

## 'Amazon exercise' could help Triangle in chase for Apple

By Lauren K. Ohnesorge – Senior Staff Writer, Triangle Business Journal  
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Economic development opportunities are increasing in the Triangle.

In a recent interview, site selection consultant John Boyd said he'd "never" seen so many projects interested in the region – a fact he credits to a good economy and a low tax rate.

But local developers say Amazon, which put the Triangle on its shortlist, is also boosting the region's efforts to connect with major brands.

Recently, a report surfaced that called out North Carolina as a top contender for Apple as it seeks out sites for a major operation.

All of the rumors – as well as the eco-devo "exercise" crafting the Amazon pitch involved – boosts North Carolina's chances for the next project, business leaders say.

Bob Geolas, the former CEO of the Research Triangle Foundation who now travels the globe with HR&A Advisors, says the "Amazon exercise" is bringing major visibility to the region. "Because we've gone through that and people see our name on the short list, people might say,

'I don't know if Amazon will go there, but maybe we should consider it,'" he says. John Kane, founder of Kane Realty Corporation (which is developing a downtown Raleigh site included in the Triangle's Amazon pitch), says Amazon's attention, as well as the publicity created by recent Amazon site rankings, is validation.

"The fact that people are listing us in their top five for the Amazon deal ... that gives credibility," he says. "I think Apple – or anybody else for that matter who's considering a headquarters – will take us much more seriously than maybe they would before."

The Amazon pursuit has also helped cities on that short list – Raleigh included – better understand themselves as a community, Geolas says. It has brought up questions about transit, capacity and incentives that are "important" for economic developers to explore, he says.

The Triangle is hardly new to a site selection shortlist. Toyota-Mazda, which recently picked Alabama over North Carolina, is one example. Kane points to General Electric, which seriously considered the Triangle for its headquarters two years ago.

Some executives, public records from the time show, had "reservations about the size of this market," and GE went with Boston instead.

Kane doubts perception would hold us back today.

"They're all taking us seriously," he says.

Geolas had a front row seat to the "frustrating" and ultimately unsuccessful effort to lure Mercedes-Benz to the Triangle three years ago.

While Geolas is rooting on the Triangle in the Amazon fight, he does hope the next project isn't so public.

"I do think it served their purpose very well – it got them a lot of attention," he says. "But I would hate to see every company run the country through these hoops."

"It's, why would you choose to go to a big city where you're just going to be absorbed by all the big corporate brands?" he says.

What he's come to learn in his travels with HR&A, however, is that perception is more of a nuanced issue for big companies.

"There's this perception that those are cities with big corporate players, and those big corporate players can come together and be more of a force in the city," he says, noting the Triangle needs to do a "better job" of selling its corporate culture to defeat that perception.

Politicization, too, is a big part of economic development fights today, says Boyd. He says efforts by officials to sell North Carolina as an "open" and "welcoming" state will be "absolutely critical" in luring firms such as Amazon.

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North Carolina has had some big wins in recent months that could also fuel interest. Here's a look at the biggest economic development wins of 2017:

- All State Insurance: Pledged 2,250 jobs for Mecklenburg County
- Infosys: Pledged 2,000 jobs for Wake County
- Credit Suisse: Pledged 1,200 jobs for Wake County
- Triangle Tyre: Pledged 800 jobs for Edgecombe County
- AXA: Pledged 550 jobs for Mecklenburg County