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Americans Are Pushing Back on the Warehouse Construction Boom

Opposition to distribution centers over noise, pollution and truck traffic is growing, complicating efforts to build logistics space



*Protesters in July held signs opposing the construction of an Amazon distribution center in Churchill, Pa.
Photo: Alexandra Wimley/Associated Press*

By Lydia O'Neal - April 8, 2022

The warehouse construction boom across the U.S. is hitting a wall in some communities. Residents in towns and cities are rebelling against a growing push to bring distribution centers closer to neighborhoods and areas unaccustomed to industrial traffic, an effort driven by surging e-commerce demand that opponents of the warehouses say is bringing noise, pollution and heavy-duty trucks to local roads.

Foes of the distribution centers have gone from speaking out at local meetings and on Facebook to launching lawsuits and GoFundMe campaigns to counter a warehouse construction wave that is changing the U.S. distribution landscape. Companies added more than 1.6 billion square feet of new industrial space across the country from 2017 through the end of the first quarter this year, according to real estate services firm Cushman & Wakefield, in an unrelenting drive to get goods closer to customers amid a growing arms race among retailers to deliver orders faster.

The construction has drawn protests from communities outside cities including Pittsburgh and Madison, Wis., and neighborhoods near expanding logistics regions in Southern California and eastern Pennsylvania.

“It would be really great if the state and the county, the companies and the communities, could get into some kind of a discussion to solve this problem, because we’re under siege,” said Anne Franke, a retiree opposing a development in Maxatawny, Pa., a rural community near Allentown, Pa., in a region heavy with warehouse construction. “Our communities are under siege in Pennsylvania.”

So far, the efforts to halt warehouse construction generally haven’t been successful, said John Boyd, principal and founder of the Boyd Company Inc., a site selection firm in Boca Raton, Fla. But he said they often complicate the planning process and have made developments more expensive, forcing companies to devote time and money to litigation and public relations efforts.

Residents of Holbrook, N.Y., on Long Island got more than 300 signatures on a Change.org petition aimed at blocking construction of a 147,000-square-foot distribution center. The developer of a 201,000-square-foot warehouse in Upland, Calif., in the Inland Empire region near the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, is locked in a legal battle with a community group over the environmental impact of the project.

Sometimes even after a project dispute is settled, opponents successfully lobby officials to apply new taxes or regulations to warehouses or establish moratoriums on new construction, said Mr. Boyd.

“Policy makers and public advocacy groups obviously need to work together, and we need to accommodate our supply chain,” he said, adding the growth in e-commerce and demand for goods during the pandemic “hasn’t happened in a vacuum.”

The mounting opposition has developers and logistics operators turning more often to public affairs firms to get ahead of the resistance by touting projects as jobs generators and boons to local economies, particularly in an era of retrenchment in the physical retail sector.

Tom Ahern, a partner at the Wellesley Hills, Mass.-based corporate public affairs firm Five Corners Strategies LLC, said the distribution centers are meeting demand in and near the communities.



Warehouse construction is booming across the U.S. Here, an Amazon project was under way in Syosset, N.Y., last year. Photo: Bruce Bennett/Getty Images

Everyone loves to see Amazon.com Inc. delivery vans “show up in their driveway the day after they ordered the new fishing reel or the mitt for their son or daughter,” he said. “But everybody wants to make sure that the warehouse from which it’s coming is one town over.”

In a typical year, Five Corners might see three or four requests for campaigns supporting new logistics facilities, said Mr. Ahern. Since mid-2021, he said, “the pedal has hit the floor.” The firm is already working on four campaigns this year, with requests for two more in the wings, he said.

More than 568.2 million square feet of industrial property was under construction in the U.S. in the fourth quarter of 2021, up from 368.6 million in the fourth quarter of 2020 and 329.9 million in the same period of 2019, according to Cushman & Wakefield.

In Maxatawny, warehouse developer Duke Realty Corp. , has run into resistance, including a court battle over the township’s approval of a large logistics park. The appeal of the land-use decision said the industrial operations would light up the night skies, alter “pristine” farmland views and bring up to 924 tractor-trailer trips daily down the area’s shoulderless two-lane roads.

“The problem is, they’re in the middle of the communities now,” Ms. Franke said. “They’re rewriting the community.”

Duke’s website calls the project a “great opportunity” for e-commerce users, citing access to New York City, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., within three-hour drives. The company declined to comment on the development, citing the pending litigation.

It is getting harder to find space for the projects, said Chris Burns, executive vice president of real estate operations at Duke.

“Larger facilities need more land. If we tried to find a site today for 50 acres in the Inland Empire, it would be next to impossible,” he said, referring to a region near the busy ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. “You’re having to go pretty far from the ports to do that.”

Julia Somers, executive director of the New Jersey Highlands Coalition, a land conservation group, said the logistics space belongs closer to highways “to make sure that they’re using the infrastructure that is built for truck traffic.”

The nonprofit is helping to finance a lawsuit by Phillipsburg, N.J., residents against their town council over a proposed 510,000-square-foot warehouse downtown, along the Delaware River roughly 70 miles west of New York City. The coalition says the project would lower air quality and unleash heavy truck traffic.

Amazon last month canceled plans for a distribution center in Churchill, Pa., just outside Pittsburgh, that drew sharp objections in the community. An Amazon spokesperson said its decision to drop the Churchill project “was entirely a business decision and not driven by community factors.”

A group called Churchill Future had scheduled protests through its Facebook page and raised more than \$46,000 online to pay for a lawyer to help with the opposition drive.

Cathy Bordner, a retiree who organized the anti-Amazon drive, said she doesn’t think the online fulfillment centers belong anywhere.

“It’s not just not in my backyard—it’s not in anyone’s backyard,” Ms. Bordner said. Online ordering and delivery “is an inefficient business model and the American public is addicted to it. I’m at the grocery store. Get up, get in your car and go to the store.”