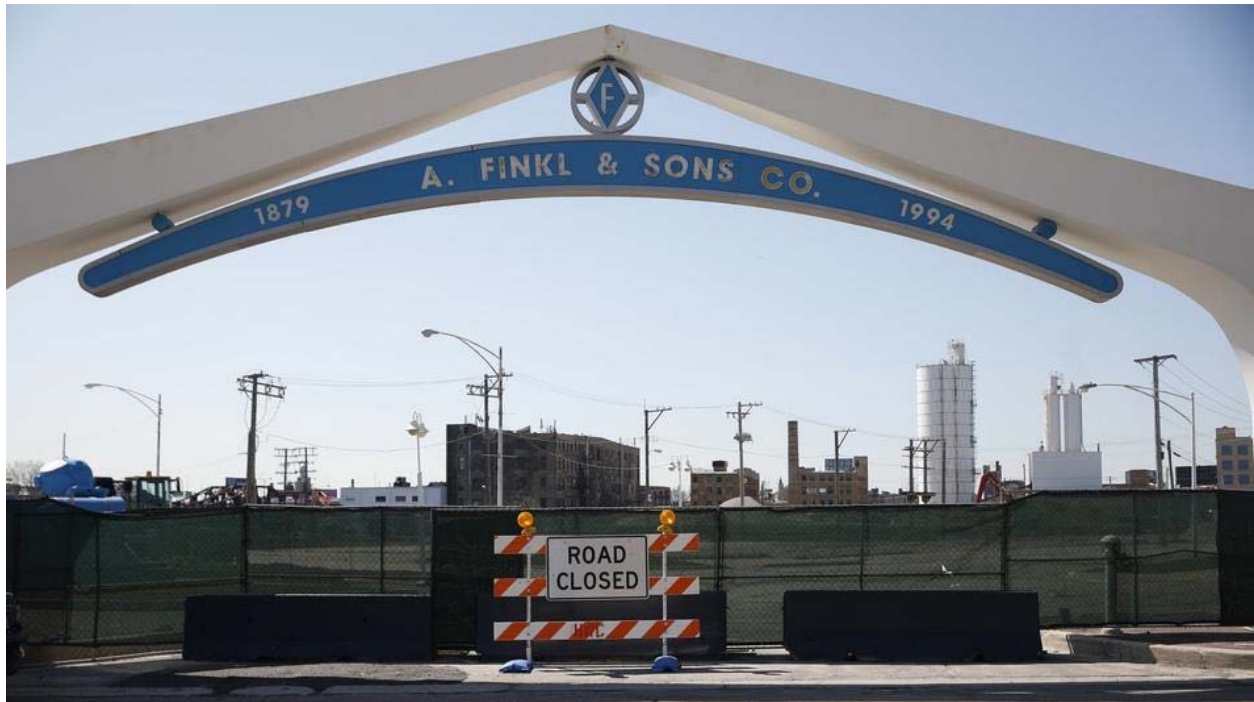


Chicago Tribune

Graffiti removals spiked near HQ2 sites ahead of Amazon visit this week



Lincoln Yards — Sterling Bay's more than 70-acre site along Lincoln Park and Bucktown, including the former A. Finkl & Sons Co. steel plant — was one of five proposed second headquarters sites Amazon officials visited this week, sources said.

Lauren Zumbach, Ryan Ori and Kyle Bentle - March 22, 2018

The city and Chicago real estate developers did a lot of sprucing up over the past week, but it was no ordinary spring cleaning.

City crews were blasting away graffiti near proposed sites for Amazon's planned 50,000-employee second headquarters in the lead-up to the online retail giant's visit, city records show.

Owners of the proposed HQ2 sites were busy cleaning up vacant land and adding signs showing glossy architectural renderings of their projects.

Amazon's site selection team scouted five of the 10 proposed Chicago-area development sites while in the city this week, sources said.

Those sites were:

- The Burnham Lakefront, Farpoint Development and Draper and Kramer's planned redevelopment of the former Michael Reese Hospital site and other land just south of Interstate 55 and McCormick Place.
- The 78, Related Midwest's 62-acre site along the Chicago River between the South Loop and Chinatown.
- Lincoln Yards, Sterling Bay's more than 70-acre site on the river along Lincoln Park and Bucktown.
- The River District, 37 riverfront acres owned by Tribune Media between Chicago and Grand avenues.
- Land belonging to multiple owners in the Fulton Market district on the Near West Side.

The city dramatically stepped up graffiti cleanup near some of the sites being pitched to Amazon in the week leading up to the company's visit, according to a log of graffiti removal requests available through the city's Data Portal.

In the month leading up to Amazon's visit, the city completed 233 requests for graffiti removal in the Fulton Market area. All but eight were handled during the seven-day period ending Wednesday, according to city data. During the same month last year, the city handled only 14 graffiti removal requests in that area.

The areas around the Lincoln Yards and River District sites got extra attention too. There were 223 graffiti removal jobs completed near Lincoln Yards in the week ending Wednesday, compared with just two during the same week last year. There were 50 completed near the River District, compared with five a year ago.

The city uses 13 "blast" trucks, which spray baking soda under high water pressure to remove graffiti from brick, stone and other mineral surfaces, and 14 paint trucks to cover graffiti on other surfaces, according to a city website. Most requests are addressed in five days or less, according to the city.

The Department of Streets and Sanitation's Graffiti Blasters crews have been more active citywide recently. Compared with last year, there was a roughly 25 percent increase in graffiti removals across Chicago during the month ending March 21. But that is a tiny increase in comparison with the tenfold spike in the areas around the five sites shown to Amazon.

It's not unusual for a city to invest in extra cleanup to recruit a "trophy project" like Amazon, said John H. Boyd, principal of The Boyd Co., a Princeton, N.J.-based corporate site selection consultancy.

"Local developers do everything possible to make a visit as expeditious and aesthetically pleasing as possible," he said.

Chicago is one of 20 North American locations Amazon is considering from an initial list of 238 locales that sought to land HQ2. Amazon has said it plans to choose a location sometime this year.

"We're excited to visit each location and talk about how HQ2 could benefit our employees and the local community," Amazon spokesman Adam Sedo said in an email.

He declined to comment on Chicago sites that were visited or other details of the HQ2 search, including what comes next.

While most owners of the proposed HQ2 sites declined to comment, Murray McQueen, president of Tribune Media Real Estate, said in an emailed statement that the company believes the River District offers "a truly unique piece of property in Chicago's extended downtown district."

"Working with the city of Chicago, we have the opportunity to attract the best employers and talent for the new economy and create a one-of-a-kind opportunity to build a live-work-play community in the heart of Chicago," McQueen said.

A spokesman for Mayor Rahm Emanuel declined to discuss specifics of Amazon's visit.

"We welcomed a team from Amazon this week and led them on a tour of sites that were submitted for HQ2," mayoral spokesman Grant Klinzman said in an email. "The visit gave Chicago the opportunity to display our strengths — talent, transportation, technology — and demonstrate to Amazon why Chicago is the ideal location for its second headquarters."