and commercial sites statewide (greaterohio.org).

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