

Grand Island managed to keep Amazon's mega-warehouse at bay. Now residents want the town to say no to a replacement.

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When Amazon wanted to build what at the time would have become one of the largest warehouses in the world on Grand Island, the company sought needed approval from the town to rezone the land. The proposal drew heavy opposition from residents concerned about everything from environmental issues to traffic jams. In the end, the project never came to fruition.

Now another project – this time proposed by Williamsville-based Acquest Development, the property owner, and smaller in size and scope – being considered for the same site is drawing the same concerns and the same kind of resistance from residents. But this time, the company does not need to have the land rezoned.

Acquest wants to build its Grand Island Commerce Center on Long Road, occupying more than half of a 207.43-acre site that had previously been eyed by Amazon.com.

And that has created a dilemma for Grand Island.

The town is considering a moratorium on such facilities, and even a change to zoning laws to prevent the project from going through, setting up likely legal action against the town, no matter which way the fight goes – whether from citizens angry that the project was allowed to proceed, or from a developer who feels its property rights were infringed upon by a rejection.

Acquest wants to build its Grand Island Commerce Center on Long Road, with more than 1.08 million square feet of storage and distribution space.

That would help address a well-documented lack of industrial space in the region that is hindering economic development because companies have no place to go, the developer has said. And it would be conveniently located along the Niagara Thruway for easy access to both the mainline Thruway to the south and the Canadian border just to the north.

Acquest has previously said the new facility could either accommodate one giant tenant or multiple large users in need of 100,000 to 200,000 square feet each, with more than 900 employees in all, but it has not identified any specific users. It projected a tax assessment of \$112 million, generating \$2.79 million in annual taxes.

But the size and nature of the \$120 million project conflicts with Grand Island residents' vision of their home as a quiet, verdant swath of residential tranquility – particularly because of the anticipated truck traffic that would come with it, and the potential for back-ups at the bridges.

“We’re an island, 7 miles across,” Janice Wiecowski of East River Road told the Town Board last week. “We’re all residents here. We love where we live. Don’t ruin it.”

Town residents are demanding that the Town Board put a stop to it.

The new warehouse is half the height - 45 feet tall - but it would cover 138 acres, pave over more of the site and have more tractor trailer parking stalls.

“I would like to see this whole thing go,” Rose Bugman said. “Think about Election Day and who’s going to back you. These people are not, if you vote the wrong way. If you like your job and want to be re-elected, I’d think about it very hard.”

Now, the Town Board is looking at changing the zoning code, instead, to retroactively prohibit the project as proposed.

“It’s really the heavy truck traffic,” Town Councilman Michael H. Madigan said. “Anytime the 190 backs up and there’s another exit, it will result in trucks getting off. And backups on the 190 happen almost daily.”

The proposed new high-bay facility at 2780 Long would sit on 123 acres of vacant land on the island, between Long and Bedell roads and fronting Interstate 190. That would occupy more than half of a larger 207.43-acre site that was previously eyed for Amazon’s 3.8-million-square-foot complex, before resident and town resistance forced the e-commerce retailer to pull out and [go to the Town of Niagara](#) instead.

It would be one-story tall and 45 feet in height, but the building’s physical footprint would take up one-third more space on the ground than what was proposed for Amazon. However, the project also would preserve 47 acres from future development, with 55% of the total site as open space. And it would include 1,292 parking spaces – 30% fewer than Amazon – but 383 trailer spaces, 75% more than Amazon.

The site is already zoned as “M-1” under town code, which allows such a warehouse and distribution center “as of right,” without needing zoning variances or changes.

Madigan – who is [running for town supervisor](#) against Peter J. Marston Jr., the deputy supervisor who is currently serving as acting supervisor – initially proposed a six-month moratorium on any new warehouse or distribution center projects on the island, to give the Town Board and residents more time to study the issue.

He argued that the code as written never envisioned such “mega” centers, and was inconsistent with the town’s comprehensive plan. “Mega-warehouse and high-cube distribution centers seem to be replacing mega malls,” he said. “Something exists today that didn’t exist at the time the law was written.”

Acquest officials did not respond to calls for comment. But that idea, which came out 18 days before the meeting, won support from more than 16 residents who spoke on the issue at the board meeting on Aug. 28. And Madigan noted that the town had previously used a similar 12-month moratorium on solar farms to adjust its code on such projects, and suggested that the short duration would prevent judicial review. “It’s not arbitrary and capricious, and it’s defensible,” he said.

But Marston and Councilman Christian Bahleda instead went further, proposing to amend the zoning code to remove warehouse and distribution facilities from the allowable uses in M-1 districts, and to allow such facilities with a special-use permit, but only up to 300,000 square feet in size. That is one-third the size of what Acquest is requesting.

The Coalition for Responsible Economic Development for Grand Island claims the project would be "far too large" and "does not fit with the general character" of the community.

The Town Board voted unanimously to set a public hearing on the zoning change for Sept. 18 at 8 p.m.

Additionally, the developer completed and filed its Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement under the State Environmental Quality Review Act, which the Town Board last week voted to accept as “adequate for public review.”

Town officials and attorneys stressed that this is only an initial step as required by law, and insisted that it doesn’t mean the town has accepted the actual contents of the documents or agreed with the findings. Rather, Marston said, it means only that the document is ready “for public review and comment.”

The board set a public hearing for Wednesday, Sept. 20, at 7 p.m., at the Grand Island High School auditorium.

But that is not the way town residents saw it last week, as many seemed confused by the proceedings. One after another, they attacked board members for even considering the draft EIS, citing repeated promises by the board to hold public reviews, and noting a host of “omissions” and “errors” that they said the board and its outside consultants should be responsible for fixing, even before the document is brought for public comment.

They demanded the board reject it outright.

But Madigan said it’s not that simple.

“We were never going to be able to say you could not do anything on this property. That would be a taking and would cost us millions,” Madigan said. “I know some people would like to think we could just say no, but that wouldn’t be responsible for the Town Board. We would lose.”