



## BUSINESS

## 2.3 million items later, Fargo's Amazon Fulfillment Center marks 1 year of operations

Over the last year, millions of items have passed through the doors of the Amazon Fulfillment Center at 3737 44th Ave. N. in Fargo. Changes, both visible and invisible, are felt throughout the facility.



Items are scanned and inventoried at the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Fargo on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2022. David Samson/The Forum



By **Thomas Evanella**

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FARGO — A lot has changed, both seen and unseen, during the first year of operation at Fargo's Amazon Fulfillment Center.

Company managers detailed the changes, from the obvious to the subtle, during a tour of the facility Tuesday morning, Oct. 4.

The most obvious change and “biggest journey” for the facility, according to general manager Martin Purdy? The towering, 30-foot shelves which were once empty are now loaded with inventory. Anything 50 pounds or less is fair game, Purdy noted, meaning items range from Apple AirPods to lawn mowers.

General Manager Martin Purdy talks about the day to day operations at the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Fargo on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2022. David Samson/The Forum

One of the more unique and surprisingly common items on hand are fake olive trees, Purdy said. "I didn't realize so many people wanted fake olive trees, but we had quite a few go through," he said with a laugh.

Items such as those have been among the 2.3 million shipped out of the building over the course of the last year, either to customers or other Amazon facilities like West Fargo's delivery center.



That's worked out to roughly 70,000 items shipped per week, Purdy said. That figure rose to about 98,000 in the weeks surrounding [Prime Day](https://www.amazon.com/primeday) (<https://www.amazon.com/primeday>), Amazon's annual sales event that took place in July.

Although the building is Amazon's lone fulfillment center in North Dakota, Purdy said only 20% of the items that pass through end up in mailboxes in North Dakota, South Dakota or northern Minnesota.

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“The rest, about 80%, it’s going around the United States,” he said. “We could be shipping something to Dallas, we could be shipping something to Los Angeles, New York City or a small town in Kentucky.”

### ‘Differentiating factors’

Also among the obvious changes is the number of employees responsible for filling those metal shelves. The fulfillment center had roughly 100 employees when it first opened. The head count is up to 600 now, which Purdy said is an ideal figure for their current demand.

“This area is pretty unique with some of the challenges with unemployment, but overall we’re staying up with what we need from a demand standpoint,” he said. “We’re basically in line with what we need to be.”

Items are placed in storage racks at the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Fargo on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2022. David Samson/The Forum

One of those employees is Heather Johnson, who started working at the facility before it opened. Johnson listed the job’s flexibility in terms of learning new roles as a key part of her decision to work for Amazon. After she was hired, however, it was the company’s tuition assistance program, called [Amazon Career Choice](https://www.amazoncareerchoice.com/home)(<https://www.amazoncareerchoice.com/home>) , that came as a pleasant surprise.

Johnson is pursuing a degree online. She estimates that the tuition assistance program has cut her education costs in half. Local schools involved in the program include North Dakota State University, Minnesota State University Moorhead and Minnesota State Community and Technical College.

"It allowed me to not be afraid to go back to school and put myself and my family in more debt," Johnson said.

Programs such as Career Choice are one of the benefits Amazon offers, but Purdy feels there are three "differentiating factors" that help Amazon stay competitive in a tight labor market.

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### **GALLERY: Look inside Fargo's Amazon Fulfillment Center**



1/4: Items are scanned on a conveyor track at the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Fargo on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2022.

The first is workplace safety. "We make sure we do what's right for our employees from a safety perspective," he said.

Purdy also believed employees are attracted to Amazon because of its involvement with local charities like United Way, Moorhead's Dorothy Day House and local animal shelters. Recent initiatives included donating 2,500 pounds of dog food to shelters as well as sending care packages to children in hospitals in Fargo, Bismarck and Sioux Falls.

"People have a connection to the community," Purdy said. "They want to make sure the company they work for is doing the right things for the community. We are really making sure we're emphasizing that."

Lastly, he said, managers try to make the fulfillment center a fun place to work in spite of busy seasons. "There are a lot of activities we do during the peak and Prime timeframes and even in normal timeframes that we make sure we have fun and really engage our associates," he said.

### **An unseen change**

One of the invisible changes surrounding Amazon in the year since the Fargo fulfillment center opened has been the increasing push for unionization among employees.



That message reached Fargo this summer, [when Amazon Labor Union president Chris Smalls spoke](https://www.inforum.com/business/amazon-labor-union-president-chris-smalls-visits-fargo-endorses-unionizing-metro-amazon-facilities)(<https://www.inforum.com/business/amazon-labor-union-president-chris-smalls-visits-fargo-endorses-unionizing-metro-amazon-facilities>) at the Fargo Theatre, calling on Amazon employees to unionize in North Dakota.

Item arrive at the docking stations at the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Fargo on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2022. David Samson/The Forum

While Purdy declined to comment on unionization efforts locally, the company has asserted that it does not feel unionizing is the best option for employees.

“Our employees have the choice of whether or not to join a union. They always have. As a company, we don’t think unions are the best answer for our employees. Our focus remains on working directly with our team to continue making Amazon a great place to work,” spokesperson Paul Flanigan stated via email.

## More coming soon

With the holiday shopping season looming, Purdy anticipates a lot more is on the horizon: more items, more employees and more to do.

When asked if the company has needed to fight negative stigmas while courting employees, Johnson said there are misconceptions surrounding all large corporations.

Despite being one of the world’s largest companies, Johnson felt the workplace still offers a small feel. “With any larger corporation, (people think) it’s corporate. That’s not the case,” she said, “Yes, it’s Amazon, it’s big, but we’re local. This is where we are, this is where our people are.”

Items are placed in storage racks at the Amazon Fulfillment Center in Fargo on Tuesday, Oct. 4, 2022. David Samson/The Forum

Those considering applying should take the plunge, Johnson urged. "It's not going to be like any other job you've had before, it's going to be better," she said. "Give it a chance. Don't believe everything that you hear, because it's way better than you ever could have imagined. This is by far one of the best decisions I've made in my life."

Beyond Fargo, Amazon officials indicated they have more expansion in mind for the region. A [robotics-focused fulfillment center](https://www.inforum.com/business/amazon-confirms-huge-sioux-falls-center-to-employ-1-000)(<https://www.inforum.com/business/amazon-confirms-huge-sioux-falls-center-to-employ-1-000>) recently opened in Sioux Falls, and a delivery center similar to the one in West Fargo is on tap for Fergus Falls.

For Purdy, his five months at the helm of the Fargo facility have been an exciting ride. "It's been a great experience. I've learned a lot," he said. "A little bit bigger (company), but overall it's been fun. It's been a good challenge, and I'm up for a good challenge."

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By **Thomas Evanella**(<https://www.inforum.com/thomas-evanella>)

Thomas Evanella is a news editor for The Forum. He's worked for The Forum for over three years, previously reporting on business news. He's also the host of the InForum Business Beat podcast, which can be streamed at <https://www.inforum.com/podcasts>(<https://www.inforum.com/podcasts>) or wherever you listen to your podcasts. Reach him at [tevanella@forumcomm.com](mailto:tevanella@forumcomm.com)(<mailto:tevanella@forumcomm.com>) or by calling 701-241-5518(tel:7012415518). Follow him on Twitter [@ThomasEvanella](https://twitter.com/ThomasEvanella)(<https://twitter.com/ThomasEvanella>).

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