The Realtors' new data center study says nine Virginia counties have none. Virginia permitted them.

The National Association of Realtors published a study on Sept. 9 that tells its members what to say when a client asks whether a data center will hurt the value of a house. The answer it reaches is that there is no single data center effect on housing. It runs county by county across the whole country, it is already moving through local boards to agents, and it will be quoted at Virginia board tables all fall.

Its argument depends entirely on one number: how many data centers each county has. Sort the nation's counties into four groups by that count, then compare home values, jobs and electricity rates across the groups.

So look up Stafford County in the study's published appendix. The count is 0. The category is "No Data Centers." Beside it sits a median home value of $485,100 that feeds the comparisons the study makes.

Virginia issued Amazon an air permit for a data center in Stafford County in March 2025.

Eight more Virginia localities are filed under "No Data Centers" while holding state permits for named data center sites: Caroline, Chesterfield, Hanover, Louisa, Russell, Spotsylvania, Virginia Beach and Wise. The Commonwealth's own regulator says they have data centers. The study says they have none.

Here is where the count came from. Not from permits. Not from any state or federal agency. From OpenStreetMap, the map that volunteers edit in their spare time. A federal laboratory gathers the volunteer tracings into a tidy file, the file gets a permanent identifier, and somewhere between the hobbyist and the appendix it stops looking like a drawing and starts looking like a measurement.

It never stopped being a drawing. Of the 1,474 records in the version the study used, 1,237 are individual buildings. Loudoun County returns 213 entries and 79 of them name Amazon Web Services, which is one company's campuses counted as dozens of separate things. Trace a campus as a single outline and it counts once. Trace it building by building and it counts 20 times. Leave it untraced and the county has none.

The study itself proves how unstable that is. It cites two versions of the map, eight months apart. Between them, 55 of 252 counties land in a different one of its four groups. One county in five, same file, same publisher, and almost none of it explained by anything being built.

Credit where it is owed, and a fair amount is owed. The study's arithmetic is correct and I checked it four separate ways. It names its source, which most research of this kind never bothers to do. It warns readers that county patterns say nothing about any particular house. It publishes a result that cuts against its own story, that electricity rates rose fastest in counties with one or two data centers rather than in counties with 10 or more. Its conclusion may well hold. The count underneath it does not.

That matters more in Virginia than almost anywhere, because this is where the study lands in a room with a gavel. Frederick County's supervisors directed staff in July to draft an ordinance removing data centers as an allowed use in every zoning district. Boards across the state are weighing caps, conditions and outright bans. Into those rooms comes a national study, handed over by the local board of realtors, saying the

housing worry is overstated. Nobody at the table has any reason to ask where the county counts came from, and nothing in the study suggests the question is worth asking.

I nearly got this wrong myself, in the other direction. Testing the map against the EPA's air permit records turned up 64 counties with permitted facilities and no map entry. Then I opened the facility names, which I had not done. Five of my missing data centers were crypto mining rigs bolted to gas wells in a Colorado county of 1,379 people. One was a coal-fired power plant. One was a Walmart parking lot repaving job. I took them out, watched my own number fall to 58, and published the script that lists every record so anyone can fight me line by line.

That took one afternoon. It is the whole distance between a number and a finding, and on this count nobody had walked it, on either side of Virginia's argument about data centers.

None of this says whether a data center helps or hurts the house next door. It says the number being used to answer that question cannot carry it. Before the next study reaches a board table, somebody should ask what it counted and whether anyone opened the file. Here the file is free, the Commonwealth's permit list is a public web page, and the check takes an afternoon.

Tommy Turner of Williamsburg is an independent, self-funded researcher whose work on data center fiscal and land use policy in Virginia, Georgia and Tennessee has appeared in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, the Virginian-Pilot, the Roanoke Times and RTO Insider. The research behind this column, including the data and the eight scripts that reproduce every figure in it, is deposited at Zenodo, DOI 10.5281/zenodo.22819653. He serves on the advisory board of a Sloan Foundation-funded study at Emory University on data centers and the southern energy buildout; the study had no role in this column.