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## Grand Island Planning Board deals blow to project believed to be Amazon

Stephen T. Watson

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A few lawn signs have sprouted on Grand Island urging people to oppose the Project Olive development in the town, like this one on West River Road.

James P. McCoy

**T**he proposal to construct a massive warehouse and distribution center on Grand Island for a tenant widely believed to be Amazon has run into a major snag.

The town Planning Board dealt the project a significant setback this week when it turned down a request from the developer to rezone the 145-acre property from light industrial use to a planned development district.

The developer, Trammell Crow Co., is seeking the change because it makes it easier to move forward with parts of the project that don't conform to the town's zoning laws, such as a building height of 87 feet that far exceeds the island's limit of 45 feet.

The Town Board has the final say on rezoning decisions and still can overrule the Planning Board's recommendation to reject the request. If this doesn't happen, then the developer would have to obtain numerous separate variances for the project in a far more complicated approval process.

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Opponents hailed Monday's 3-2 vote by the Planning Board but said it's not the death knell for Project Olive.

"This fight is far from over. We're talking about David and Goliath here," Cathy Rayhill, co-founder of **a newly formed group of residents** who don't want Amazon to build on the island, said in an interview.

Critics say the five-story, 3.8 million-square-foot facility proposed for 2780 Long Road is too large for the island, would bring too much additional traffic and congestion at the Grand Island bridges and would pave over too much green space.

Proponents, including leading members of the island's business community, point to the jobs and tax revenue the project would generate. The developer was unperturbed by the vote.

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"We will continue to engage with other respective town advisory boards and the Town Board itself to help clarify any concerns about the project and firmly believe that this initiative will be of substantial, long-term benefit to the town without compromising the vibrancy and tranquility of the Grand Island community," Kimberly R. Nason, an attorney with Phillips Lytle who represents Trammell Crow, said in a statement.

The Buffalo News reported in May 2019 that Amazon was eyeing the property on Long Road near the Interstate-190 exit.



A rendering of the proposed ecommerce facility on Grand Island.

Image courtesy of Langan

In February, Texas-based Trammell Crow filed plans for a nearly 4 million-square-foot warehouse and distribution center at the site that is large enough to hold two Walden Gallerias inside it.

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**The developer's application runs 2,202 pages** and doesn't name the e-commerce company but uses a code – Project Olive – instead.

The sortation and fulfillment center would receive bulk shipments of consumer products from various vendors, package them and send them off to another facility where they are readied for final delivery to customers.

Much of the work at the facility would be automated, but it would have at least 1,000 employees working in two shifts – with up to 1,800 employees during the peak holiday period when seasonal workers are hired.

The building would be open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

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The structure would have 1,871 parking spaces for cars and motorcycles, another 219 spaces for trailers and 69 loading docks. The developer expects 484 truck trips per day to the facility.

A traffic study by the developer estimates the project would increase traffic on the north and south Grand Island bridges by 2.1% to 3.3% during the peak summer months, according to Nason.

Amazon has declined to comment on the project. The e-commerce giant has existing facilities in Lancaster and the Town of Tonawanda as well as a Whole Foods Market in Amherst.

The Grand Island project slowly is making its way through the approval process. Nason presented Trammell Crow's plans to the public at a packed Town Board work session on March 2.

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A planned hearing on the project that was set to take place April 8 in the Grand Island High School auditorium to accommodate an expected large crowd was canceled because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Instead, a joint Town Board-Planning Board public hearing was held online on June 11.

The request to rezone the Long Road property to a planned development district would make it easier for the developer to, for example, construct a five-story building where the town code only allows up to four stories and parking for 1,800 vehicles when the code requires 4,000 spaces, officials said.

The developer said it has made changes to the project to address the concerns of some residents, including shifting the location of a driveway, and it's working with the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority to install a bus drop-off at the front of the facility.

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Nason said the town has for years targeted the vacant property on Long Road for development and inaccurate information about the project is circulating on the island.

"The development team remains very excited about this project and its fit for Grand Island," she said in the statement.

Rayhill and Planning Board member David Duchscherer are among those concerned about the project's effects on the community.

They said they believe the developer is underplaying how much additional traffic it will bring to the island, both during the construction phase and after it opens.

And they said the project is out of scale for this property and out of character for the town more broadly, arguing Grand Island's water and sewer lines and roads can't support it.

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“The Town of Grand Island is just the wrong place for this massive industrial complex,” said Duchscherer, speaking at Monday’s Planning Board meeting shortly before the vote.

He also said he wants to know the tenant’s identity, the length of the lease and how much the property owner would pay in taxes or in lieu of taxes under an incentive agreement.

Rayhill said she believes more people will oppose the project as they learn more about it. Within the last two weeks, she helped organize a group of opponents who met on a Zoom video call last Friday to strategize.

“I firmly believe in the voice of the people,” said Rayhill, who wants the question settled by a formal public vote.

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Anti-Amazon lawn signs also are sprouting up on the island.

But does this vocal opposition reflect the views of average islanders?

Supervisor John Whitney said Project Olive inspires strong feelings on both sides.

He said the Town Board is still gathering data from consultants it hired to assess the project's effect on traffic, wildlife and plant life, wetlands, infrastructure and other areas.

Within the next month, Whitney said, the Town Board could vote on whether it thinks the project would significantly harm the environment and whether to grant the rezoning request.

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The town supervisor, for his part, said he hasn't decided whether he supports the project.

"I have to keep an open mind," he said.

 46 comments

**Stephen T. Watson**

News Staff Reporter