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Conceptual rendering of Schuylkill Yards, a site being put forth for Amazon's second headquarters

Amazon HQ2 RFP asks for just one bid per region, so Philly submits three

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After Amazon announced plans to build a second headquarters earlier this month, promising 50,000 jobs paying an average of six figures and \$5 billion in direct investment, Philadelphia and a few dozen other North American cities all jumped to join the pageant.

The city's business and political community have shown none of the fractious relationship that's marked fights over the soda tax or calls for ending the wage tax: from City Council to the Chamber of Commerce, everyone seems to agree: Landing Amazon would be a massive boon for the city.

But not just the city — the region as a whole would benefit, regardless of where exactly Amazon located its campus, which it says will eventually total 8 million square feet. You know how

Comcast built Philadelphia's tallest building and is about to open another, taller, tower? Imagine if they did that four more times and built another Cira Center, too. That's what Amazon is proposing.

All of that would mean jobs for regional contractors, vendors, and other firms. The 50,000 Amazonians would buy homes across the region.

"A win for Camden County is a win for Philadelphia. A win for Philadelphia is a win for Wilmington and vice versa," said John Boyd, a Princeton, NJ based corporate site selection consultant who's spent the last 40 years helping companies find the ideal location for their office.

That's one reason why it would make sense for the region to submit a collective bid, said Boyd.

"All things being equal, you want to see regionalism," said Boyd. "A successful common denominator among regions attracting industry are regions that work together."

More often than not, the only place municipal boundaries really matter are on maps. Unless there's some kind of legal reason stopping them, most workers live where they want, regardless of borders. "Labor markets don't really end and begin at municipal lines," said Boyd.

There's another reason why the region, better known to Census geeks as the Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington metropolitan statistical area, might want to submit a single, combined bid.

Amazon told them to.

The front page of the retail giant's request for proposals reads: "We encourage states, provinces and metro areas to coordinate with relevant jurisdictions to submit one (1) RFP for your MSA."

The Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington MSA is submitting at least three, one from each city.

Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said he tried to work things out with his peers, but to no avail.

"It's hard. I had a preliminary discussion with one mover and shaker, so to speak. We're trying to figure it out."

Kenney said he expected Philadelphia to make it past an initial round of cuts for Amazon's bid. After then, he hopes the region can come together. "In the first round, it's hard to articulate the partnership, if there is one," he said.

Regional cooperation can be hard, especially in a tri-state area like the Delaware Valley, where appealing intermunicipal fights to the governor or state legislature isn't an option. It's a prisoner's dilemma: Elected officials from different cities have different constituencies, creating differing political incentives, which leads to competition instead of cooperation.

Philadelphia is throwing a ton of resources at the Amazon bid, despite the belief among some commenters that Amazon has already picked a city and is using the RFP process to simply solicit larger subsidies from their predetermined top pick.

“I think there's probably about a dozen to twenty [city employees working] right now full time. We're partnered with PIDC, their staff, commerce dept is fully involved,” said Kenney.* The Commerce Department is leading the city's bid effort. A Commerce Department spokesperson later added that Select Greater Philadelphia, Visit Philly, PHLCVB, and Campus Philly were also all working on the proposal.

Camden County's freeholders voted to submit a bid on Tuesday. In a press release, the freeholders touted all of the regional benefits it shares with Philadelphia — talented work force, good transportation network, access to Philadelphia International Airport — while emphasizing the number of large tax breaks New Jersey has given to companies relocating to Camden.

Delaware Gov. John Carney said soon after Amazon's announcement that the First State would submit a bid on behalf of New Castle County and Wilmington.

Will the Delaware Valley's inability to work together on a single bid doom the region's shot at landing Amazon? Probably not.

“Amazon can walk and chew gum at the same time,” said Boyd. “Amazon will first be sold on a labor market, the talent pool, proximity to a major airport, the transit issues we talked about, and then they'll select, do we want urban or suburban?”

So, Amazon won't disqualify the region for failing to follow instructions. That's not how multibillion dollar investments get made.

But the intraregional competition won't help. That worries business leaders like Tracey Welson-Rossman, Chief Marketing Officer for Chariot Solutions, a co-founder of Philadelphia Startup Leaders, and founder of TechGurlz.

Welson-Rossman hasn't just watched as Philadelphia's tech scene has grown from its infancy two decades prior. She's been one of its mothers, nurturing and guiding its growth. To Welson-Rossman, the strength of Philadelphia's tech scene comes from its collaborative spirit, and an ability to work together. Noting how many major Philadelphia tech employers are actually located just outside city limits, Welson-Rossman emphasized the importance for everyone to come together to entice Amazon.

“We need big thinking in our region, this is a big project,” she said. “This allows us to push and think bigger and let ourselves think that we deserve this, as a region.”

Welson-Rossman emphasized repeatedly the importance of working collectively, as a region, rather than letting jurisdictional spats undermine the bid. So when she heard that Philly, Camden

and Wilmington were all working on their own, separate Amazon bids, she let out an exasperated sigh.

“The region should come together, that's all I have to say.”

It's an echo of something Philadelphia's most famous tech entrepreneur, Benjamin Franklin, once said : “We must, indeed, all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

As high as the stakes are with Amazon HQ2, at least the fate of the nation doesn't hang in the balance.