

# Amazon gone, but bitterness lingers at board meeting

BY LARRY AUSTIN

Island Dispatch Editor

Amazon's Project Olive proposal is gone, but debate continues in its wake.

Residents criticized the Grand Island Town Board at Monday's monthly for the way it handled Amazon's proposal for a 3.8-million-square-foot warehouse project on Love Road, which was withdrawn last week. In the public comment portion of the meeting, held remotely online due to restrictions on public meetings due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the board heard from members of the main Amazon opposition group.

Dave Reilly said the Coalition for Responsible Economic Development (CRED4GI) "is dedicated to sharing accurate information and informed discussion related to development on Grand Island. We're a nonpolitical group of concerned citizens who want to protect Grand Island's natural beauty and residential character from irresponsible development subsidized by local taxpayers. We purposely chose this name because we're not against economic growth and jobs for our community. We support the businesses

that currently reside on Grand Island because they provide good jobs, add to our tax base, and community, and don't destroy the natural habitat of our sensitive environment."

Reilly said, "What was abundantly clear in the 'No Amazon Warehouse' campaign was that the public does not want large-scale development that affects the environment and character of Grand Island and the health, safety and well-being of the people. We ask that the board recognize the will of the people and eliminate the incentives to destructive large-scale development that comes with unacceptable costs."

Michael W. Rayhill spoke "about the future of responsible development in this community in light of the recent Amazon proposal and the changing of our zoning laws.

"We need to shift how we do business in this town to align with the voice of the people," he said. "We need to reference the residents' surveys conducted in the comprehensive plan and regularly engage and solicit Islanders to lead by consensus, instead of having developers lead our conversation. When you allow organiza-

tions who have the most to profit dictate the terms of this conversation and the scope of inquiries, you forfeit the voices of those you represent. The residents of Grand Island deserve nothing less than full representation moving forward."

Cathy Rayhill of CRED4GI spoke about what she called "the lack of transparency with the recent process that changed a critical zoning law."

"So buckle up, Grand Island homeowners, because you just came inches from having one of the world's largest warehouses built on our Island."

Maureen Phillips said, "As our elected supervisor and council members, I urge you to make your intentions abundantly clear that you will not permit outsized commercial development to take over Grand Island, and that the community of homeowner/taxpayer voters, not primarily the Chamber of Commerce or the Long Range Planning Committee, is guiding your effort."

At the end of the meeting, during comments from the board, Councilman Mike Madigan welcomed the conversation about Amazon, saying: "I think there's

been a lot of good debate. I think it's really opened some folks' eyes as far as maybe being more engaged in and aware of the zoning laws and other activities that are happening on the Island."

He said, "The key thing, though, is how it's healthy to debate. We should make sure that it doesn't affect relationships, and what have you, because everybody I think has the best interest. There's two sides to the issues, and I think we should all respect the fact that there are two sides to the issue."

Councilman Tom Digati chafed at the comments on transparency by CRED4GI members. He said, "Throughout this process, though we could have communicated better, sure, during the midst of the pandemic we did what we could.

"We've been open. We've answered every phone call that's been made to us. And yet, nobody's asked what the deal was with the incentive zone. That was actually placed on the agenda in February. It was approved by the Planning Board on March 9. So to suggest that a May 28 was the first time it was public is wrong.

"The fact of the matter is that project could have gone through.

We could have issued every variance without the incentive zoning and passing that law to protect the interests of our residents by giving us the ability to get something out of it in the event it went through was this board doing right by our citizens. And before allegations get made and words get twisted to suggest that something was being brought in a clandestine manner, maybe a phone call to a board member to fully understand the circumstances would be appropriate.

"One thing that needs to be fixed on this Island is that it is healthy to debate. But we need to do it with facts. We need to do it in a respectful manner where we're not creating a divide," Digati said.

He added: "CRED4GI, it says right on your Facebook page you're a group that was anti-Amazon. Ms. Rayhill was on the radio saying there was nothing that could come to this town that would be sufficient to support that project. We can't take that approach. But we listen. We heard you. We did all we could. And if you don't believe us, maybe you should call us and talk to us about it."