

What It Means to Be a Community:

Reflections on the Successful Campaign to Stop Amazon's Warehouse on Grand Island, NY

The Coalition for Responsible Economic Development for Grand Island
CRED4GI.org
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With the announcement last evening, 12th of August 2020, that Amazon is abandoning their plans of a massive 3.8 million square foot warehouse on Grand Island, NY, we reflect on the steps that led to this meaningful victory.

The Coalition for Responsible Economic Development for Grand Island (CRED4GI) came together about forty days ago with one goal: protect the community we love from ill-conceived and unsustainable economic predation. We were not on a crusade against Amazon as a company. We were not backed by any political or special interests, or “outsiders.” We are neighbors and grandparents and friends and community members whose families have lived on Grand Island for generations or who have recently chosen to move here out of love for our way of life and the serenity and nature that surrounds us.

The decision to stand against one of the largest companies in the world is not an easy one. Many of us had never protested before, hadn't spoken at a Town meeting or public hearing, didn't know what it meant to engage in a campaign or how to create flyers or go door-to-door. We didn't know what a SEQRA process is, what kinds of particle emissions emanate from diesel tractor trailers, how many decibels of ambient sound is too many, how to interpret an Environmental Impact Statement, how to call for a public referendum, what an Article 78 is, or how to calculate tax abatements for a large industrial business. But we did our research because we needed to understand each of these in order to assess and communicate and educate about the true impacts of this proposed Amazon warehouse development.

We were told, more often than we can count, that fighting against Amazon is folly, that the project is a done deal, that we should accept the inevitable and take the best deal we can get, that if we are going to lose we might as well get something out of it. We didn't focus on the big picture because the big picture looked too much like an exercise in futility: they make movies out of David versus Goliath stories because they happen so rarely, if at all, in real life.

Instead, we stuck to the important tasks: distributing signs, creating websites, researching, writing talking points, gathering petition signatures, reaching out to friends and neighbors. We went from one Town Board meeting to the next, planning strategy as we went along and organizing to meet the challenges of the dynamic situation, learning in the process. Each person who joined us brought new energy. Every skill and talent and voice was appreciated and valued, and we worked to engage every volunteer and utilize their abilities and commitment.

The growth was noticeable. More than 700 “No Amazon Warehouse!” signs appeared in front of homes across the Island. We received donations from generous community members who could not imagine the 2nd largest warehouse in the world on this 33-square mile island, upstream from Niagara Falls, the 8th natural wonder of the world. Respected regional and national organizations came forward to communicate their staunch opposition to this project. People increasingly turned out when we sent notice of hearings and rallies. They were passionate and

encouraging of our work, which became their work too, and we gained momentum from their strength and their outrage and their belief in what we were doing together. And we believed it too. Because we couldn't accept anything else. The alternative was unthinkable.

Our resolve was apparent to Trammell Crow, the Texas-based project developers, who temporarily put the project on hold to solicit the support of the Erie County Executive and others with economic interests and little understanding of the environmental fragility and critical importance of our Island ecosystem. We celebrated prematurely and they returned with reinforcements.

But we could now imagine success. We had momentum and we realized how to win this struggle: by demonstrating the will of the community. In forty days we had received petition signatures or written statements from twenty percent of the households on Grand Island. We had fundraised more than we expected to, we had punched holes in their cookie-cutter development plans that didn't fit our community, we received expert legal counsel to guide our decision-making, and we rallied the people to voice their opposition to this project. We rejected Amazon's assault on our way of life and our environment and the future of our Island and it was apparent.

Amazon can claim that they are just making an adjustment to their multifaceted and flexible plans, that factors such as cost increases and labor requirements and the attractiveness of other locations are the reasons why they have walked away from Grand Island.

Here's what we know: Amazon does not want to be seen as a Goliath. They don't want to give the impression that they are conquering or predatory or constantly calculating how to increase market share while crushing competition both big and small and subjugating small towns. They want to win us over with slick campaigns and analytics and convenience and accessibility, even as these cost us our sense of community and our local businesses and our traditional way of life. With their nearly unlimited resources they tried to buy their way into our neighborhoods and to promise us a vision of jobs and tax income that never could compensate for the costs we would have paid with losses to greenspace, tranquility, roads and infrastructure, health and safety.

When we asked the people of Grand Island how much money we would take in exchange for our way of life, the resounding answer was that no amount of money was worth that cost. And that's when we knew we had won. Once we demonstrated to each other that we are united in our commitment to our community together, it was only a matter of time before Amazon walked away. And what feels so wonderful is not only that we have protected our community, but that we have learned what it means to be a community in the process.

With sincere appreciation and dedication,
The Steering Committee of CRED4GI
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