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Big, small wins possible with pitch: SHOEMAKER



By Brian Kelly, Sault Star
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AFP/Getty Images

Making a pitch for Sault Ste. Marie to host Amazon's second corporate headquarters is a numbers game for Matthew Shoemaker.

Speaking to Strive: Young Professionals Group on Friday, the Ward 3 city councillor offers his some sobering statistics.

The Sault's population has dropped about 3,000 in the last six years to 73,000. If an average of 500 residents keep leaving per year, the city's population sign will read less than 50,000 by the time the roughly two dozen young professionals gathered at Low and Slow retire.

"If you ask me if I'd rather be a city of 150,000 or a city of 50,000, I'd think we'd all rather see the place at 150,000," said Shoemaker during his presentation.

"The trend is clearly that it's not growing," he told The Sault Star on Saturday. "I want to see the upward trend."

Amazon's request for proposals from North American cities to bid for the Internet retailer's second HQ offers some impressive rewards for the winning entry.

The Seattle-based company says it will hire up to 50,000 employees, on average paid more than \$100,000 annually, at the new site. Capital expenditures will top \$5 billion. The seven-page document notes Amazon has "a preference" for a metropolitan area with more than one million residents that has the potential "to attract and retain" strong technical talent. Proximity to an international airport should be within 45 minutes.

"What we don't directly meet in their RFP we do meet indirectly," said Shoemaker.

"We far surpass other areas of their RFP that they are looking for."

That includes natural attractions such as Agawa Canyon, paddling on the St. Mary's River or hiking at Hiawatha Highlands.

"That's something that you can't get elsewhere," said Shoemaker of the trails offered at the Fifth Line East site.

Shoemaker maintains there's only one absolute must – 100 acres for an Amazon campus. There's four such sites available in the city. Building requirements start at more than 500,000 square feet in the first phase starting in 2019 followed by up to 8,000,000 square feet past 2027.

"It's not like if we get Amazon we're going to become Toronto," said Shoemaker during his Strive talk. "It's a big expansion. It would be a huge expansion for our city, but it's not an expansion to something that is unrealistic like turning Sault Ste. Marie into New York."

If the Sault is chosen, the municipality would have eight to 10 years to prepare infrastructure such as housing.

"It's nothing that is unachievable," said Shoemaker.

The city is partnering with Michigan Sault in the bid. It's a move that reflects a Donald Trump presidency that would likely frown on Amazon opting to base its second headquarters outside the United States.

Plus, Popular Science suggested late last year Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., would be one of the best places to live in America by 2100, avoiding extreme weather such as wildfires, hurricanes and tornadoes.

"I think companies have to look at that," said Shoemaker.

Numerous other cities also want Amazon including Calgary, Toronto, Halifax, Chicago, San Diego and Kansas City.

If the Sault isn't chosen for the headquarters, Shoemaker sees other possibilities as result of the attempt including landing a smaller Amazon operation such as a data or distribution centre.

"If we end up with 50 jobs rather than 50,000 jobs the whole effort has been worth it," he said. "The bid is not going to cost us much other than staff time."

Shoemaker's goal is a more diversified economy whose fortunes won't largely rest on Algoma's well-being. The steelmaker is approaching its second anniversary of creditor protection.

"It's struggling so we're struggling as a result," he said. "We need to be more diverse in order to help stabilize our economy across the board."

Shoemaker also anticipates other companies may choose to follow Amazon's lead in making a pitch for municipalities to vie for their headquarters.

"If it's successful for Amazon, and they build a second headquarters and it's a big success for them, everybody's going to copy them," he said. "We could be ready with our document, dust it off to add in up-to-date information ... We have the ability to market our city in one package that we'll be ready to submit to any company who is looking to put a headquarters anywhere in North America."

Shoemaker chairs the city committee that's overseeing the Amazon bid. He's working with fellow councillors Ozzie Grandinetti and Susan Myers, chief administrative officer Al Horsman and Sault Ste. Marie Economic Development Corp. executive director Dan Hollingsworth and manager of trade, investment and marketing Nevin Buconjic. The committee meets Monday or Tuesday to approve the bid's final version before it's dispatched to Amazon. Submissions are due Thursday.

"I would say we're the underdog, but I would not count us out," said Shoemaker.

"We want to be part of the Amazon family," is part of the Sault pitch.

Shoemaker heard from Sault MPP Terry Sheehan shortly after he announced the city's plans to land Amazon's headquarters.

The city's federal representative represented Ward 2 when he led an effort to bring Canadian Music Hall of Fame to the community in 2004. That attempt failed.

Sheehan gave Shoemaker a contact at Amazon's Canadian operations. That link led Shoemaker to speak with someone at the company regarding the bidding process.

"It's been an amazing opportunity," said Shoemaker of getting involved with the bid effort. "I basically get to sell Sault Ste. Marie through the bid package. I get to talk about everything that's great about the Sault. That's the best part about it."

He plans to run for another term as a city councillor in 2018.

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