
Why the High Desert isn't ready for Amazon's second headquarters

By Joseph W. Brady

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When Amazon recently announced a search for the company's second headquarters, several residents of the Victor Valley wrote to the Daily Press and on social media asking why our region was not stepping forward as a potential suitor for the company.

Although we certainly offer some of the features that companies like Amazon are looking for, including abundant, low-cost land and local governments that would support large-scale commercial development, a closer look at the Request for Proposals for Amazon's HQ2 project (in response to which 258± cities and regions submitted proposals) reveals a number of important attributes that our area currently lacks.

Potential to attract and retain strong technical talent

Like many growing companies, Amazon needs a large number of software development engineers, as well as executives, managers and workers with legal, accounting and administrative abilities. Workers with high-level STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) education and experience are especially sought by Amazon and most other rapidly growing corporations.

The absence of a public university in the High Desert is a significant impediment to companies looking to expand their corporate operations. Amazon's RFP specifically stated that "A highly educated labor pool is critical, and a strong university system is required," a criterion that would have automatically put the Victor Valley out of the running. While it might have been possible to address this deficiency by drawing in highly educated workers residing down the hill, persistent traffic congestion on the Cajon Pass makes it infeasible for these workers to consider commuting to jobs in our region.

In order to be competitive for corporate expansion projects like Amazon we need a branch campus of the California State University system. While private institutions exist in our area, these colleges generally do not provide sufficient STEM training, tend to focus on lower-level vocational curricula and often saddle their graduates with student loan debt that impedes their ability to buy homes and advance economically.

Logistics

The Amazon RFP also identified logistics as a key criterion. Specifically, “travel time to a major highway corridor and arterial roadway capacity potential are key factors” and “travel time to an international airport with daily direct flights to Seattle, New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. is also an important consideration.”

Once again, the Cajon Pass bottleneck would have knocked us out of the competition despite the fact that Ontario International Airport is less than 45 miles from Victorville. Clearly, from the standpoint of access to both major transportation hubs and a well-trained workforce, traffic congestion along the I-15 corridor looms as a major hurdle to attracting large-scale commercial development. While there have been some recent improvements thanks to investments supported by the San Bernardino County Transportation Authority, Caltrans and Measure I supporters, traffic along I-15 remains an impediment to the future growth of the Victor Valley.

Quality of life

Amazon’s RFP states that “We want to invest in a community where our employees will enjoy living, recreational opportunities, educational opportunities and an overall quality of life.” While the Victor Valley can boast of our sunny weather, nice parks and outdoor recreational opportunities, our limited educational system and in particular our reputation as a high crime area, combined with our population’s high level of dependence on public assistance (which increased from 19 percent in 2000 to 58 percent in 2016 according to the County Human Services Office) makes our area a tough sell for companies seeking a high quality of life for their workers.

With all of the challenges we face, it is essential that we identify the highest priority issues and needs of our region and take immediate steps to address them. It is not as though we have nothing to offer — we have an abundance of building sites, relatively rapid approval processes, a business-friendly environment, comparatively low construction and operating costs and close proximity to Los Angeles, the beaches (less than two hours), mountain ski resorts (one hour) and Las Vegas.

That said, it will be difficult for the Victor Valley economy to move exponentially forward unless we make progress on these high priority needs:

- Identifying and implementing a long-term solution to Cajon Pass traffic congestion;
- Upgrading the skills of our workforce by expanding public higher education options;
- Achieving a meaningful reduction in violent and property crime; and

- Reducing the dependency of our population on public assistance by improving their job skills and expanding good paying job opportunities.

Believe it or not, we are not all that far from being able to compete for companies like Amazon. Let's continue to tackle these important issues so that the next time an opportunity like this arises the Victor Valley will be in a position to capitalize on it.

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