

'Wrong Side of History': Demise of Amazon Deal Reveals Deep Divisions in Queens

By **Corey Kilgannon** and **Sean Piccoli**

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Shortly after news broke on Thursday that Amazon was abandoning its plans for a campus in Long Island City, Queens, local elected officials and activist groups who had opposed the deal held a celebratory rally near the site where the company had planned to build its new offices.

But along with those cheering the deal's demise, many hecklers from another faction appeared — those who supported Amazon coming to New York and blamed opponents for torpedoing a deal that would have brought sorely needed jobs and improvements to the community.

"Where you gonna get the jobs?" one heckler shouted.

[For the full story on Amazon's decision to pull out of New York, read more here.]

And so, as the Amazon news reverberated around New York City and beyond on Thursday, perhaps nowhere did it get a more divided reception than in Long Island City, the neighborhood that would have undergone the biggest transformation as a result of the deal. [Open in the app](#) |

Locals like Richard Wissak, an owner of a yellow taxi company, 55 Stan, next to the proposed Amazon site, saw the company's arrival as a way to bring improvements to the area.

“Instead it gets killed by the worst type of politics, and by a very vocal minority with no roots in this community,” said Mr. Wissak, who offered a common view that a large dose of the Amazon opposition came from elected officials and young, progressive activists with an anti-corporate agenda who rode the political tailwinds of the election of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

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“They weren’t from the neighborhood, and they got caught up in this movement, and on the wrong side of history,” Mr. Wissak said.

In a statement, a group of tenant leaders from four housing projects in the area blamed “grandstanding politicians” for putting “petty politics above true public service and they spread misinformation to whip up the small band of opponents.”

But Ray Normandeau, a longtime resident of one of the projects, the Queensbridge Houses, the largest public housing development in the country, called Amazon’s decision to pull out a win because of its track record, he said, of unfair labor practices and not investing enough in local communities.

“They thought we wanted them here, but they finally recovered from that delusion,” he said. “They’re known for breaking promises, so you’d have to be gullible to think it would be great for Queensbridge.”

News of Amazon’s withdrawal caught Long Island City residents by surprise, since the neighborhood had already begun to feel like Amazon’s future home.

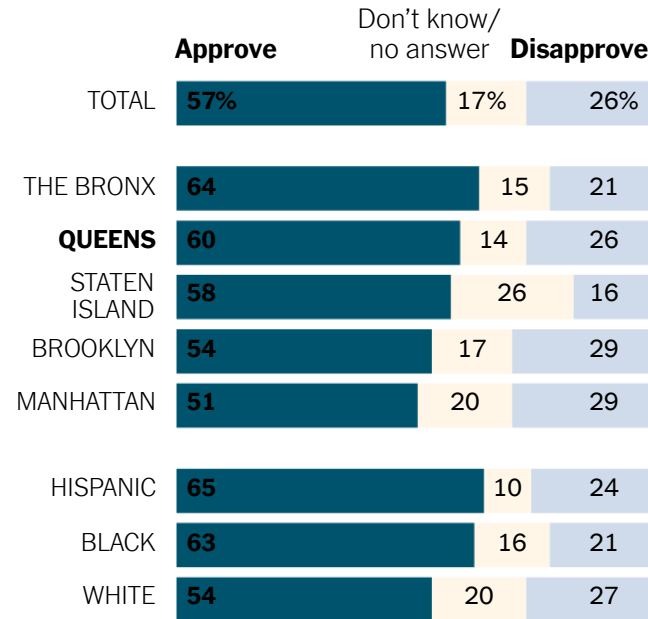
For many, the deal carried the potential to turn Long Island City into a major tech hub and an attractive corridor for bars, restaurants and stores.

Most New Yorkers Wanted Amazon, but Not Tax Breaks

A December poll showed a majority of New Yorkers welcomed Amazon, especially those in the Bronx, Queens and Staten Island. The move was also popular

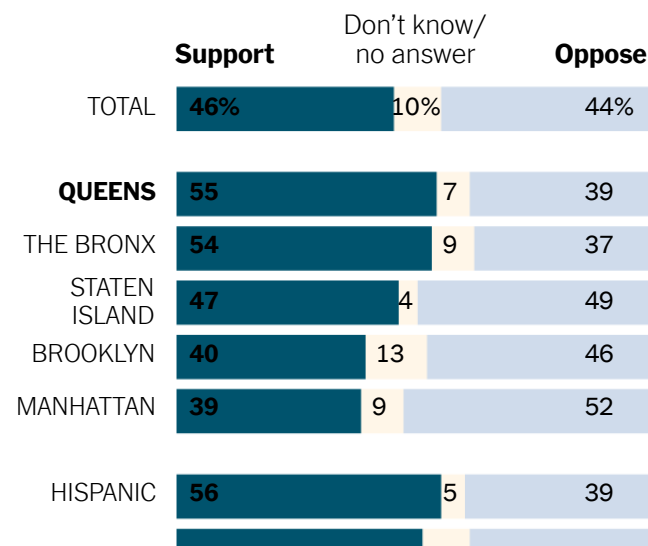
among blacks and Hispanics.

Do you **approve** or **disapprove** of Amazon locating one of its new headquarters in Long Island City in Queens?



But fewer New Yorkers approved of the incentives officials offered Amazon, though again the proposed deal was more popular among Queens residents, blacks and Hispanics.

As you may know, Amazon will be receiving roughly 3 billion dollars in tax breaks and other benefits from the state and the city as part of its deal to locate its new headquarters in Long Island City. Amazon says it will create 25,000 new jobs. Do you **support** or **oppose** the incentives that have been offered to Amazon?



BLACK	52	10	39
WHITE	40	9	51

Survey conducted Nov. 27 to Dec. 4 among 1,075 New York City voters with a margin of error of +/- 3.8 percentage points. • Source: Quinnipiac University • By Karl Russell

In the three months since the deal was announced in November, the number of real estate sales was nearly three times the number of sales recorded during the same period a year earlier, according to Patrick W. Smith, a real estate broker who lives and works in Long Island City.

But the deal also ignited social and economic tensions in an area where luxury residential developments rub up against low-income areas like Queensbridge and the other housing projects.

Some longtime residents were concerned that the company’s arrival would exacerbate the ongoing gentrification and luxury development in the neighborhood, while others said whatever drawbacks were worth the economic windfall the deal would generate.

“I can’t see why bringing a company here when we’re losing companies is a problem,” said Cory Watson-El, 41, a U.P.S. driver with a route in Long Island City.

Amazon’s arrival would have helped offset job losses caused by the departure of other large employers, he said, including FreshDirect, which moved from Long Island City to the Bronx last year.

[‘Productive Meeting’ Between Amazon and unions, then a shock, read more here.]

At the Queensbridge Houses, one resident, Joann Mezil, said she, too, was disappointed that the deal had fallen apart.

“You need jobs in this area, and they promised us jobs, and we were looking forward to them being here,” Ms. Mezil, 27, who works at a family shelter, said of Amazon. “And now?”

She said she didn’t understand the opposition to Amazon, “because as a community we did need that attention — I know a lot of people that were excited about it.”

Andrew Johnson, 62, who runs a book stand outside a subway station on the edge of the Queensbridge Houses, said he had supported Amazon's plan and blamed the opposition for the deal's collapse.

"Now I want these people who were opposed to Amazon coming here, to bring at least 500 jobs to Queensbridge," Mr. Johnson said. "I doubt they will."

Rich Nieto, 46, a Queens native who lives in Long Island City and who founded two thriving coffee shops there, was sympathetic to both sides of the argument.

"Businesses were really happy about the potential new customer base, an affluent customer base that would be looking to move into the neighborhood and hopefully spend their money in the neighborhood," he said. "As someone with three businesses in the neighborhood, an influx of thousands of new people would benefit a lot of us."

He added: "At the same time, you can't be ignorant of the fact that it was going to put a lot of pressure and stress on people who are already having a hard time paying their rent in the neighborhood, and who are concerned that they would be getting pushed out of the neighborhood."

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