

Who Was Assigned to Ask How Much

Institutions, Their Records, and the Fact Nobody Had a Field For

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Opening

A data center in Virginia that buys its water from the county utility is metered. The utility bills the facility and files its own report with the state, and on that report, in the December 2018 revision still current in September 2026, the facility does not appear. Virginia's rule settles who reports: "The purchase of water from a waterworks by a customer of the waterworks does not constitute a withdrawal". The customer is outside the class. The utility is inside it, and the utility's form records a sale of water as a transaction between two waterworks and has no field for the other party.¹²

Tennessee's form asks a buyer to name its source and asks the seller nothing about its buyers. Of the forms read, Georgia's alone ask a supplier to identify its buyer, and the field is built for another public water system, which a facility that buys its water is not. Read field by field, on the four recurring paper forms in the revisions examined, with Tennessee's registration form, a delivery of treated water to a data center "has no field of its own". The electronic filing systems, permit-specific reporting conditions and separately published guidance were not read. On the paper, the volume is measured and the recipient is what the record cannot see, "and the illegibility is produced by the form". When the General Assembly took up the problem in 2026 it added a line to the utility's report and left the definition of a withdrawer unchanged in substance. The paper's summary is exact: "The Board will see a volume delivered to a class of customer; it will not see a customer".³⁴⁵⁶

Institutions govern through what they write down. On a form, a field is a labelled blank. In an institution it has two halves: the capacity to write the fact down, and someone who holds what was written against something else, last year's figure, the policy on the books, the rule being drafted. A figure that lands in a whole field can be counted, compared, appealed and summed across a state. A fact with half a field reaches the decision some

¹ *No Field to Land In*, pp. 2, 27.

² 9VAC25-200-10, quoted in *No Field to Land In*, p. 5.

³ *No Field to Land In*, p. 27.

⁴ *No Field to Land In*, pp. 2, 12.

⁵ *No Field to Land In*, p. 27.

⁶ *No Field to Land In*, p. 27.

other way or not at all. Across the settings in this essay the decisive fact is reliably the one nobody has a field for.

The failures divide by which half is missing, and there is a third case the first two do not cover. Where the writing half is absent, the instrument has no place to put the fact, or has one the public cannot see. Where the reading half is absent, the fact went into the record and nobody read it against anything; repeat that long enough and a record fills with copies of a claim nobody held against its source, until the copies pass for confirmation. In the third case both halves are present. The fact was written down, someone read it, said what it meant on the record, and the institution wrote that down too and proceeded. These are different failures with different repairs, and the essay keeps them apart.

The distinction matters because the repairs run in different directions. A missing field is repaired by writing a line into the instrument, or unsealing one; Virginia's General Assembly tried that in 2026, adding a line to the utility's water report that still names no customer. An unread field already has its line. What it needs is a reader with a reason to hold it against something, and a reason is harder to legislate than a line. The third case has no repair in the instrument at all. The line was there and the reader was there, and what was missing was anything that obliged the room to answer. The settings below are sorted, roughly, by which of the three they show, and the essay ends on the third because it is the one no form can fix.⁷

Instruments that measure only what they can already see

Georgia requires a permit of anyone withdrawing more than 100,000 gallons of groundwater a day, the figure the Regulated Riparian Model Water Code later recommended. Virginia, by comparison, requires an annual report from every user withdrawing more than ten thousand gallons a day in any month, statewide. In the sixteen rules of Georgia's Subject 391-3-2, compiled through 14 August 2026, every recurring duty to measure or report a withdrawal attaches to an applicant or a permittee. Permit status therefore "turns on a quantity that, before a permit issues, exists only as the withdrawer's declaration". The paper states the design property on its own terms: "Where every obligation to measure a withdrawal is keyed to permit status, the agency holds a measured figure only for parties whose status is already settled. Such a regime routinely produces no measurement of the quantity its own trigger depends on". The word *routinely* is load-bearing. The Division keeps case-specific authority to enter property and investigate a withdrawal, and a narrower power to require sworn reports. The finding concerns what the rules routinely produce; what the Division could learn if it chose to look is a separate question.⁸⁹¹⁰¹¹¹²¹³¹⁴

⁷ *No Field to Land In*, p. 27.

⁸ *Declared, Not Measured*, p. 2.

⁹ *A Line Drawn on a Highway*, p. 8.

¹⁰ *Declared, Not Measured*, p. 2.

Benneer's study of Massachusetts toxics reporting could bound what went unreported because facilities that left the regime left a record on the way out: a reporting spell that ended, sometimes a stated reason, and a known distance from the line. A Georgia declarant who files no application leaves nothing comparable: "no exit form, and no reported quantity". On the Act and rules as read, the declarant who files no application generates no reporting record of the kind her method needs.¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷

Gas works the same way one level up. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission finds need for interstate pipeline capacity on the strength of a signed precedent agreement. The public versions of the three precedent agreements filed in FERC docket CP26-14 run 124 pages and contain no occurrence of "data center," "generation," "power plant," "end use" or "load," on a full extraction including optical character recognition of the scanned pages. That silence is doctrine. In a neighbouring certificate three months later, the Commission stated that it "does not weigh end uses differently for the purpose of determining need," and, on rehearing, that a shipper's procurement decisions are "outside the Commission's jurisdiction and best left to state regulators".¹⁸¹⁹²⁰

The state regulator was the Virginia State Corporation Commission, considering Virginia Electric and Power Company's application for "an approximately 944 megawatt nominal flexible fuel electric generating facility in Chesterfield County". The public record put capacity factors between 2.7 and 20 percent in front of it, and at least one further figure is redacted from the public versions, and a witness confirmed 16 percent on the third day of hearing. The twenty-seven-page final order contains no occurrence of the phrase "capacity factor". That is a search of an optically scanned order with visible misreadings, and the finding concerns the written order; what the commissioners had in mind is outside it. Fuel cost turns on the figure the order does not name, and so do the transportation convention and the federal carbon subcategory. FERC leaves the question to state regulators. Virginia's had already written its order without the number. No forum's decision in the Virginia

¹¹ *Declared, Not Measured*, p. 2.

¹² *Declared, Not Measured*, p. 22.

¹³ *Declared, Not Measured*, p. 10.

¹⁴ *Declared, Not Measured*, p. 22.

¹⁵ *Declared, Not Measured*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Declared, Not Measured*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Declared, Not Measured*, pp. 2, 5.

¹⁸ *What the Record Does Not Say*, p. 12.

¹⁹ *What the Record Does Not Say*, pp. 11–12.

²⁰ 194 FERC ¶ 61,078 at P 47 and 195 FERC ¶ 61,217 at P 43, quoted in *What the Record Does Not Say*, p. 12.

record states it: "Between them sits a number nobody has stated". It will surface later in the fuel factor under Va. Code § 56-249.6, which asks whether costs were prudently incurred once they have been incurred, "and by then the plant is built".²¹²²²³²⁴²⁵²⁶²⁷

Where the shipper is TVA, which has no state regulator, the Commission reaches for something else. Asked who reviews the Tennessee Valley Authority's decision to contract for firm gas capacity for two new plants, it answered: "Regardless, Congress has oversight power over federal agencies, including TVA, and we find this sufficiently analogous to state commission oversight". The sentence appears in two of the nine Commission orders the paper holds on disk, both of them TVA's.²⁸²⁹

Georgia wrote the cost of its RFP resources down and then sealed it. On the same day in July 2025 Georgia Power filed two certification applications whose stated components sum to 9,885 megawatts, and both were granted in full. Georgia law requires each certificate to describe its approved cost, and makes that approved cost the threshold that later decides who carries the burden when rate-base recovery is challenged. The order describes the cost of the RFP resources by pointing at Tables 1.3.4 and 4.4 of the application, and every cost cell in both tables is redacted. The Commission's own staff recommended that construction monitoring reports carry the status of firm gas transportation for the three new plants. The stipulation staff signed twenty-eight days later dropped that reporting, and the order adopted the stipulation's text.³⁰³¹³²³³

²¹ the application, as quoted in the Order on Reconsideration, quoted in *What the Record Does Not Say*, p. 3.

²² *What the Record Does Not Say*, p. 11.

²³ *What the Record Does Not Say*, pp. 11, 18.

²⁴ *What the Record Does Not Say*, p. 11.

²⁵ *What the Record Does Not Say*, pp. 3, 12.

²⁶ *What the Record Does Not Say*, p. 18.

²⁷ *What the Record Does Not Say*, p. 18.

²⁸ quoted in *Sufficiently Analogous*, p. 3.

²⁹ *Sufficiently Analogous*, p. 3.

³⁰ *What the Certificate Points At*, p. 4.

³¹ O.C.G.A. §§ 46-3A-5(b), 46-3A-7(a), as cited in *What the Certificate Points At*, p. 4.

³² *What the Certificate Points At*, p. 13.

³³ *What the Certificate Points At*, p. 4.

TVA builds transmission across seven states and, on the record *The Whole Record* examined, no external body decides whether a line is needed or where it goes; its transmission tariff was approved by its own Board in 1996 and never filed with FERC. It publishes eight registers of completed categorical-exclusion checklists, 27 April 2020 to 31 March 2026, 11,899 entries, each naming a project and the exclusion applied. The register establishes that an exclusion was applied and when. "It establishes nothing about the mileage counted, the acreage credited against the 125-acre limit, or the extraordinary-circumstances screen the regulation requires. There is no such column, and no approving official is named on any of the 11,899 rows". TVA publishes the register and not the checklists. Whatever the checklists carry, the public has the column that says the answer was yes.³⁴³⁵³⁶

TVA publishes a map service named `Facebook_North_Gallatin_Alternative_Transmission_Line_Route`. The project page for the same line tells Sumner County property owners that it is being built "to provide power for growing load and increase power reliability in the Gallatin area". Both are TVA's. The file name identifies a customer. The page the landowners are sent to names no customer.³⁷

The shape is not confined to regulators. Universities met generative AI by producing records. Across 53 institutions profiled from public sources at a March 2026 snapshot, 52 had formed a named AI committee, task force or similar body, and 49 had revised an honor or integrity code with AI-specific language; 45 had provisioned an enterprise AI tool. Four had documented outreach to employers about AI expectations for graduates, and one originated its AI strategy from employer input; three had a career services unit with a documented role in AI governance or programming. The coding captures what institutions published, and the paper says so: "A thin profile can conceal extensive unreported work". On what was published, fifty-two of the fifty-three built the same kind of body, and twenty-nine were governance-dominant with no documented external-facing readiness work. The paper's account is that the institution routed the new problem through the channel it already had, and "the channel that exists wins by default before the question reaches a meeting agenda". The channels answered the questions they were built for, about risk, access and conduct. "Those are the questions they answered". On what was published, the

³⁴ *The Whole Record*, p. 13.

³⁵ *The Whole Record*, p. 13.

³⁶ *The Whole Record*, p. 13.

³⁷ quoted in *The Whole Record*, p. 16.

question the record carries least is readiness, and it is the one the paper's title names.³⁸³⁹⁴⁰⁴¹⁴²⁴³

The instruments in this movement keep the fact their decisions turn on off the page, or out of public view. Georgia's groundwater rules, as read, routinely hold a measured figure only for a permittee and, before a permit, the withdrawer's declaration. FERC's need finding rests on a signature and leaves the end use to the states, and the Virginia order that took it up, as searched, names no capacity factor; Georgia's certificate points at tables whose every cost cell is redacted. TVA's register records that an exclusion was applied, with no column for what lay behind it. Fifty-two universities built the same kind of body, and on what they published its records answer the questions the channel was built for. On the instruments read, the decisive fact either had no place, or had a place the public could not see. The county cases that follow open on the same failure in zoning, with one difference: the rule was written after the industry was already there.

The rule written after the industry is load-bearing

Three counties in the Richmond region rewrote their data center rules within fifteen months, and each reform was tested within a year. Each county won its test, in the sense that in those tests no developer established a vested right and no board was forced to approve anything. What distinguishes them is what the reform could not reach afterward. Hanover never entitled the land and denied the Mountain Road rezoning with full discretion intact. Henrico was left with a grandfathered pipeline and a warehouse, and Chesterfield with Google's effective rate, on the largest installed base in the region, held at \$0.24 for thirty years by contract. The case study reads the three as a natural experiment in the timing of reform.⁴⁴⁴⁵⁴⁶

Henrico shows what the earlier arrangement recorded. Data centers were permitted by right in the county's three industrial districts. Staff checked a plan against setbacks, height, parking, stormwater and landscaping, and if it met the code the planning director was required to approve it. There was no public hearing and no board vote, and notice went by

³⁸ *Governance Without Readiness*, p. 21.

³⁹ *Governance Without Readiness*, p. 21.

⁴⁰ *Governance Without Readiness*, p. 21.

⁴¹ *Governance Without Readiness*, pp. 21, 30.

⁴² *Governance Without Readiness*, p. 30.

⁴³ *Governance Without Readiness*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ *Chesterfield*, p. 52.

⁴⁵ *Chesterfield*, pp. 23, 52.

⁴⁶ *Chesterfield*, p. 52.

mailing to the owners of abutting parcels. The case study's summary of the consequence is the sentence this essay would have written if it had not already been written: "Each project was evaluated against the zoning code, parcel by parcel. No one was assigned to add them up". Cumulative grid and water demand across successive approvals "was never subjected to system-level review".⁴⁷⁴⁸⁴⁹

The sum arrived from inside the county government. On 1 May 2025 the planning staff published *Potential Impacts of Data Centers*, which the case study describes as cataloguing "what the by-right era had never required anyone to total," including evaporative cooling that staff put at three to five million gallons a day for a single large facility. Five weeks later the Board of Supervisors voted five to zero to remove data centers as a by-right use in every industrial district and require a Provisional Use Permit, with hearings before the Planning Commission and a board decision.⁵⁰⁵¹

"The June 2025 ordinance governs what Henrico approves next. It does not govern what Henrico already approved". QTS is proceeding with two expansions in Varina of roughly 1,100 acres and seventeen buildings, nearly eight million square feet, against more than three million square feet QTS has built at White Oak to date. The larger of the two sites was the last major data center rezoning the board approved before the reform. Every entitlement granted before 10 June 2025 proceeds under the old rules, "and the largest of those entitlements were granted in the final eighteen months of the by-right era". The case study's verdict on the result: "The process now offered residents a hearing for projects that did not matter and no hearing for the ones that did".⁵²⁵³⁵⁴⁵⁵⁵⁶

The reform also reached only the use it named. At Darbytown Road, two days after the county denied a vested-rights claim for a data center in December 2025, the developer filed a plan for seven warehouses totalling 1.82 million square feet on the same 195 acres, against the one million square feet the data center would have occupied. Warehouses

⁴⁷ Henrico, p. 14.

⁴⁸ Henrico, p. 14.

⁴⁹ Henrico, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Henrico, p. 25.

⁵¹ Henrico, p. 25.

⁵² Henrico, p. 33.

⁵³ Henrico, p. 33.

⁵⁴ Henrico, p. 33.

⁵⁵ Henrico, p. 35.

⁵⁶ Henrico, p. 35.

remain by right under the site's M-1 zoning, and the planning director approved the plan administratively on 21 January 2026 with no hearing.⁵⁷

Chesterfield wrote its rule down and put it where the public could not read it. For Google the \$0.24 rate is contractual. Three Economic Development Authority performance agreements under Va. Code § 15.2-4905 cover its three sites, and if the Board of Supervisors raises the equipment rate, the EDA pays Google an annual grant equal to the difference: "The effective rate is fixed regardless of what the Board does". Henrico raised its own rate from \$0.40 to \$2.60 in April 2025 without losing its installed operators, and Northern Virginia jurisdictions charge \$4.15 to \$4.50. Chesterfield's lock runs thirty years, in three ten-year terms. The investment thresholds and clawback provisions are under non-disclosure agreements, and "None of the underlying documents is public". One reported bound on the lock is a subject-to-appropriation clause: if a future board declines to fund the grant, the EDA is not liable. The case study calls the mechanism "highly reliable in practice even though it is legally discretionary," and says a failure to fund would severely damage the county's credit rating. Short of that, "The edge governs entrants. The performance agreement governs the incumbents". The operative instrument exists. The public holds a description of it assembled from board coverage and later county disclosures, and the case study says of that account that "every mechanic described in this paragraph awaits verification against the agreements themselves".⁵⁸⁵⁹⁶⁰⁶¹⁶²⁶³

Loudoun is the series' endgame case, and it shows the other half of the field failing. On 18 March 2025 the Board of Supervisors voted 7–2 to require a special exception for data centers in districts where they had been permitted by right. The board adopted its grandfathering standard while four staff-sourced counts of what it was grandfathering moved across fifteen weeks, 36, then 50, then 21, then 31. Two of the four were spoken under eight minutes apart in the same hearing from the same packet, and in the meetings the study transcribed no supervisor asked why the number had moved by half. Each count was a floor. Applications that did not name the use were not counted, county staff said so

⁵⁷ *Henrico*, p. 29.

⁵⁸ *Chesterfield*, pp. 22–23.

⁵⁹ *Chesterfield*, p. 22.

⁶⁰ *Chesterfield*, pp. 22–23.

⁶¹ *Chesterfield*, p. 23.

⁶² *Chesterfield*, p. 53.

⁶³ *Chesterfield*, p. 23.

on the record, and the county had by its own account once advised applicants not to name it.⁶⁴⁶⁵⁶⁶⁶⁷

The larger fact was on the county's own website. A 1987 highway financing district froze commercial and industrial zoning along the Route 28 corridor. Under Va. Code § 15.2-4603(C), those classifications "shall remain at least as permissive" until "the earlier of July 1, 2037, or for so long as there remain any outstanding monetary obligations of the district ...". Loudoun's zoning FAQ names the subsection by letter. On a point-in-polygon join the study ran against the county's building data and district boundary, and could not re-run, 51 percent of Loudoun's built data center square footage sits inside the district, 18.4 million of 36.1 million square feet; for square footage under construction the share is 26.23 percent. The reading of the statute is the study's; no judicial construction and no Attorney General opinion were located on the search the study records. "Nobody raised it against the data center amendment across the fourteen months of that process," on a corpus of fifteen meetings in the study's record, an April 2025 national law-firm client alert and a conservation organization's contemporaneous tracking. The first public, named treatment of the surviving pathway that the study located came in writing from the Zoning Administrator in July 2026, sixteen months after the vote, two days after Amazon filed a by-right site plan for roughly 800,000 square feet in Ashburn.⁶⁸⁶⁹⁷⁰⁷¹⁷²⁷³

The county cases open on lines missing or out of public reach: a by-right review with no place for the sum, a rate lock written where the public cannot read it. Loudoun ends on the other failure. Its record held the freeze and the moving counts; the freeze was published and the counts were spoken into the transcript, and in the fifteen meetings the study transcribed nobody read them against the rule being written. In Radford, somebody did.⁷⁴

⁶⁴ *Loudoun*, p. 8.

⁶⁵ *Loudoun*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ *Loudoun*, p. 8.

⁶⁷ *Loudoun*, p. 8.

⁶⁸ quoted in *Loudoun*, pp. 13–14.

⁶⁹ *Loudoun*, pp. 14, 101.

⁷⁰ *Loudoun*, pp. 8, 14.

⁷¹ *Loudoun*, pp. 7, 15.

⁷² *Loudoun*, p. 101.

⁷³ *Loudoun*, p. 101.

⁷⁴ *Loudoun*, pp. 8, 101.

The record that was read, and the institution that went on

Up to Loudoun the failures sat on the writing half; Loudoun's sat on the reading half. In Radford the fact was written down in the government's own documents, year after year, and read, on the record, by people with votes. In James City County it was written down, noted by the people in the room, and left standing. Adding a field would have repaired nothing, because the line was already there, and appointing a reader would have repaired less than it sounds, because on the records the papers examined the readers were already in their seats.

Radford runs a municipal electric utility, and in every audited year from FY2011 through FY2024 the electric fund moved money into the general fund, never less than about \$1.8 million, peaking at \$5.73 million in FY2017, \$52.04 million across the fourteen years. In FY2024 the fund earned \$144,096 in operating income and transferred \$3,974,796, roughly twenty-seven times what it earned; at the 5 to 7 percent of operating revenue typical among peer municipal-electric cities, the transfer would have been near \$1.5 million. Martinsville runs an almost identical utility at almost identical scale with the same 80.8 percent wholesale burden in FY2024. It transferred nothing from that utility to its general fund and ended the year with an \$18.6 million utility net position and a \$5.26 million general-fund cushion. The paper's summary opens with the argument: "Radford did not decide to become a fiscally distressed city. It arrived there by making the same small decision fourteen times".⁷⁵⁷⁶⁷⁷⁷⁸

Each of the fourteen decisions was recorded. The unassigned general-fund balance peaked at \$3.33 million in FY2013, fell to \$88,460 by FY2021 and to negative \$4.55 million by FY2024. Radford's audits reported no financial-statement findings from FY2011 through FY2018. The first finding, 2019-001, a material weakness in accounting systems that "are not integrated," was filed with the FY2019 report in March 2020 and recurs under a new number in every report through FY2024. It is the same weakness the Auditor of Public Accounts cites in its 2025 distress determination. The paper does not say who in the city received or reviewed the findings. The city's own audited FY2024 report quotes its fund-balance policy, 10 percent of operating expenditures, and three pages later states: "The City's unassigned fund balance in the general fund has been below 10% since FY 2019". *Fiscal Crossroads* reads that as six consecutive years out of compliance with the city's own policy.⁷⁹⁸⁰⁸¹⁸²⁸³

⁷⁵ *The Quiet Option*, p. 2.

⁷⁶ *The Quiet Option*, p. 13.

⁷⁷ *The Quiet Option*, p. 3.

⁷⁸ *The Quiet Option*, p. 2.

⁷⁹ *The Quiet Option*, p. 2.

⁸⁰ *The Quiet Option*, pp. 13–14.

The state keeps a reader for exactly this, outside the city. Its fiscal-distress early-warning system scores localities against a 45-point threshold. Radford scored 55 in the 2023 analysis and 70 in 2024. When the Auditor wrote to the mayor and city manager on 12 November 2025, the score was 88.33. The paper reports the letter of 2025 and the scores for 2023 and 2024; it does not report a letter for 2023 or 2024. The letter invited the city into a follow-up review and did not by itself impose a corrective-action plan. A recommendation for state assistance followed on 26 March 2026.⁸⁴⁸⁵⁸⁶

Inside the city, on the record the paper examined, the problem was named on the council in 2017, and the two who named it were outvoted. When residents came in force to the spring 2026 budget hearings they came about the electric bill, and the structural question "surfaced from the public a few times and was met by the council as a procedural matter of state paperwork". Between those two moments, the paper concludes, "the transfer continued because nothing in the structure required anyone to defend it". Why the council chose the transfer over a tax increase, the paper labels inference: the documents support it and do not prove it.⁸⁷⁸⁸⁸⁹⁹⁰

James City County shows the same failure over a longer span. Williamsburg and James City County have run a joint school system since 1 July 1955, under contracts amended fourteen times between 1963 and 2022. The minutes of the FY09 budget adoption, 24 June 2008, as quoted in *Three Rooms*, record Supervisor John McGlennon saying he was "disappointed with the budget and felt it damaged relationships with the City of Williamsburg and the School Board." He voted for it anyway. The book calls it "the earliest warning shot on the public record from someone who would still be in the room when the breakup arrived". In April 2012 Supervisor Jim Kennedy asked whether the City, with ten percent of the budget, could dictate how ninety percent of the spending would occur. The county administrator explained the mechanism, and "Kennedy let the answer stand. Eleven years later, in 2023, that arithmetic would still be sitting underneath every dispute the two governments had".

⁸¹ *The Quiet Option*, p. 14.

⁸² quoted in *Fiscal Crossroads*, p. 19.

⁸³ *Fiscal Crossroads*, p. 19.

⁸⁴ *Fiscal Crossroads*, p. 18.

⁸⁵ *Fiscal Crossroads*, p. 18.

⁸⁶ *Fiscal Crossroads*, p. 19.

⁸⁷ *The Quiet Option*, pp. 5, 22.

⁸⁸ *The Quiet Option*, pp. 2–3.

⁸⁹ *The Quiet Option*, p. 22.

⁹⁰ *The Quiet Option*, p. 3.

The system went through a breakup attempt in 2023 and a new contract in October 2025.⁹¹⁹²⁹³⁹⁴⁹⁵

A teacher in the school division presented a figure on county funding of the schools during public comment, and when a supervisor asked the county administrator to verify it, he said he did not have the verified number. The county was then inside negotiations whose tri-party committee of chief financial officers was building a funding formula; the book calls the teacher's figure "the kind of number the negotiating committee was generating." "The negotiation room had it. The BoS room did not". The book records that the administrator did not return the verified number at the next meeting, or at the one after.⁹⁶⁹⁷

The Mounts Bay book, covering the Board of Supervisors from October 2012 through February 2026, states the method's claim and its limit together: the board's decisions, "when traced across the thirteen-year period, form patterns that no single year would have made visible". It also says it "does not generalize beyond that road". Tracing across thirteen years took an archive. The Regional Government Records Corpus holds approximately 87,800 files across eleven jurisdictions, five at research depth; its strongest jurisdiction carries continuous minutes from 1978 and verbatim transcripts from 2012.⁹⁸⁹⁹¹⁰⁰

On these records, reading was not the scarce thing. Radford's two dissenters had the figures and the standing and were outvoted. The state keeps a reader with a mandate, and it helped late: Radford's early-warning score was past the threshold in the 2023 analysis, and the letter the paper reports came in November 2025. The public has the strongest reason to read, and in Radford it arrived last, at the electric bill in the spring of 2026, six years after the first audit finding was filed. What would let it arrive earlier is a record built to be read across years rather than one meeting at a time, the kind that let the Mounts Bay book see patterns "no single year would have made visible". The public supplies the reason,

⁹¹ *Three Rooms*, p. 3.

⁹² *Three Rooms*, p. 7.

⁹³ *Three Rooms*, p. 7.

⁹⁴ *Three Rooms*, p. 7.

⁹⁵ *Three Rooms*, pp. 2–3.

⁹⁶ *Three Rooms*, p. 24.

⁹⁷ *Three Rooms*, p. 24.

⁹⁸ *Mounts Bay*, p. 50.

⁹⁹ *Mounts Bay*, p. 50.

¹⁰⁰ *Regional Government Records Corpus*, p. 1.

and the cross-year record supplies something to hold the reason against. None of this is a line anyone can add to a form, and none of it casts a vote.¹⁰¹¹⁰²¹⁰³¹⁰⁴

The record that grows by repetition

The last form of the failure is older than any instrument in this essay. In 1798 James Rennell drew two maps for Mungo Park's account of his West African travels, and on them a substantial east-to-west mountain chain. Park had recorded distant mountains southeast of his route and been told they lay in the kingdom of Kong. He did not report a great wall across the region. Rennell supplied it, from Park's limited observation, local reports, older accounts and his own theory that the Niger rose there and ended inland. Aaron Arrowsmith put the range on an influential map of Africa in 1802, and other cartographers followed. Bassett and Porter later examined 99 maps produced from 1798 through 1890. "Ninety showed a named or unnamed mountain chain in the same general area. The accumulation looked like corroboration. Much of it was repetition".¹⁰⁵¹⁰⁶

The range was questioned. A reviewer doubted it as early as 1815, and later explorers and geographers disputed its location or extent. "Rennell's reputation and the authority of the inherited map outweighed those doubts". Louis-Gustave Binger reached the town of Kong in February 1888 and found hills and highlands and no continuous chain. The correction took years to travel: the mountains were in a 1905 school atlas and in the index of the Oxford Advanced Atlas in 1928. The later mapmakers did not have to invent anything. "They could copy the mountains accurately". A reader consulting several atlases could reasonably believe several mapmakers had independently confirmed the range, when many of the maps "belonged to the same family of information".¹⁰⁷¹⁰⁸¹⁰⁹¹¹⁰

¹⁰¹ *The Quiet Option*, p. 5.

¹⁰² *Fiscal Crossroads*, p. 18.

¹⁰³ *The Quiet Option*, pp. 2, 13.

¹⁰⁴ *Mounts Bay*, p. 50.

¹⁰⁵ *The Mountains That Were Not There*, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰⁶ *The Mountains That Were Not There*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁷ *The Mountains That Were Not There*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁸ *The Mountains That Were Not There*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁹ *The Mountains That Were Not There*, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *The Mountains That Were Not There*, p. 2.

This is the reading half failing in another form. Each map was a record, and each could be read. The maps "shared the same inherited premise," and "The source lineage also became difficult to see".¹¹¹

The essay's warning is that AI systems "can reproduce the same pattern at much greater speed". The Source Diversity Audit, reported in *Who Is Training Whom*, put six Virginia public-record questions to four generative search products, twice each, on 12 and 13 September 2026, for 48 answers. The answers displayed 185 citations that reached 136 distinct pages. Thirteen were the record itself. None of the pages documented its own verification against a record; the paper notes that two pages behind one question were written by reporters who may have been in the room, and calls that coding call "the weakest joint in the audit". Ninety could not be followed from what the product showed, 77 of them titles with no link at all. Counted over the 59 linked pages alone, the result is 13 primary records and 13 unknowns, "and the zero on independent checks holds either way".¹¹²¹¹³¹¹⁴¹¹⁵

The loop closes when the answer enters the record. The paper's worked example: three accurate restatements of one county table, a memo citing all three, and "the public record acquires a fourth descendant. The next search retrieves the memo and reports four sources. Nothing false had to be invented at any step". The example is a hypothetical, and the paper offers its framework as pathways to test, not proven laws. The audit measures what a reader already receives at the start of that loop, and nothing further along it. The paper's proposed fix is modest: the products already hold the citation set and could group the pages that descend from one record, "so that a reader sees an inventory of two or three things observed and a note that the rest could not be followed. On the six audited questions the inventory would have been short and the note long".¹¹⁶¹¹⁷¹¹⁸

Four settings have found fields missing, unread, or read and overruled. One place in this essay's evidence did something else with a gap. It built one.

¹¹¹ *The Mountains That Were Not There*, p. 2.

¹¹² *The Mountains That Were Not There*, p. 3.

¹¹³ *Who Is Training Whom*, p. 12.

¹¹⁴ *Who Is Training Whom*, pp. 2, 10.

¹¹⁵ *Who Is Training Whom*, p. 10.

¹¹⁶ *Who Is Training Whom*, pp. 12–13.

¹¹⁷ *Who Is Training Whom*, p. 2.

¹¹⁸ *Who Is Training Whom*, p. 13.

Reading a record against itself

Published employment figures for data center construction come from the industry, from agencies relaying an industry figure, or from unions testifying on projects, and the paper could locate no independent series at the metropolitan level. The standard measure of union membership does not reach the question either. The Current Population Survey codes construction as one undifferentiated industry, and the occupation variable that would isolate electricians is crossed with metropolitan area in no table the Union Membership and Coverage Database publishes, so the trade is reached only nationally, on a sample of 695 to 940 observations a year, which caps the mean across the published metropolitan areas below four in every year. Union density is published for metropolitan areas, and for private construction within them. It is not published annually for one trade inside one metropolitan area, and the survey cannot supply it.¹¹⁹¹²⁰¹²¹

The record that could was written for another purpose. Every labor organisation covered by federal labor-reporting statutes files an annual report with the Department of Labor stating its membership, under penalty of perjury, and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers publishes maps of which of its locals holds jurisdiction over inside construction, the wiring of buildings, in each area. Neither was made to measure a data center. Joined, they give a sixteen-year panel of 11,645 local-years covering 786 filing organisations, every IBEW local that filed a report of any kind in any year from 2010 to 2025, with membership, apprentice counts and geography. It is a count, and the paper says so. The series shows how many people the trade's own locals reported, year by year, in the places where the campuses were built, filed for a purpose that had nothing to do with data centers.¹²²¹²³¹²⁴

Set against a second record the series had never met, it holds. The Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages counts electrical-contractor employment with no sampling error. The two sources correlate in log levels in every year of the panel and at 0.55 in growth over the full span, against 0.23 year over year: "They agree about where the trade is and how it moved over a decade, and disagree about what it did last year". Against the survey estimate of construction union membership the comparison fails, and the paper says why: the two count different populations, and within a metro the survey's figure moves eleven and a half times as much from year to year as the panel's. Known defects are bounded. A local absorbed by another cannot be told from organic growth in the filing, and that is capped at

¹¹⁹ *Where the Electricians Went*, p. 1.

¹²⁰ *Counting a Trade*, p. 1.

¹²¹ *Counting a Trade*, p. 1.

¹²² *Counting a Trade*, p. 2; *Where the Electricians Went*, p. 1.

¹²³ *Counting a Trade*, p. 2.

¹²⁴ *Counting a Trade*, p. 1.

17.2 percent of aggregate growth in the treated group and 19.7 percent in the nearest comparison group, counting disappearing locals of fifty members or more.¹²⁵¹²⁶¹²⁷

Among inside locals of at least a thousand members, those in metropolitan areas where one of four hyperscale operators published a campus grew 27.4 percentage points faster over 2010 to 2025 than those elsewhere. "That estimate is stable in sign and magnitude and fragile in significance". Clustered on 33 states, the 95 percent interval runs from -1.4 to +56.1 and does not clear conventional significance; randomization tests permuting whole metropolitan areas and whole states give 0.0136 and 0.0102, and do. The papers report both. Employment in the same metros, counted by the census of employers, grew 9.1 to 11.9 percent faster by 2025, against 17.3 percent in membership summed to the same areas, so membership grew 1.5 to 1.9 times as fast as the employment beneath it, and the note cannot separate treatment from catch-up, because the employment series was not flat before the campuses arrived either. The numerator is one branch of one trade. The denominator is every electrical contractor. The series counts members; hours and jobs are outside it, and that is the limit that matters for the question this essay has asked in every setting.¹²⁸¹²⁹¹³⁰¹³¹¹³²

The series was then read against itself. The eight-year version, opening in 2018, had reported a 25.8-point difference with a randomization p-value below 0.001. That figure came from permuting treatment across individual locals. Treatment is assigned to a metropolitan area, several locals share one, and permuting them independently "yields a null distribution too tight by a factor of about three". Rebuilt over sixteen years with the correct units, "the direction of the earlier conclusion is unchanged and its stated precision was overstated". The eight-year panel could also see only one usable year before treatment and could not test the assumption its design required; the sixteen-year panel reports the test. A referee "accepted the measurement and rejected the identification," and the note calls itself descriptive.¹³³¹³⁴¹³⁵¹³⁶

¹²⁵ *Counting a Trade*, p. 2.

¹²⁶ *Counting a Trade*, p. 2.

¹²⁷ *Counting a Trade*, p. 2.

¹²⁸ *Counting a Trade*, p. 2.

¹²⁹ *Membership Grew Faster*, p. 2.

¹³⁰ *Membership Grew Faster*, p. 2.

¹³¹ *Membership Grew Faster*, p. 2.

¹³² *Membership Grew Faster*, p. 12.

¹³³ *Membership Grew Faster*, pp. 1–2.

¹³⁴ *Membership Grew Faster*, p. 1.

That is the whole method. Two records written for other purposes were joined into a line that no published table carried. The line was held against a third record and against its own earlier version. What survived is the count and its direction, with an interval that crosses zero and two randomization tests that clear.

The same reading is available to the essay's other settings, and in each the paper that supplied the setting has already begun it. The utility reports that carry no customer still carry the utility's own volume, year by year, and a volume series can be held against itself once anyone is reading for that. Loudoun's four counts were spoken in four meetings and meant nothing until the study set them side by side. TVA's map service and TVA's project page were both published; the customer appears when one is held against the other. The Radford transfer sat in fourteen audited statements, and fourteen statements read side by side are the series The Quiet Option built. In every case the second record already existed. What the corpus adds is the reading, and the reading is the method.¹³⁷¹³⁸¹³⁹

Close

On 17 April 2017 Radford's mayor, Bruce Brown, declined to support the budget he was presiding over and read a statement into the minutes. He dated the practice to 2004, when an earlier council "elected to supplement funding our general fund with income from the electric enterprise reserves & yearly income". When deregulation raised the city's wholesale power cost in 2008 and 2009, "we were still able to draw the \$2.5 million targeted for electric revenue". A councilman said he was "in favor of a tax increase," that the reserves were below where they should be, "and this budget does not do anything to restore those and this is worrisome". The budget passed three votes to two. The paper's account of that night: "The two dissenters had named the mechanism and the remedy. The majority chose to continue".¹⁴⁰¹⁴¹¹⁴²¹⁴³

That is the third failure. Two officials, neither assigned to audit it, held the record against the years before and the reserve the city was spending, and said so. What they said went into the minutes, beside everything else the city had written down. The transfer ran in

¹³⁵ *Membership Grew Faster*, p. 2.

¹³⁶ *Membership Grew Faster*, p. 2.

¹³⁷ *Loudoun*, p. 8.

¹³⁸ *The Whole Record*, p. 16.

¹³⁹ *The Quiet Option*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ minutes as quoted in *The Quiet Option*, p. 5.

¹⁴¹ *The Quiet Option*, p. 5.

¹⁴² *The Quiet Option*, p. 5.

¹⁴³ *The Quiet Option*, p. 5.

every audited year that followed. In November 2025 the state's early-warning score for Radford stood at 88.33 against a threshold of 45.¹⁴⁴¹⁴⁵

The regulatory settings in this essay turned on a quantity, and the question was who was assigned to ask how much. Radford had the quantity, and it had the asker. Two officials said it on the record, one of them naming the figure the city was drawing, and the institution wrote it down and went on. A field can be written and read and still lose the vote.¹⁴⁶

The mayor's statement is in the minutes.

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¹⁴⁴ *The Quiet Option*, p. 2.

¹⁴⁵ *Fiscal Crossroads*, p. 18.

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