



## **A major player? St. Johns County wants to be in the conversation when companies look to move, expand**

By Stuart Korfhage  
October 29, 2017

When major corporations look for places to relocate or expand, communities usually line up for the chance to demonstrate their worthiness as suitors.

The latest example is Amazon, which recently announced it had received 238 proposals to be the site of its planned second North American headquarters.

Was St. Johns County one of them? Should it have been?

The answer to the first question is: probably not. County director of economic development Melissa Glasgow said she never talks about companies' inquiries, so she wasn't going to change her policy for this one.

As for the latter question, some of the county leaders say: yes, why not?

"I would not not take a look at anything," county commissioner Jay Morris said. "I wouldn't turn down anything. I would look at any opportunity that comes up."

Morris isn't unrealistic about Amazon in particular because the county doesn't really meet all the criteria for that project, which could eventually result in up to 50,000 new jobs. Cities like Atlanta, Chicago, Boston and Toronto are considered the favorites by national business journalists.

The smallest city on the favorites list is Austin, Texas, with a population of just less than 1 million. By contrast, the population of St. Johns County was estimated at 235,000 as of July 1, 2016.

But Morris' point is that this growing county, which has nearly doubled in population since 2000, is no longer just a place of quaint tourist spots, a few farms and some Jacksonville commuters.

It has become a serious competitor for attracting businesses. The recent commitment of the PGA Tour to maintain and expand its headquarters here is the perfect example.

“I think we could always be considered for any opportunity,” Glasgow said. “And we would stand out on a number of levels. That would ultimately be for them to decide.”

Morris credited Glasgow for her work with the Tour and for helping to secure other relocations like Advanced Disposal and Ideal Aluminum, among others. He also said the fact that her position was created about five years ago showed the county was really serious about bringing companies here.

“(Business owners) know they now have somebody to call to get information that hopefully will benefit them and hopefully benefit us,” Glasgow said of her position.

There are a lot of good things Glasgow can tell business owners about the county. It’s top-rated schools already attract people here and act as a good recruiting tool when companies look to bring in or retain talent.

In addition, St. Johns County has good transportation networks with Interstate 95 running right through it, access to railways, a small but competent local airport and access to a large airport and seaport just up the road in Jacksonville.

There is also the fact that the county still has a considerable amount of room for businesses with big plans. Glasgow said the county’s build out is still well under 50 percent — with quite a bit of open land in the county’s southern regions.

“We have a lot of opportunity to shape our future,” Glasgow said.

All of that, coupled with low taxes and natural amenities, draws business owners to at least consider the county.

“We have limitless opportunities to attract new businesses here because we’re so well regarded with many of the attributes that people and companies look for when they look for new business locations,” Glasgow said.

But does that all add up to being ready for a major project that would add thousands of new jobs quickly and really change the character of the area?

Well, the enthusiasm is there, but the numbers don’t really add up.

As of September, St. Johns County had the lowest unemployment rate in the state at just 2.7 percent. Now, a large employer could draw from the surrounding counties as well, but the idea that a new employer could quickly find hundreds, much less thousands, of qualified workers almost immediately is hard to imagine.

Ideal Aluminum co-owner Michael Siegel said when his company moved here in 2015 from DeLand there was some difficulty in getting a full staff of 115 employees right away.

He added that moving here has been great for Ideal, but he isn’t sure a huge company would be able to find what it needed unless its growth took place slowly.

“It would be very difficult to attract an opportunity like Amazon purely because of scale,” Siegel said in an email to The Record. “We see St. Johns County as a tremendous place to headquarter a business like ours because now growing our workforce incrementally and finding quality talent is actually easier (because of the smaller scale on which we are doing it).

“I do believe that the backbone of St. Johns County can be built incrementally by attracting more businesses like Ideal.”

And unlike some communities that might have lost big employers due to changes in the national economy, St. Johns County is not desperate to land any company willing to move here.

Glasgow said certain types of businesses would probably not be good fits here. A chemical plant, for instance, would not find much favor.

The county follows a guideline from the state that prioritizes bringing the following industries here: cleantech (biomass and biofuels processing, energy equipment manufacturing); life sciences (pharmaceuticals, diagnostic testing); infotech (software, telecommunications); aviation/aerospace; homeland security/defense; and financial/professional services (banking, insurance).

Brad Nelson, a member of the county Planning and Zoning Agency that reviews commercial and residential developments, said it’s important that boards like the PZA demand high standards for applicants in order to maintain the area’s quality of life.

“We want to see really good quality development here,” Nelson said. “We’re trying to find the right balance on the PZA and we’re trying to figure out what is the right balance, knowing we have the (precious) commodity here in the county.”

Nelson shares the confidence of Morris and Glasgow for the future of the county. He said the best potential for commercial growth here is, besides retail, assisted living facilities and medical facilities.

“There’s clearly a lot of demand for a lot of those,” he said.

If a large, dynamic, game-changing development came along in that industry, there would be plenty of active listening by county leaders.

“If we had a big one (development proposal), I guarantee you we’d go to the state and say, ‘Hey can you help us out?’” Morris said.

Added Glasgow: “We always want the opportunity to discuss. I think we would be open to any discussion a company would want to have to see where the real fit is and how we can be a benefit to each other.”