

Speaking Engagements | September 30, 2026

Building the Grid, Building Communities: Transmission Investment, Affordability, and Accountability in the Southeast

SPEAKERS

[Josh Combs](#) | [Andy J. Flavin](#)

As billions of dollars flow into transmission infrastructure across the Southeast, this segment examines the real-world tension between economic development and customer impact. Drawing on the Virginia State Corporation Commission's oversight of utilities, the discussion considers how utilities and regulators can be held accountable for delivering tangible benefits to the communities they build in and around, and not just economic promises on paper. The conversation then turns to a timely case study: Virginia's data center corridor ("Data Center Alley") and the debate over potential data center moratoriums, alongside a look at how shifting political dynamics, including the effects of midterm elections, shape local engagement and decision-making. The segment closes with a broader view of how the Southeast is approaching transmission development as a region, balancing rapid growth with the need for durable, trust-based relationships with the communities affected.

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Transcript

Title: Building the Grid, Building Communities: Transmission Investment, Affordability, and Accountability in the Southeast

Speakers: Josh Combs and Andy Flavin

Andy Flavin (00:14):

So, along with these big dollar investments in transmission and generation, I think there's another camp of folks who would point out the economic development benefits that would come with that type of large investment, whether it's building the necessary infrastructure to attract business or even just the economic development that comes from spending money to build infrastructure and maintain it over the next however many years.

That kind of balances against maybe, or is a consideration that maybe is a bit different than just affordability.

So how have you seen the commissions in the Southeast weigh that economic development benefit with the concerns that you were just discussing about affordability?

Josh Combs (01:21):

So I think that one of the interesting things about that, and you're right, there is a tension, right, and it's coming up everywhere.

But the state public service commissions have the jurisdiction over public utilities. So there's a certain level of — there are state efforts that are beyond just the Public Service Commission that are impacting and driving some of this economic development. So I do feel that some of those issues are not really within their purview.

But what we have seen, I think, is you've seen some of these customers, these large customers, and the way that the commissions have been able to have an impact in this area is really require some true engagement in the community, some true investment to demonstrate that these investments — whether it's jobs, whether it's certain other community benefits — really trying to oversee that process, as a part, through the commission, if through its purview of utilities, to require, whether it's community centers or require certain other investments in the community, that may be wholly unrelated to ultimately why they're there or what their business is.

But it's a way of requiring some of these customers that are really impacting these communities, by using land and kind of potentially impacting customer bills, but requiring them to be a citizen of the community and invest in the community in a real way, that they can be held accountable for. So there is this natural tension, and there's questions about jobs, and then other impacts, environmental impacts.

And I think the commissions have used the tools that they have within their toolbox, based on the legislative kind of framework that authorizes them, to really address affordability, but also require some true engagement from these customers in the communities in which they're going to be building and impacting.

And I think one thing that we've been seeing around the country, through state governments and commissions, is there have been pauses that have been placed on some of this development for various reasons. And I know that while Virginia is in an RTO jurisdiction, it's also in the Southeast, right? And you have, I think, a state government that's very interested in this, and also a commission that's interested in this.

Have moratoriums been discussed in Virginia, and how has that kind of played out in terms of a mechanism of really addressing this tension between economic development and customer impacts?

Andy Flavin (03:57):

So what I've seen in Virginia is that, I believe, particularly in the last legislative session, there were ideas floating around at the state level about some type of moratorium — or either repealing certain tax incentives for data centers, or imposing new requirements that, while not outright banning them, would make it much more difficult to develop those projects.

As of, through the 2026 General Assembly session, there was nothing like that, that was actually enacted, that had, at a state level, a really severe impact.

But now we are starting to see a lot of localities that are discussing moratoriums. I believe Loudoun County, who really is at the epicenter — Data Center Alley is in Loudoun County — and I believe it's, if not the highest concentration of data centers in the world, it's pretty darn close.

I believe there's going to be a local public hearing, probably in a couple of weeks or so, soon, in which I believe the local board of supervisors are going to discuss a potential moratorium on data center permitting at the local level.

So that's one area where you can see some of these moratoriums take shape, and perhaps it might be a little bit easier than trying to do something at a state or certainly federal level, for those folks that are seeking to place moratoriums.

At the local level, of course, you need the local zoning and building permits and so forth. So that's where localities can exercise some significant siting control. And, like in Virginia at least, the localities do not have authority to regulate the siting of electric transmission towers and lines. With a couple of minor exceptions, the localities of Virginia do retain siting authority over substations.

And so, typically, when you have a transmission line that's being built to deliver a lot of power to a large load customer like a data center, you will typically need a substation on site, in order to transform that voltage, bring it down, and bring it to a usable level. And that's one area where some localities have been able to apply some pressure.

Josh Combs (06:51):

Yeah, and I think that — and I'll just mention that the same thing here — well, in Georgia, and I think I'm seeing it across the country, and I don't know whether it's kind of the interaction between the fact that there is midterm elections coming up, but the level of local engagement and pushback, to the town hall-type meetings that are lasting for hours, where customers are really — not just customers, I think just community members — are really digging into these data centers coming into their communities. And so it's another way that, while it's not the state, it's a way that you have this tension of economic development. I think you have also other environmental and tax, other kind of tensions, right, that are driving and fueling some of the debates and the discussions that are happening at a local level.

Andy Flavin (07:42):

Absolutely.

So Josh, you covered quite a bit today, and so maybe to close this out — for stakeholders that are watching this video and who may be interested in how the Southeast is approaching transmission development in the current environment, what should they be paying attention to?

Josh Combs (08:16):

Well, I'll first say, I think that, unlike normal times with energy, the work that we do — I think that in every local paper, on the local news, everywhere you turn, these issues are coming up, right? And I think that transmission is a component of every discussion that's happening across the states when it comes to energy reliability, load growth, and affordability. I think that dockets across the country, whether it's through rate cases or through IRP

proceedings, are popping up to address these issues. And so those are opportunities for community members and citizens and customers, really, to see what is the utility planning, what are the costs associated with what they're planning, and who's ultimately going to pay for it.

So I think that you will see active commission dockets around the country. I think that, sua sponte, really commissions are opening dockets to investigate certain aspects of these issues to really — and I know we kind of sound like a broken record here, but because of that, affordability is overlaying everything that's going on — they're opening dockets to investigate: how can we bring these costs down? How can we ensure that they're being fairly allocated?

So really look at the state commission dockets. And I think, that you mentioned the legislatures — I think legislatures around the country are developing a variety of bills to address some of the tensions that we've talked about, to address some of the cost issues that we've talked about. And again, at the local level, whether it's through the planning commissions or the city councils, and even in gubernatorial elections, right? It's coming up, and it's being addressed.

And so I would say, just open the newspaper, turn on the news, but really, throughout your state and local government, I think you're going to see opportunities to be engaged, and to understand how these issues are playing out, and ultimately how the costs are going to be paid for, for some of this build-out.

Andy Flavin (10:15):

Well, thanks so much, Josh. Appreciate it, and thank you for sharing your insight and experience with these transmission issues in the Southeast.

Josh Combs (10:26):

Yeah. Great talking to you, Andy.

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