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Comparative Evaluation of Data Center Community Engagement

Rowan Infrastructure Cinco | Meta El Paso | Misae Mojo Ranch

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates three Texas-based data center projects and the dramatically different outcomes they have achieved based on their community engagement strategies. Rowan Infrastructure's Cinco project in Medina County earned unanimous approval from both the Lytle City Council and the Medina County Commissioners' Court. Meta's El Paso data center navigated significant water concerns in a desert environment through a combination of technological commitments and water restoration partnerships, though the project continues to face opposition on energy sourcing. The Misae Investments Mojo Ranch project in Wilson County has triggered intense grassroots backlash, with nearly 1,400 petition signatures gathered in under five days and residents packing government meetings to voice opposition. These three cases illustrate a spectrum of approaches to the increasingly complex politics of data center development in water-stressed regions of Texas.

1. Rowan Infrastructure- Project Cinco (Medina County, TX)

Project Overview

Rowan Digital Infrastructure's Cinco project is a 300-megawatt hyperscale data center campus located on approximately 440 acres near Lytle in Medina County, Texas. The project represents a minimum investment of $900 million and is contracted to serve a top-five U.S. technology company. Construction began in August 2025, and full operational status is expected by 2027. The campus is expected to generate approximately 600 construction jobs and more than 40 permanent positions, with salaries Rowan states will be more than double the median income in Medina County.

How Unanimous Approval Was Achieved

Rowan's success in securing unanimous approval from both the Lytle City Council and the Medina County Commissioners' Court can be attributed to several deliberate strategies:

Proactive Community Open House

In March 2025, prior to any formal vote, Rowan hosted a public open house that drew more than 230 attendees. This event gave residents a direct forum to ask questions, review project details, and engage with company representatives before the permitting process moved forward. By holding this session proactively rather than reactively, Rowan positioned the event as a gesture of good faith rather than damage control.



Water Stewardship Commitment

Perhaps the most strategically significant move was Rowan's investment in the Edwards Aquifer Conservancy (EAC) to achieve a 250% water offset. The project is permitted to use 144.5 acre-feet of groundwater per year from the Edwards Aquifer. Rather than simply minimizing consumption, Rowan committed to an offset that would result in 2.5 times more water being conserved than the project consumes. The conservation initiative supports the EAA's Groundwater Conservation Program, which helps regional farmers transition from water-intensive flood irrigation to more efficient center-pivot systems. This partnership simultaneously addresses water concerns and supports the agricultural community, which is the economic backbone of the region.

Collaborative Framing with Local Leaders

Lytle Mayor Ruben Gonzalez publicly praised Rowan's approach, describing it as development "done the right way- openly, responsibly, and with long-term benefits for our residents." The County Commissioners and County Judge have also expressed support, framing data centers as transformational economic opportunities for a county that has historically lacked large-scale investment. Rowan's willingness to engage directly with local leaders and allow them to become public champions of the project was a key factor in building political consensus.

Transparency on Operations and NDAs

Notably, both the County Judge and commissioners told local media that they did not sign non-disclosure agreements with Rowan, a point of contrast with practices seen in other jurisdictions. While Rowan declined to publicly identify the specific technology company that will occupy the facility, the absence of NDAs allowed local officials to speak freely about the project and reassure constituents.

Remaining Tensions

Despite the unanimous vote, not all residents are fully satisfied. At least one nearby resident, Rob Scholes of Natalia, told KSAT that he was only made aware of the project when the company invited neighbors to an informational session just months before construction began, at which point the land had already been purchased and plans were moving forward. Community organizing groups such as the Data Center Action Committee have questioned whether Rowan's economic promises are enforceable. These tensions suggest that even a well-executed engagement strategy does not eliminate all opposition, but Rowan's approach was sufficient to secure official unanimity.

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2. Meta Platforms — El Paso Data Center

Project Overview

Meta Platforms is building a $1.5 billion AI-optimized data center on over 1,000 acres in far Northeast El Paso, near the Texas-New Mexico state line. The facility, which could eventually scale to 1 gigawatt across multiple phases, represents one of the region's largest-ever private investments. Meta expects approximately 1,800 construction workers at peak activity and about 100 permanent full-time positions. In late 2023, Meta (operating through an affiliate called WurldWide LLC) purchased the land from the city, secured a water supply agreement with El Paso Water, and negotiated incentive packages with the city and county. The project was not publicly announced until October 2025.

How Meta Navigated Water Concerns

Water is arguably the single most sensitive issue for data centers in the El Paso region, which is classified as arid desert and has experienced historic drought conditions. Meta deployed a multi-layered strategy to address this concern:

Closed-Loop Liquid Cooling Technology

Meta committed to using a closed-loop, liquid-cooled system rather than the water-intensive evaporative cooling used by older-generation data centers. The company stated this system will use zero water for cooling for the majority of the year, engaging water-based cooling only when temperatures exceed 86 degrees Fahrenheit. El Paso Water CEO John Balliew estimated that even in a hot year, average daily usage would likely be around 400,000 gallons, well below the permitted 750,000 gallons per day initially (and 1.5 million at full buildout). Balliew emphasized that at estimated usage levels, Meta would not even rank among El Paso Water's top 10 largest customers.

200% Water Restoration Pledge

Meta pledged to restore 200% of the water consumed by the data center to local watersheds. To operationalize this, Meta partnered with DigDeep, a nonprofit that works to bring running water to El Paso colonia communities that lack basic water infrastructure, and with the Texas Water Action Collaborative/Texan by Nature to identify and fund additional water restoration projects. By directing restoration efforts toward underserved communities, Meta connected its water offset to a recognizable social good.

Institutional Support from El Paso Water

El Paso Water provided public reassurance through its CEO's newsletter, explaining that the utility had been planning for growth through projects like the Pure Water Center (which will produce 10 million drought-proof gallons of drinking water per day by 2028), desalination plant expansion, and aquifer replenishment. Balliew emphasized that the utility's sustainable supply planning process, in use since the early 1990s, accounted for new demand. He also stated that Meta would not receive free water or discounts.

Economic Development Alliance

The Borderplex Alliance, the region's economic development organization, served as a visible advocate for the project and had been working on it for four years. Jon Barela of the Alliance pointed to Meta's successful data center in Los Lunas, New Mexico, as evidence that the company creates lasting economic benefits. El Paso Electric developed a custom rate schedule for Meta with safeguards to ensure existing customers would not subsidize the facility's infrastructure costs.

Ongoing Challenges and Controversy

Despite these measures, Meta's project continues to face significant opposition. In early 2026, it was revealed that El Paso Electric had filed paperwork to build a 366-megawatt natural gas power plant (the McCloud facility) to power the data center, contradicting earlier messaging that the site would run on renewable energy. This revelation has energized groups like the Sembrando Esperanza Coalition, which called the renewable energy claims "an illusion" and has demanded that the city, county, and utilities terminate their contracts with Meta. The El Paso City Council voted unanimously to intervene in the regulatory proceedings. Additionally, El Paso Water adopted a budget with a 12% rate increase in January 2026, and although utility leaders insist the increase is unrelated to the data center, residents have linked the two issues. A February 2026 social media exchange between the Sembrando Esperanza Coalition and El Paso Water over whether the water contract had been properly signed highlighted the depth of community mistrust.

The Meta case demonstrates that even a well-resourced company with sophisticated water mitigation strategies can face sustained opposition when critical details (especially around energy sourcing) emerge after initial agreements have been made. The project secured the necessary governmental approvals in 2023, before the current AI data center backlash movement gained momentum. Whether the project would have faced more formal resistance had the approvals been sought today is an open question.

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3. Misae Investments Mojo Ranch / Misae Energy Hub (Wilson County, TX)

Project Overview

Misae Investments, led by founder Miguel Oneto, proposes the Misae Energy Hub on 2,742 acres near Stockdale in Wilson County. The project encompasses three components: a 500-megawatt hyperscale data center, a solar farm ("Mojo Solar") with battery energy storage systems on approximately 2,170 acres, and a gas plant. The site is positioned over the Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer. As originally described on the company's website, the project referenced "access to 2 million plus gallons per day of water." Commercial operations are targeted for 2028.

What Has Gone Wrong

The Mojo Ranch project has generated a level of community opposition that is remarkable in both its speed and intensity. Several interrelated failures have driven this outcome:

Lack of Proactive Community Engagement

There is no public evidence that Misae Investments held any proactive community workshops, open houses, or informational sessions prior to site work beginning. By contrast, Rowan held a 230-person open house before seeking approval. The community meetings that have occurred around the Mojo Ranch project were organized by residents, not by the developer. In February 2026, a newly formed grassroots organization called "Protect Wilson County Water" held a meeting in Stockdale on February 18 that drew nearly 150 residents. The meeting was organized to discuss concerns residents had identified on their own, not in response to an invitation from Misae. On February 23, residents filled the Wilson County Courthouse courtroom and overflowed into the lobby during a Commissioners Court meeting to voice opposition, even though the data center was not on the formal agenda.

Water Use Messaging Confusion

Perhaps the most damaging misstep was the evolution of the project's water use claims. The original project description on Misae's website referenced "access to 2 million plus gallons per day of water." As of late February 2026, the website was updated to describe estimated average water use of "up to 15,000 gallons per day, or 5.5 million gallons per year," and referenced advanced closed-loop cooling systems. The Wilson County News explicitly documented this change. This dramatic shift in stated water consumption from 2 million gallons per day down to 15,000 has fueled deep suspicion rather than reassurance. Residents view it as a reactive attempt to obscure true water demand rather than a credible engineering update. The organization Protect Wilson County Water continues to cite the original 2-million-gallon figure.

Lack of Transparency and Government Coordination

Wilson County Judge Hank Whitman told the Wilson County News that while there is a company "entertaining building a data AI center in Wilson County," no official permits or proposals had been forwarded to the Commissioners Court for review. At the February 23 commissioners meeting, Whitman said that many of the residents' questions were questions

that the commissioners also had, and that "there's been no permits drawn" and no representative from Misae had gone before the county development review board. The fact that trees had reportedly been bulldozed on the site before any formal governmental engagement created an impression of a project proceeding without community or governmental input.

No Established Water Offset or Conservation Partnerships

Unlike Rowan's 250% Edwards Aquifer offset or Meta's 200% water restoration pledge, Misae has not announced any comparable water stewardship initiative. The company's website states it will "comply with any drought restrictions imposed by the groundwater district" and "prioritize conservation measures and efficient technologies," but these are generic commitments that lack the specificity and financial backing of what the other two projects offered. Wilson County's Carrizo-Wilcox Aquifer does not have the same regulatory structure as the Edwards Aquifer, making the absence of a voluntary conservation commitment even more significant.

Rapid Grassroots Mobilization

The speed of community organizing has been extraordinary. In fewer than five days, 1,385 verified Wilson County residents signed a petition to protect county water. The "Protect Wilson County Water" organization launched a website (protectwilsoncountywater.com), organized public meetings, and mobilized residents to attend government sessions. Residents have framed the issue in deeply personal terms: cattle ranchers describe selling half their herds due to drought; regenerative farmers call the project "a corporate raid on our resources, disguised as land regeneration"; and others plead that allowing the project would "sign our death certificates." The rural identity of Wilson County, where residents moved specifically for quiet agricultural living, has made the data center proposal feel like an existential threat rather than merely an economic tradeoff.

Did Misae Hold Workshops or Meetings?

Based on all available public reporting through February 2026, there is no evidence that Misae Investments held community workshops, open houses, or public informational sessions for the Mojo Ranch project. The company's founder described Wilson County as having a "welcoming community," but the developer's engagement appears to have been limited to its website and statements to the press. Every public meeting on the topic has been organized by residents, not by the company. This stands in sharp contrast to Rowan's pre-approval open house and Meta's partnerships with local economic development organizations. The absence of developer-led engagement has left a vacuum that has been filled entirely by opposition voices.

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4. Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Rowan Cinco	Meta El Paso	Misae Mojo Ranch
Investment	$900 million	$1.5 billion (Phase 1)	Not disclosed
Capacity	300 MW	Up to 1 GW	500 MW
Site Size	440 acres	1,000+ acres	2,742 acres
Community Open House / Workshop	Yes 230+ attendees before approval	Partnered with Borderplex Alliance; public event at project announcement	No evidence of any developer-led public engagement
Water Offset Commitment	250% offset via Edwards Aquifer Conservancy	200% restoration pledge via DigDeep and TX Water Action Collaborative	None announced; generic compliance language only
Cooling Technology	Advanced cooling to limit water use	Closed-loop liquid cooling; zero water for majority of year	Claims advanced closed-loop; details changed after backlash
Government Approval Status	Unanimous approval City Council and Commissioners Court	Approved via 2023 incentive packages; ongoing regulatory challenges on energy	No permits drawn; no formal proposals submitted to Commissioners Court
Community Opposition	Minimal; some individual concerns	Growing coalition groups, UTEP protests, energy sourcing anger	Intense 1,385 petition signatures in 5 days; packed courthouse meetings
NDA with Officials	No NDAs signed	Operated under front company WurldWide LLC initially	Unknown; limited government communication reported

5. Key Lessons

1. **Early engagement is not optional.** Rowan's pre-approval open house with 230+ attendees set the tone for a collaborative relationship. Misae's absence of any developer-led outreach created a vacuum that was filled exclusively by opposition. In the current environment, data center developers who do not proactively engage communities should expect organized resistance.
2. **Water offsets must be specific, funded, and credible.** Both Rowan (250% Edwards Aquifer offset) and Meta (200% restoration via DigDeep) committed to measurable water stewardship programs connected to recognized institutional partners. Generic language

about "compliance" and "conservation measures" is no longer sufficient to satisfy community concerns, especially in drought-stressed regions.

3. **Contradictory or changing information destroys trust.** Misae's shift from "2 million+ gallons per day" to "15,000 gallons per day" was the single most damaging event for the project's credibility. Meta's pivot from renewable energy messaging to a natural gas power plant caused a similar erosion of trust in El Paso. Developers must ensure their public statements are accurate from the outset and that subsequent changes are clearly explained.
4. **Government alignment matters, but it must be earned in the open.** Rowan cultivated relationships with the Mayor and Commissioners and allowed them to become project advocates. In Wilson County, even the County Judge said he shared the community's questions, signaling that Misae had not effectively briefed government stakeholders, let alone residents.
5. **Rural communities organize quickly around resource threats.** Wilson County's response demonstrates that small, rural communities with strong ties to agriculture and groundwater can mount sophisticated, fast-moving opposition campaigns. The 1,385 petition signatures in five days and packed courthouse meetings suggest that developers who underestimate rural civic capacity do so at their own risk.
6. **Timing and political context are critical.** Meta's 2023 approvals preceded the current national wave of data center backlash. Projects seeking approval in 2025-2026 face a fundamentally different political environment, with organized opposition groups, moratorium proposals (such as in Hays County), and heightened media scrutiny. Developers must calibrate their engagement strategies to the current moment, not to the conditions of two years ago.

6. Conclusion

The contrast among these three projects underscores that community engagement is no longer a supplementary component of data center development, it is a decisive factor in whether projects proceed at all. Rowan's Cinco project demonstrates that proactive transparency, meaningful water stewardship, and genuine partnership with local leaders can produce unanimous governmental support even in a water-stressed region. Meta's El Paso experience shows that even well-resourced engagement can be undermined when key project details change after commitments are made. And the Mojo Ranch situation illustrates how the absence of engagement, combined with inconsistent water use claims, can transform a community from receptive to fiercely oppositional in a matter of weeks. For the data center industry, these cases collectively suggest that the era of quiet, backroom approvals is ending. The communities that host these facilities are paying attention, organizing rapidly, and demanding accountability. Developers who recognize this reality and invest in genuine, early, transparent engagement are far more likely to build both their projects and lasting relationships with their host communities.