

Is it a Trader Joe's? Speculation surrounds specialty grocery coming to Cumberland County

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The former Bon-Ton store on Gettysburg Road, near Capital City Mall, is partly demolished on Nov. 6, 2019 during a "Bon Voyage Bon-Ton!" The site on Gettysburg Road in Lower Allen Township calls for a 12,500 square foot grocery store with two additional retailers. File photo by Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com

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The rumor mill is churning over a proposed specialty grocer in Cumberland County. Could it be an Aldi, Lidl, Sprouts Farmers Market or Amazon Go? And, what's the chance Trader Joe's will finally stake a spot in the region?

Not since the arrival of New York-based Wegmans in Silver Spring Township in 2007 has such a groundswell of excitement surrounded a food store's arrival in central Pennsylvania.

The proposed grocer is part of a 17,000-square-foot parcel at the Lower Allen Commons, a 14-acre complex under development by the Lower Allen Township Development Authority at the former Bon-Ton and Border's stores. The site is located near the Routes 11/15 and Route 581 interchange in the vicinity of the Capital City Mall.

On multiple occasions when asked to identify the grocer, Lower Allen Township's Assistant Manager Erin Trone has remained mum.

"We are not able to disclose this at this point. We signed a non-disclosure agreement with the tenant," she said.

In late October, the Lower Allen Township Board of Commissioners approved the project's land development plan, Trone said. The 12,500-square-foot grocery is proposed as the anchor, with two neighboring retailers each utilizing 2,400 square feet spaces.

The authority purchased the tract, previously called the Capital City Commons, for about \$8 million in early 2019 to assist in redevelopment of the site and assure the site would not sit empty for years as has been the result of other former big box stores.

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In the meantime, Trone said the authority has entered into a sales agreement with a potential buyer to take over three out parcels at the site, including the pad site with the grocer.

Many are hedging their bets on one specific grocer. Jennifer Storm, Victim Advocate of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, wrote on Twitter: "And just like that 2020 takes a turn from dumpster fire to hope. While they cannot name it, it rhymes with Jader Toes!!!!!"

Bob Gorland, vice president of Matthew P. Casey & Associate in Harrisburg, which specializes in supermarket site selection and feasibility studies, also has his suspicions.

"The long time rumor and assumption is a Trader Joe's, but it's never official until you get an official announcement from the township, a brokerage company or from the company themselves," he said.



Trader Joe's in State College. December 20, 2017. Dan Gleiter | dgleiter@pennlive.com HARHAR

The California retailer is one of the most desired grocery stores in the nation. Its quirky atmosphere, low prices and unique items such as cookie butter, Unexpected Cheddar, Everything But the Bagel sesame seasoning, Joe Joe's cookies and Thai lime & chili cashews, drive a cult-like following.

Joe Coulombe opened the first Trader Joe's stores and named it to evoke the image of the South Seas. In 1979 it was sold to German grocery mogul Theo Albrecht, whose family is behind the Aldi Nord supermarket company in Germany.

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Unlike Super Walmarts, Giant and Weis Market stores, Trader Joe's stores operate under a small footprint.

For Gorland, the giveaway hinges on the square footage. On average, the size of a Trader Joe's store is between 8,000 and 15,000 square feet. In comparison, Lidl stores are about 20,000 square feet and Aldi stores 16,400 square feet.

"I'm not aware of anyone else and there are very few retailers opening the size of 12,500 square feet," Gorland said, adding it's smaller than a Rite Aid or CVS.

Trader Joe's corporate media department has not responded to emails asking if the grocer has signed a lease at the West Shore complex. The company is tight-lipped about business plans and strategies, making it difficult to predict its next move. It does allow shoppers to make location requests on its website.

Gorland said some companies may not publicly comment on a pending location until all lease issues are finalized, possible grants are awarded and land development plans are approved, and any variances for signs, landscaping and building design, are fully negotiated and approved.

In the meantime, Aldi's Frederick Division Vice President Jeff Baehr, said they do not have any information to share about a potential new Aldi store opening in Cumberland County. This summer Aldi opened a new store in Silver Spring Township and recently reopened its Hampden Township store after a renovation.

Gorland said it's possible the site is dedicated to an Amazon Go Grocery operated by online retailer Amazon. The checkout free stores are between 8,000 square feet and 35,000 square feet and mostly cropping up in urban areas such as Seattle and New York City.

Scott Karns, CEO and president of Karns Foods, a chain of grocery stores in central Pennsylvania, said rumors about Trader Joe's opening here have been circulating for at least three years.

"I will tell you, at some point new businesses come into the areas. When I look around and say, 'Where is a good location for a grocery store?' that would be one of the lowest."

Traditionally, Trader Joe's opens stores in college towns or in well-traveled areas in close proximity to highways. The closest Trader Joe's to the Harrisburg region operate in State College and Maryland and there are stores in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

Generally, the consensus is Trader Joe's examines three factors when considering locations – population density with a high number of residents with college degrees; households with income of \$100,000 or more; and a robust logistics/distribution network.

For that, Cumberland County nearly meets the criteria. In the past decade Cumberland has been the fastest growing county in Pennsylvania. Its population jumped 6.8 percent from 2010 to 251,423 residents, according to U.S Census data.

As for Trone, she's just happy the location won't be vacant. "I'm glad it's getting exposure. We are excited to see something there," she said.

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