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Greenville to bid for Amazon's 'second headquarters'

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity so you take a shot at it." – Greenville site consultant Mark Sweeney

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SEPTEMBER 8, 2017

by Rudolph Bell

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Local economic development officials say they'll make a bid for a jaw-dropping jobs opportunity that just surfaced – a proposed second headquarters by e-commerce giant Amazon that would employ 50,000 people.

But Greenville will be competing with much-larger metro regions for the economic plum, and its bid will be a “long shot,” according to one veteran site consultant.

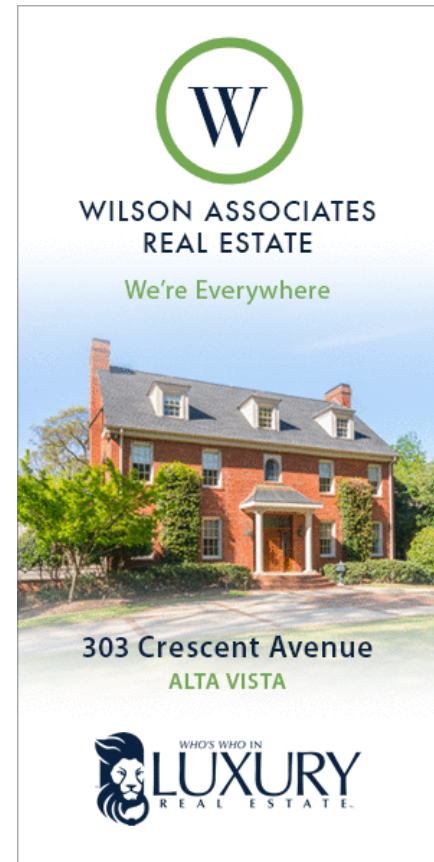
Seattle-based Amazon said in a Request for Proposal (RFP) issued on Sept. 7 that it was considering a “second corporate headquarters” somewhere in North America and was encouraging metro areas to submit proposals for hosting the facility.



Amazon said it plans to hire up to 50,000 full-time employees at the facility over the next 10 to 15 years with an “average annual total compensation” of more than \$100,000.

The company said it could spend more than \$5 billion on the facility over time.

Mark Farris, president of the Greenville Area Development Corp., Greenville County's economic development organization, said GADC was “working with several partners” to respond to the RFP. He declined to provide details.



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Farris successfully recruited numerous corporate headquarters when he was economic development director in York County within the Charlotte metro region.

His York County wins include two Fort Mill facilities announced in 2014 by The Lash Group and LPL Financial that together were to employ nearly 5,500 people.

John Lummus, president of the Upstate SC Alliance, a regional economic development organization based in Greenville, said his organization would also work on a response to the Amazon RFP, though it was still thinking through exactly how.

A spokesperson for the South Carolina Department of Commerce said it would not actively participate in recruiting the Amazon headquarters but is ready to assist any counties that want to do it.

Amazon said responses are due Oct. 19 and that it expects to announce the winning community sometime next year.

The e-commerce giant said an “important consideration” in the decision is travel time to an international airport with daily direct flights to Seattle, New York, San Francisco/Bay Area, and Washington, D.C.

Amazon also said a “highly educated labor pool is critical and a strong university system is required.”

The company said incentives offered by state and local governments will also be significant factors. Its second headquarters would employ managing executives and software development engineers, as well as legal, accounting, and administrative workers.

The headquarters site would need more than 500,000 square feet of building space initially and up to eight million square feet over time, the company said.

Mark Sweeney, a Greenville site consultant who has helped numerous companies find locations for new headquarters, including Hertz and Nissan North America, said Greenville doesn't seem to meet some of the basic criteria that Amazon outlines in the RFP.

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Those criteria include preferences for a metro area with more than one million residents and a location within a 45-minute drive of an international airport.

“If I’m working for Greenville, I can show a million people,” Sweeney said. “But international air service? You’re talking 90 minutes to Charlotte, and Charlotte has limited international air service. You’re talking two and a half to three hours to Atlanta.”

Still, Sweeney said Greenville can’t be blamed for trying.

Recruiting the Amazon headquarters to Greenville “may be a low probability,” he said, but it’s “not a zero probability.”

“This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity so you take a shot at it,” Sweeney said.

Sweeney, whose firm helped find locations for seven corporate headquarters between 2011 and 2014, said he figures Atlanta, Dallas, Chicago, New York, and Boston should be strong contenders.

“I would suspect those five are in the mix right off the bat,” he said.

Sweeney said he also thinks Detroit “could put together a very interesting proposal.”

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