

South Florida makes first cut in Amazon's HQ2 search

Jeff Ostrowski - Palm Beach Post Staff Writer - Jan. 18, 2018



AP Photo/Reed Saxon, File

South Florida made the first cut in its bid to become the home of Amazon's second headquarters, the ecommerce giant said Thursday.

Amazon narrowed its search to 20 contestants. Aside from Miami, they are: Atlanta, Austin, Boston, Chicago, Columbus, Ohio; Dallas, Denver, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, Montgomery County in Maryland; Nashville, Newark, New York City, Northern Virginia, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Raleigh, Toronto and Washington, D.C.

Amazon said 238 localities applied to be considered. Among the notable regions that didn't make the cut are Charlotte, Cleveland, Detroit, Jacksonville, Orlando, Phoenix, Portland, Oregon, and Tampa. No other Florida region is on the short list.

The Business Development Board of Palm Beach County joined forces with its counterparts in Broward and Miami-Dade counties to make a joint pitch for Amazon's HQ2.

"Now, it's trying to figure out what part of the region they want to see, and how we would conduct the tours, with Brightline really being a key connecting point," said Kelly Smallridge, head of the Business Development Board.

Smallridge said the bid includes secret sites in each of the three counties. And, she added, economic developers in each county are prepared to support the project no matter which part of South Florida Amazon shows interest in.

"There are no territory battles here," she said.

John Boyd, a location consultant based in New Jersey, said making the first cut bestows prestige on each of the 20 finalists.

"There's a branding quotient that goes along with making the Top 20," Boyd said. "We're a nation that loves lists."

Boyd and Smallridge both mentioned Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' ties to South Florida. He went to high school in Miami, although Bezos has a stronger connection to Washington, where he owns both a mansion and the Washington Post.

South Florida's selling points include its position as a gateway to Latin America. "One of Amazon's major priorities is to gain market share in Central and South America," Boyd said.

Seattle-based Amazon opened a bidding war in 2017 when it unveiled plans to open a facility with 50,000 employees at an average salary of \$100,000. It sought proposals from regions with a population of at least a million people, and a frenzied competition ensued.

Palm Beach County's decision to work with the Greater Fort Lauderdale Alliance and the Beacon Council was partly in response to Amazon's requirements. The Internet retailer is encouraging cities to submit only one proposal per metropolitan statistical area, and despite its population of 1.4 million, Palm Beach County is part of the Miami MSA.

While Florida has grown less generous in offering job incentives to employers, Boyd said that might now matter. "Given Florida's low-cost profile, given the lack of a state income tax, this will be a less cost-driven site selection than most," Boyd said.

Amazon said it will pick a winner this year.