

Grand Island project believed to be Amazon is still alive, developer insists

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Amazon's plan to build a 3.8 million-square-foot facility at 2780 Long Road in Grand Island may be up in the

The developer behind a giant warehouse and distribution center planned on Grand Island for a mystery tenant widely believed to be Amazon insisted Tuesday the project remains very much alive. The statement from Trammell Crow Co.'s attorney comes one day after the developer told Town Supervisor John Whitney that the project is on hold, leaving officials on and off the island speculating about the status of the plan code-named Project Olive. "The development team is continuing to pursue Project Olive within the Town of Grand Island," said Kimberly Nason, an attorney with Phillips Lytle, in an email to The Buffalo News.

Officials had spent the past day trying to figure out whether Trammell Crow's "pause" was an attempt to squeeze the Town Board or whether it was the death knell for the controversial development. The project stalled in the face of outspoken opposition on the island and the failure so far to strike a deal that includes tax breaks for the developer and public improvements for the town, officials said. Whitney and others said it's clear the company has other options around Western New York.

The proposal for a five-story, 3.8-million-square-foot facility that would employ 1,000 workers around the clock has drawn strong support and opposition since it was unveiled in February. "It's a very polarizing project," Whitney said.

Proponents say losing Amazon would be a major blow to the island's efforts to boost its work force and tax base. "This is now at the point where a very vocal minority could potentially do permanent damage to our community, financially," said Eric Fiebelkorn, president of the Grand Island Chamber of Commerce. "We won't get another project like this on the island."

Critics, however, say the facility large enough to hold two Walden Gallerias is out of scale for this location and would generate too much congestion, particularly at the bridges. They say they won't ease up until the plan is officially dead. "We're just getting started," said Cathy Rayhill, co-founder of a coalition of residents who object to the project and the way the town has conducted its review. The group organized a protest Monday outside Town Hall that drew more than 50 people.

The 2,200-page application from Trammell Crow doesn't identify a tenant, but The News reported as far back as May 2019 that Amazon was interested in the island. The developer is seeking permission to build on 145 acres at 2780 Long Road owned by Michael Huntress and his father, William, of Acquest Development.

The town Planning Board voted down a rezoning request at its July 13 meeting, although that's only a recommendation and the Town Board has final say. One week later, on Monday, a Trammell Crow representative told Whitney the proposal was on hold. Whitney said the developer cited the public opposition to the project and the lagging negotiations over tax breaks and public improvements as factors in the decision. "They think we're too far apart," said the supervisor, who declined to reveal what the town is seeking.

The Erie County Industrial Development Agency said it has not received a formal incentive application from Trammell Crow. However, a nearly identical Trammell Crow facility under construction for Amazon in a Syracuse suburb will receive almost \$71 million in tax incentives. Michael Huntress said, even with a tax break deal, the developer would pay millions of dollars in new taxes to the town, county and Grand Island School District. It's not clear when discussions over the project will restart. "The positive impacts of this project are numerous and extensive, and our team will ensure that these facts are accurately presented in order to ease concerns that may exist regarding the project," wrote Nason, the Trammell Crow attorney.

Paul Brown, president of the Buffalo Building and Construction Trades Council, said his union sent a proposed project labor agreement to the developer. The deal, if accepted, would ensure a certain share of construction jobs go to union laborers, but the e-commerce giant has a reputation for preferring non-union workers. "They're tough," Brown said. "It's Amazon."

Was the pause a sign Trammell Crow is ready to walk away from the Grand Island site? Huntress said that's not the case. "Our plan is to make this work," he said. Some officials said the statement indicates the developer isn't happy with the way things are going on the island and, at the very least, is exploring other sites. Whitney said it would be a blow to Grand Island if an Amazon facility goes to Niagara Falls, for example, bringing truck traffic to the bridges and Interstate 190 but no economic benefits to the town. "I think they're trying to put pressure on the Town Board to get the deal done," said one Project Olive observer who requested anonymity. "I think they have too much time, money and energy invested to just simply walk away without one last try."