

## Q&A: Is Downtown Miami the Best Fit for Amazon?

DDA Chief Alyce Robertson Touts Benefits of the Urban Core



Miami Worldcenter is currently in development on 27 acres in Downtown Miami. The mixed-use project could potentially accommodate Amazon should the online retailer select the city for its second headquarters.

Amazon short-listed South Florida for its coveted second headquarters, HQ2, though most analysts expect Miami to be the focal point should the online retail giant decide to move to the region.

Business development leaders proposed five sites in Miami-Dade County, two in Broward and one in Palm Beach. Officials involved with the bid have kept specific locations confidential, except to say they are located in both urban and suburban areas.

One likely site earmarked for Amazon is the new Miami Worldcenter under construction downtown on 27 acres between Second and Miami Avenues to 11th Street. The massive mixed-use project will have up to 500,000 square feet of offices - enough for what Amazon says it needs for its first phase. And 20 adjoining acres could accommodate Amazon's future plans, Worldcenter developers say.

Hines is building the offices and breaking ground this year, and that's the company that manages Amazon's real estate across the country, said Nitin Motwani, managing principal of Miami Worldcenter Associates.

"We have tremendous infrastructure that would allow Amazon to start immediately," Motwani said. "I think Miami is a very logical place to create a headquarters campus that could expand to Latin America. This is one of the global gateway cities to the world."

Another possible site is land located across from the American Dream project, the retail mecca similar to Mall of America that's planned for northwest Miami-Dade, said Danielle Grimelli, a market analyst with CoStar Market Analytics.

It's unclear to what extent Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' ties to Florida will factor into the company's decision. He was the valedictorian of Miami Palmetto Senior High School in 1982 and is building a \$205 million, 750,000-square-foot rocket assembly plant in Melbourne, FL, three hours north of Miami.

The South Florida proposal said the region's labor pool of 3.1 million and downtown Miami's population of educated young people has more than doubled since 2010, making it the fastest-growing urban core in the country in that demographic.

Miami also would provide symmetry to Amazon's existing Seattle base, creating a bi-coastal presence that would offer easy accessibility to international ports, Grimelli said.

"While Miami has not been at the top of the list of strong contenders reported in news outlets, it does provide many of the features Amazon outlined in its request for proposals last fall," she said. "Key factors the area fulfills and Jeff Bezos' roots in Florida may prove to push Miami past the post and secure it as a final pick."



Alyce Robertson, executive director with Miami's DDA.

That's what Alyce Robertson hopes will happen. As executive director of Miami's Downtown Development Authority, Robertson worked with the Miami-Dade Beacon Council to prepare the Amazon proposal in cooperation with the Greater Fort Lauderdale Alliance and the Business Development Board of Palm Beach County.

Robertson, a South Bend, IN native, said she's confident in the region's chances of landing the \$5 billion investment from Amazon. Despite general guidance from the company about what it's looking for, South Florida and the other 19 finalists are still left to guess what will matter most, Robertson said.

"Every location is going to have its strengths," she said, "and they're also going to have their weaknesses."

*CoStar News: What was your reaction when you found out South Florida was a finalist for the Amazon headquarters?*

Alyce Robertson: » My first reaction was, now most of the world knows what I already knew. Traditionally, we have been about smaller businesses - the financial industry, banking. We've been known for our beaches, tourism, South Beach. We haven't had a major corporate entity like Amazon, generally because our land is so expensive. But we've been growing our business climate year after year.

*Is it fair to say that as head of the Miami DDA, you think downtown Miami is the best place for an Amazon headquarters? Why?*

» I wouldn't be the executive director of the DDA if I didn't think downtown Miami would be the best place for Amazon. The transportation hub we have in downtown Miami, you don't see anywhere else in the state of Florida. We have Metrorail and Brightline. I can't wait until Brightline opens up its station in Miami. Tri-Rail also will be coming to downtown and that will be a cheaper alternative to Brightline. Amazon's corporate headquarters in Seattle is in the downtown, and that's a strong indication that downtown sites don't frighten them.

*The perceived negatives for South Florida include a scarcity of available land, traffic gridlock and a shallow pool of tech talent. How do you respond to that?*

» We're a vertical community. You don't see all of it on the first floor. We can build up and not out. Being in the urban core brings a lot of lifestyle choices. You're close to everything. Businesses, restaurants, nightlife and cultural amenities. I think most metros have traffic concerns, but one of the ways we are dealing with that is that we're making Miami a more walkable city, with wider sidewalks and more trees. Most Miamians are addicted to their cars, but we're trying to get away from that. We think more and more people are wanting to live without the complication of a car.

As for our tech industry, we're not Silicon Valley, that's for sure. But what I would say about Miami is that we are a capital for start-up companies.

*How would Amazon transform South Florida?*

» South Florida is pretty big, so Amazon wouldn't overwhelm us. Our No. 1 industry is tourism, but Amazon would be a diversification into another area that we have been building up slowly. The new tax code makes Florida even more attractive than it has been from a financial standpoint. Amazon would raise the standard of living for everybody and lead to multipliers that would create jobs and other positive changes.