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Amazon's HQ2 surveyors have yet to come to Pittsburgh, but many say there's no reason to worry

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By Mark Belko / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

It's enough to feed Pittsburgh's long-held inferiority complex. Amazon has scoured Washington, D.C., Chicago, Dallas, Denver, Atlanta, and even cross-state rival Philadelphia — apparently 10 of the 20 finalists in all — in its search for a second headquarters.



Source: Amazon

James Hilston/Post-Gazette

But not the Steel City, at least as far as anyone can tell. So far the visits appear to have been to some of the largest cities on the finalist list. Does that make them the frontrunners? Should Pittsburgh be worried? What exactly can we read from where Amazon has gone to date?

Almost nothing, site selection experts say.

They caution against making too much from the list of cities that the e-commerce behemoth has toured to date, noting there are a number of factors — mostly based on logistics — that go into such visits.

In fact, it would be a “fool’s errand” trying to discern much from where Amazon has landed so far, said Tom Stringer, a managing director at professional services firm BDO’s New York office.

He noted such visits often are dependent on flights, who’s available from each side, and other such factors. “This is an exercise in logistics right now,” he stressed.

Based on news reports, Amazon has made formal visits to Washington, D.C.; northern Virginia; Montgomery County, Maryland; Atlanta; Austin; Boston; Dallas; Denver; Philadelphia; and Chicago.

With 50,000 jobs and \$5 billion in investment at stake in the HQ2 sweepstakes, the search has been cloaked in secrecy.

After word leaked out about a trip made to Washington and its two suburban contenders around March 1, Amazon acknowledged that it had started visiting the 20 finalist cities, but the company has had little else to say.

“Amazon is working with each HQ2 candidate city to dive deeper on their proposals and share additional information about the company’s plans. We’re excited to visit each location and talk about how HQ2 could benefit our employees and the local community,” its statement read.

Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto said March 7 that Amazon had yet to schedule a formal visit, although he suspected the company has done its own private reconnaissance. After all, Amazon has a South Side tech hub and a warehouse in Fairywood.

Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald refused to say Monday whether or not Amazon had visited and he cautioned against making assumptions.

“We know that there have been folks on the ground in lots of cities. That I’m pretty confident of,” Mr. Fitzgerald said. “They’ve been very quiet about what they’ve been doing. We’re respecting that, and we’re going to honor that.”

Nonetheless, the county executive said he didn’t read anything into the visits, one way or the other, that have been reported so far.

“I feel very confident that we are in a very competitive position,” he said, citing the Pittsburgh region’s quality of life, its tech pipeline, and site availability as among its strengths in the competition.