

- **NNAMDI 12:03:57**

Ann Wheeler, Prince William County is working to bring a new data center corridor in western Prince William County. The project has been dubbed the Prince Williams Digital Gateway, and it's been a fairly controversial issue in the county, to say the least. But before we get into the controversy, can you explain what data centers are and why they need to be built on rural land?

- **WHEELER 12:04:16**

Well, so, data centers are buildings that handle internet traffic. And you can understand that during the pandemic there was such an increase in use of virtual platforms and internet traffic. And they're expanding rapidly. They'll also expand because of the advent of, let's say, self-driving cars. You know, Prince William County has to be fairly well situated to have data centers in that corridor and other areas because of our proximity to Loudoun, which has a great number of data centers, as well as our current data centers. And this corridor that's being suggested that was brought to the board for evaluation by the applicant sits between those two groups of data centers.

- **NNAMDI 12:04:57**

Which companies are interested in putting data centers in Prince William County, and what are the benefits of creating this digital gateway, in your view?

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:05:06**

We have one official applicant so far and that's QTS who has data centers already in Prince William County. This area that we're talking about, we are currently in the midst of redoing our comprehensive plan. We haven't redone our comprehensive plan, our land use plan since 2010. We are way overdue. And so, really looking at where we're going to expand some of our commercial opportunities, to have more land for commercial businesses, is really all part of this. And this is why this was brought forward at this time.

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:05:34**

So everybody who hears data centers, the first thing they think about is Loudoun County, which seems kind of not necessarily the corner of the market, but they've done a lot of data center development over there. Where does Prince William stand compare to Loudoun County? Is it

relatively small potatoes right night? Does it want to become the next Loudoun County when it comes to these data centers?

- **WHEELER 12:05:51**

You know, I would say I believe they have maybe 25 million square feet of data centers and we probably have, I hate to say the wrong thing, but let's say 5 million. And so we're not small potatoes. We are certainly growing. We have many that are coming online and we're so well situated because we're near Loudoun. But we are still way behinds where they were -- where they started out -- we are really basically where they started out 15 years ago when they residential taxes making up 83 percent of their tax base, which is where we are right now.

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:06:21**

And how important is this in terms of economic development because, like for me, theoretically speaking, like a data center I can see it being a driver of economics. But at the same time it's not, you know, an attractive site. Like, you don't go shopping at a data center. It's obviously like a very single-use system or kind of, yeah, place. You know, is it the sort of economic development you guys want? Is it just what's available and what's out there and what the market needs? Like, how do you compare it to other economic development ideas?

- **WHEELER 12:06:47**

It is a pretty great economic development driver, if you could just ask, you know, Loudoun who has \$600 million of revenue from their data centers. It is a target industry and has been for a while in Prince William County. There are a lot of pros in that. When a building comes, it doesn't have school children attached to it. It doesn't have a lot of traffic, the things that people tend to worry about when we're putting in development.

- **WHEELER 12:07:11**

It does have a lot of different jobs, depending on the kind, but Virginia sales (sounds like) say every one person who's working in a data center, there are 13 other jobs created because of that with the auxiliary industry.

- **NNAMDI 12:07:23**

There seems to be a strong effort, however, opposing the digital gateway. What are the main concerns of the opposition?

- **WHEELER 12:07:30**

Well, the digital gateway is proposed for an area that has been not developed. We have -- 53 percent of Prince William is currently in our rural area with 6 percent of our population. And as we look to expand these commercial areas, people would rather us not go anywhere in the rural area, right. And so that's the first, the change of looking at different land use patterns.

- **WHEELER 12:07:53**

The second is they worry about proximities to neighborhoods. And they want to make sure that there's going to be adequate buffering, you know, from existing neighborhoods and things like that. And they do worry about water.

- **NNAMDI 12:08:09**

Well, since there are both organized efforts for and against the data centers, has anyone asked the residents of Prince William County? Has anybody polled to see what everyday residents of the county think about this?

- **WHEELER 12:08:20**

No, and it's hard to do a scientific poll without having people self select and come in and vote twice, right. We're very careful about how we govern by using polls. You know, I do know that the concerns that people have, if this is ever to come to fruition, will be well addressed by the safeguards that the county has in place regarding development. I mean, we've doubled in size over the last 20 years and have done development pretty well.

- **NNAMDI 12:08:44**

Where are you now in the planning process?

- **WHEELER 12:08:46**

Right now, the staff has accepted the application for the comprehensive plan amendment which is just a land use change, and is in the middle of evaluating that comprehensive plan amendment. And one of the users, QTS, has filed an official rezoning with the county.

- **NNAMDI 12:09:03**

Onto next year's budget, which the county is currently working on. What are the biggest priorities you're looking at?

- **WHEELER 12:09:10**

You know, for me personally it's making sure that our tax rate doesn't go up very, very, very high. We had to lower our tax rate substantially because of the average increase in homes in Prince William County was 12.2 percent. So that's one thing, making sure we bring that tax rate down.

- **WHEELER 12:09:26**

The other is employee compensation. We've spent a lot of time focusing outside into the county. We're now focusing on our employees, how we retain them. Everyone knows about the labor shortage. What can we do, as a board, to make that better for the employees?

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:09:39**

I was actually curious about this. You mentioned the issue of housing costs. I mean, that's something, I love in DC, it's well known in The District, even in the kind of closer suburbs. But I was curious about places like Prince William County because they're seeing the same sorts of trends where just housing is becoming the driver of most people's expenses nowadays.

- **WHEELER 12:09:54**

It is. At 12.2 percent increase over a year is incredible. And, like I said, we lowered the tax rate. Not exactly commensurately which there's still an increase but a heck of a lot. And so how do we provide (sounds like) affordable housing? That's a whole other issue that this new board is dealing with, with regards to making sure that we have -- that the people who work in Prince William County can afford to live there.

- **NNAMDI 12:10:18**

Our guest is Ann Wheeler, chair of the Prince William County board of supervisors. As you pointed out, you are, in fact, decreasing the real estate tax but property values are going up so rapidly that a lot of the residents are, nevertheless, going to spend more money in taxes. At a public hearing earlier this month, a lot of them said they didn't want to see that. They didn't want to have to be paying more money. How do you respond to those concerns besides decreasing the tax rate?

- **WHEELER 12:10:44**

Well, that's a valid concern. No one wants to pay more taxes, obviously. And so, you know, we're saddled with a growing community who

demands a lot of services with an 83 percent reliance on residential taxes. And so that's really one of the reasons, when I came into office, having a focus on really diversifying that tax base which is what we're trying to do. Right now, I believe there's a 5 percent increase in the average tax bill but if we have more room in the budget to lower that even further, we will do that.

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:11:14**

How do you manage, can you manage the kind of identity, how the county's identity is changing? I mean, a lot of counties in the Washington region, it could be Loudoun County, Montgomery County, people might've moved out there 15 years ago because it was quiet, it was more rural. You know, land costs much cheaper so it was cheaper to live out there. But now you're seeing, like you're saying, housing costs are going up, people have to pay more taxes. Yeah, how do you kind of massage the fact that the county is changing and has to change? But that's difficult.

- **WHEELER 12:11:40**

It is. Governing in this kind of atmosphere is difficult. We're sort of in our adolescence stage in a lot of ways. You know, we're just about to really go into the next phase. I mean, we are the second most populace county in the state. I mean, you know, we are a large county with almost half a million people. And how do you balance that with people who moved in in new development, mind you, and then don't want other people moving in, you know, and that's really very typical.

- **WHEELER 12:12:05**

It's really making sure that the infrastructure is in place to handle the growth. And, as I accounted (sounds like) , we are trying to diversify our tax base and make sure that there isn't so much of a reliance on those people.

- **NNAMDI 12:12:16**

Your budget includes a 3 percent merit-based pay raise for police and firefighters, as well as a 1 percent cost of living adjustment. But some firefighters in the county are pushing back, saying that's not enough to compete with inflation or recent soaring gas prices. How do you respond to those concerns?

- **WHEELER 12:12:33**

Well, a valid concern, I mean, inflation is affecting us all. I'm hoping that the current inflation rate of over 7 percent isn't something that we're going to sustain nationally. Otherwise, we have larger problems in our country with that kind of inflation rate. You know, we are looking at that and, as I said, if we have extra benefit that we can move around -- we're still in the middle of the budget process, I'm hoping to increase that. And I understand their concerns. I think everyone does, especially with gas prices.

- **NNAMDI 12:13:02**

The Virginia general assembly wrapped up most of its work earlier this month but notably not the budget. How does the state budget affect your budget plan?

- **WHEELER 12:13:11**

You know, it's really difficult to finish our budget without knowing where the state is going to be. It affects so many different areas, so many things that we have in the works at the state. The key is, obviously, the grocery tax and repeal of the 1 percent for local funding. For right now we've adjusted our budget to assume we're not getting that, and just have to proceed that way and be conservative.

- **NNAMDI 12:13:33**

How does getting rid of the state's grocery tax, because that's one of Governor Glen Youngkin's priorities, hasn't been finalized yet, but do you support repealing the grocery tax? And what effect will that repeal mean for the county budget?

- **WHEELER 12:13:49**

Well, it's hard to say. I would support it only because that 1 percent, it means about \$11 million for the county. And there are bills that say it'll make the local jurisdiction whole, you know, for that lost revenue, which is one way. You know, it's just a matter of where you're going to tax people. And if they would rather get rid of it from grocery and they're going to make us whole, that's fine. But to see it go away completely is an \$11 million hole in our budget.

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:14:16**

But, I mean, there's now this new meals tax in Prince William County. Talk about that because I realize, again, as someone who lives in DC, that's the sort of thing you just take for granted. It's something you pay

an additional tax when you go to a restaurant. It is what it is. But it was, obviously more controversial out in Prince William County and there's kind for some debate over...

- **WHEELER 12:14:32**

There's always a debate over a new tax, I think. And that sort of gets back to diversifying our revenues and how do we do that. You know, the meals tax, you know, we thought a lot about that. You know, the cities and towns have been able to do that for a while. And one of my questions was, because we were worried about hurting the restaurant businesses and, you know, one of the most vibrant scenes I know around is the city of Manassas, right. Really great restaurants. A lot of people go there from Prince William County. And I said, do they have a meals tax? And the answer is yes.

- **WHEELER 12:14:59**

And so that I'm not necessarily worried about hurting the restaurant industry from that point of view. And then we had, recently, the staff say that 80 percent of the people who eat at our fast food restaurants, they had some information from data from industry around the area, 80 percent of those people are from out of the area. So, that makes me a little more comfortable with putting that in place.

- **NNAMDI 12:15:24**

Arsalan sent, or Arsalan sent us a note on Twitter. If data centers generate money for the county, why can't the county share this with county residents in the form of direct bank deposits?

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:15:36**

Oh, this is kind of like the oil industry idea. It's like in Alaska it's like a dividend.

- **WHEELER 12:15:41**

You know, I bet -- you know, we're a (word?) rule state. I bet we couldn't do that if we tried. (laugh) That said, but, you know, that's never -- you know, my goal would be to lower the residential tax rate like they have in Loudoun. A house in Prince William County, same price in Loudoun, 20 percent less in taxes in Loudoun County.

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:15:58**

Oh, wow.

Friday, April 1, 2022, Chair Wheeler interview on WAMU 88.5,
American University Radio, [Politics Hour with Kojo Nnamdi](#) transcript

- **WHEELER 12:15:58**
So that would be my goal.
- **NNAMDI 12:16:00**
Let's talk politics for a second. What do you think of Governor Glen Youngkin's first few months in office?
- **WHEELER 12:16:05**
I think they've been interesting and, I was going to say, controversial. You know, people always think that when people get off their campaign trail and they move into office, they'll sort of pivot to the middle. And it doesn't necessarily feel like some of that has happened with the administration. You know, I'm just waiting to see what kind of changes come down the pike with this budget.
- **NNAMDI 12:16:27**
So you clearly don't think he's pivoting towards the middle at all.
- **WHEELER 12:16:30**
It doesn't feel that way from everything I've read but, quite frankly, I've focused on local issues over the last few months so I'll leave that to people that are able to handle those questions.
- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:16:39**
That's a good dodge. No, not a dodge necessarily but (unintelligible) ...
- **NNAMDI 12:16:42**
A dodge (laugh) . Prince William County will soon have its own health department. Not one run by the state. Remind us why the county wants to control its own health department and tell us what that transition will look like.
- **WHEELER 12:16:54**
You know, that really started when we came onboard in 2020. Even before the pandemic hit, the board gave a lot of supplemental salaries to our public health department because it had been way underfunded for many, many years since 2008. And we recognize that there -- and I'll say, there are disparities across our county. Someone says 17 years in mortality rates from one end of the county to the other, which tells me that we have public health issues that need to be addressed.
- **WHEELER 12:17:23**

And having control over the public health department, making sure it's as strong as it can be and focused on areas that need help in our county I think would be better served if it was controlled by the county.

- **NNAMDI 12:17:34**

You not only have public health issues, you have mental health issues. A crisis receiving center could soon be a reality in the county. It would be a place where residents can get immediate help from mental health crises. Why is this a priority? Tell us about that.

- **WHEELER 12:17:49**

Well, I think everyone knows what's happening in our society with regards to mental health. And it is such a burden on law enforcement. And I know that it -- and even fire and rescue dealing with mental health issues in our society. We had a cutting edge cover sponder (sounds like) unit. We were the first, I believe, in the state to put that in place where we have mental health professionals going out with police.

- **WHEELER 12:18:14**

But even when they bring them in, there's nowhere to put them. You know, you don't want to bring them to the jail because that's not an appropriate place. You can bring them to the hospital but because there aren't, and this is a state issue, beds for them to go to, sometimes people sit in hospitals for days with the police monitoring them. And so there's a burden on our law enforcement agencies for this.

- **WHEELER 12:18:34**

And we really need to have somewhere in the county locally where people can bring people for short term crises, you know, crisis receiving it for short term to really be able to address those issues and get them help they need immediately as opposed to having them handcuffed to a bed in the hospital.

- **NNAMDI 12:18:50**

Okay. We're going to get to a big regional issue, the Washington Commanders location. Our guest is Ann Wheeler, chair of the Prince William County board of supervisors. The Washington Commanders football team is considering bringing its new stadium to Prince William County. Loudoun County is also being considered, as well as locations in Maryland and even maybe the District. I was going to ask you, would

you like to see the stadium come to the county, but I know the answer to that would be yes. So, why?

- **WHEELER 12:19:20**

You know, well, I would want to make sure that if it does come to the county, and I haven't sat down and spoken to anybody on the team. You know, we haven't had that kind of contact with them. You know, the main thing that I hear that people are concerned about is traffic and that we address those issues and we have the community input with regarding those.

- **WHEELER 12:19:37**

You know, we have a lot of time to figure out if they were to say, here, I can understand why they would come to Prince William County. Great workforce, proximity to I-95 corridor, up and down, back and forth to Richmond, you know, as well as a huge fan base. And so, I understand why we would be attractive to consider. So, I'm glad that we're in the running for having a professional sports team in Prince William County. I mean, that would be a game changer.

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:19:58**

So does it -- part of the idea, the concede to the idea isn't just like putting a stadium in the middle of nowhere. It's building this kind of like mini city idea, so you have restaurants, you have residential. You're building kind of a location that's going to attract people who are going to come for a game and stay after the game, or come before the game, that sort of jazz. What does this look like to you in your mind? I mean, how big are we talking? Is there anything comparable in Prince William County or will this be -- if this were to happen, would this be the first thing of its type, like development of its type, on a scale (sounds like) ?

- **WHEELER 12:20:23**

I've got to believe that it would be the biggest thing of its type for Prince William County. You know, we don't necessarily have a lot of -- we have some things that draw people. Some of them are just natural resources that draw people. But something like this would be a game changer and it would give people in Prince William County an area to drive to more quickly than an hour-and-a-half away to experience the same kind of quality of life entertainment things that they could have, you know, exposure to.

- **AUSTERMUHLE 12:20:48**

And I'm guessing this mini city wouldn't be a mix of stadium post data centers. You'd probably want to separate those things out.

- **WHEELER 12:20:52**

Probably, you know (laugh) .

- **NNAMDI 12:20:53**

And apparently you have not yet been schmoozed by the ownership of the Washington Commanders but, I guess, taxpayers can wonder, how much will it cost us if this mini city, as Martin described it, comes about?

- **WHEELER 12:21:06**

You know, that's a good question. There's been a lot of talk about, you know, the taxes from people going to a business. And I've been thinking about this and, you know, we give benefits to businesses a lot of different ways, as it could be through tax abatement, tax structures, tax incentives.

- **WHEELER 12:21:26**

And so this wouldn't be the - I mean, we use tax dollars in this form. It's more the fact that it's going to an authority. And I think the authority's being created to make sure that those tax dollars are protected, as a matter of fact. We use tax dollars for things like Metro where there's an authority, the airport where there's an authority. And I think that's really the idea behind creating a stadium authority.

- **NNAMDI 12:21:46**

Let's hear from Laura in Alexandria. Laura, you're on the air. Go ahead, please.

- **LAURA 12:21:50**

Yes. Good morning and thank you. I pretty much lived in Montgomery County or northern Virginia except for a couple years, all my life. I always wanted to come to Alexandria City. And to me, now, everything's a nightmare, all these so-called authorities, as you're saying. I don't want my tax dollars for a stadium. It will be the final nail in the coffin for me if they bring the stadium here. Sixty-six is a nightmare, what they've done, all the land, all the buildings (unintelligible) right behind my house for the new Metro line. I can see all the way to Maryland to GW Parkway.

- **LAURA 12:22:29**
I just think that devastation to the wildlife, to the waterways. I think enough is enough. When is there enough money, when is there enough building? When does it start to infringe quality of life? And that's how I see it.
- **NNAMDI 12:22:47**
Ann Wheeler.
- **WHEELER 12:22:47**
You know, and I think, you know, areas often, overtime, just get more urbanized. And that's what we're seeing across northern Virginia. We're seeing it in Prince William County. It's almost inevitable as the population -- just of the whole entire country grows. And I think that's why people move around when they move into an area that was once less congested or even just less urban. When they find it becoming more urban than their taste, they choose to relocate. And that's really why we have shifts in population.
- **NNAMDI 12:23:18**
Finally, here's Joy in Arlington. Joy, we only have about a minute left so make your question or comment quick.
- **JOY 12:23:25**
Yes. I'm curious why the board is considering rezoning land for the proposed server farms (sounds like) when so much land already has been designated as appropriate for server farms. And the (unintelligible)
- **NNAMDI 12:23:42**
(overlapping) Here's Ann Wheeler.
- **WHEELER 12:23:43**
So that's a really great question. I mean, there seems to be a disconnect in what we say is available for citing commercial businesses. Data centers are not in Prince William County versus what people say is available. And I know for a fact when we try to set any kind of commercial businesses, we're running out of commercial space.
- **NNAMDI 12:24:04**
And we are running out of time. Ann Wheeler is the chair of the Prince William county board of supervisors. Thank you so much for joining us.

Friday, April 1, 2022, Chair Wheeler interview on WAMU 88.5,
American University Radio, [Politics Hour with Kojo Nnamdi](#) transcript

- WHEELER 12:24:10
Thank you so much for having me.