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## 'Prime' Development: Investment by Amazon breaking Columbia County record

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Amazon's future fulfillment center in Appling is Columbia County's largest one-time industrial investment to date.

Columbia County is home to two John Deere tractor plants and the headquarters for Club Car. So it might have seemed County Commission Chairman Doug Duncan was mistaken when he said the new Amazon center was the county's "single-largest project announcement ever."

He wasn't.

The 600,000-square-foot fulfillment center taking shape off Interstate 20 in Appling's White Oak Business Park will indeed be the county's single-largest industrial project, falling somewhere between \$200 million to \$300 million by the time it opens in late 2021.

Though other county industries have invested untold millions in expansions over the decades, the e-commerce giant's robotics-assisted distribution facility raises the bar for a one-time industrial investment, its chief economic development official said.

"In the grand scheme of things, there's nothing like it anywhere in this market," said Robbie Bennett, the executive director of the Development Authority of Columbia County. "This is very much a game-changer."

Amazon said the fulfillment center will employ 800 people who work in tandem with robotic machines to pick, pack and sort products destined for customers throughout the Southeast. The company's minimum wage starts at \$15 an hour and includes medical, dental and 401(k) benefits beginning on day one.

State and local officials announced the massive warehouse and distribution project in April, the culmination of discussions that began last summer with site-selection consultants.

The process involved Bennett and other county officials touring a similar Amazon fulfillment center in Oklahoma City in the fall, as the nearest comparable facility – a \$238 million fulfillment center in Gwinnett County – was still under construction.

That facility, near the Gwinnett-DeKalb county line, has four stories and a 700,000-square-foot footprint. Amazon's Appling center will be larger overall, Bennett said, because it has five levels, giving it somewhere around 2.7 million square feet of total floor space.

That will make it more than twice size of Augusta Mall and will give it the distinction of being metro Augusta's largest logistics facility, a title currently held by Club Car's recently opened 556,000-square-foot distribution center.

"The base footprint is larger than Club Car," Bennett said. "And it will be about 60 to 70 feet taller."

There have been conflicting reports of the building's actual size. Neither its square footage nor its projected investment were disclosed when the project was announced April 27. An Amazon spokeswoman responding to an Augusta Chronicle inquiry that same day said the building was 600,000 square feet.

However, Amazon's regional director of operations, Rob Packett, told The Chronicle in a recent interview that the building would be 450,000 square feet. He would not disclose the number of floors other than to say it was a "multi-tier, multi-level" facility.

Amazon's recent fulfillment center developments suggest the Columbia County facility will be in the 600,000-square-foot range.

Amazon's four-story Oklahoma City facility – the one Columbia County officials toured – has a 640,000-square-foot building footprint, giving it a total of 2.5 million square feet. A three-story fulfillment center the company opened in south New Jersey this summer has a footprint of 655,000 square feet, for a total of 1.7 million square feet under one roof.

Packett said the company has more than 110 fulfillment centers in North America and 185 worldwide, some with footprints of up to 1 million square feet. Fifty of the facilities, including the future Appling fulfillment center, feature robotics technology the company has developed during the past 20 years.

"What makes these unique is that Amazon robots travel to various locations in our fulfillment centers to pick up mobile shelves of product and deliver them to our employees who are working at ergonomic workstations," Packett said. "Our focus is providing a safe and positive work environment for our associates while they work hand-in-hand with innovative technologies to deliver for our customers."

The company is not yet accepting applications or interviewing prospective employees. Prospective applicants are being directed to the company's employment website, [aboutamazon.com/working-at-amazon](https://aboutamazon.com/working-at-amazon), until the facility gets closer to its opening date.

Packett said the fulfillment center, expected to open before the 2021 holiday shopping season, will better serve Augusta-area customers and others throughout the Southeast.

“As we build out our fulfillment network, we are building closer to the customers more than ever,” he said.

The company employs about 3,500 Georgians and has invested \$3.6 billion in the state since 2010, he said.

Amazon’s 70-plus acre White Oak tract is owned by the county development authority. It is expected to be transferred to the company through a 20-year industrial revenue bond, an incentive deal designed to lower the company’s property tax burden.

However, Bennett said Amazon did not want to abate the school-tax portion of its county tax bill.

“They said (the Columbia County Board of Education) is a pipeline for our workforce, and we really want to benefit them,” Bennett said.

He said he conservatively estimates the operation will generate between \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million for the school system.

The facility could bring other benefits as well, such as corporate philanthropy initiatives in STEM education and other community programs. Amazon offers a tuition-assistance program in which employees can defray up to 95% of higher-education costs.

Bennett said he is interested in learning more about the company’s various small business programs, which enable companies to ship their products through Amazon’s distribution network.

Amazon’s blue, 53-foot tractor trailers will be a common sight at the 24-hour facility just off Appling-Harlem Road near I-20’s Exit 183, which is undergoing an \$8.5 million reconstruction project that will replace the bridge and add two roundabouts.

Easy interstate access was just one reason the company decided to build in Appling.

“There are a variety of factors that we took into account when deciding to launch a building, such as customer demand, a dedicated workforce and local support,” Packett said. “And we found those in Appling.”