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{r}evolution

James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership
Thinking for Ourselves
Shea Howell
Valued Economy

Last week Detroit received the news that it did not make it on to the short list of cities being considered for the new Amazon headquarters. A total of 238 cities pitched their virtues to Amazon in the hope of becoming the new home of Amazon’s second corporate center.

Amazon is the fourth largest company in the world and is planning on investing $5 billion in the expansion. It asked cities to apply for consideration and said they were interested in education and skills of the workforce, transit and the built environment, and the livability of their communities. It also asked for a list of the tax
incentive programs each municipality would offer.

Reports of the conversation with Amazon said that one of the main factors in their decision was the lack of mass transit in the region. The response from Detroit apparently was that regional highways were able to handle any increased traffic. Such a response shows how much the thinking of our political leadership and business community is still dominated by the single car culture, and how out of step they are with the growing desire, especially of younger people, to be car free and able to have dependable public transport.

But more than the captivation of Detroit by the dying car culture, or the painful reality that almost everything Amazon considered part of a livable community has been defunded by our right wing legislature, the whole spectacle created by these kinds of dehumanizing competitions is repulsive. They erode our sense of what is important and are dangerous to the health of democracy.

The idea that we will rebuild our city by some magic infusion from a single corporation is an illusion. And a dangerous one.

Detroit would be much better off if elected leaders devoted their energies to working to help create local businesses to satisfy local needs. A strong, equitable, sustainable economy requires imaginative rethinking of business practices and economic needs. It requires the kind of thinking that has evolved into the largest urban agricultural center in the country, sparked remarkable cultural and artistic productions, culinary creativity, and ambitious enterprises. These efforts often draw on principles of cooperative economic production and regenerative practices that develop people and our communities as they produce for local needs.

We are well out of the Amazon race. We should be among the first cities to challenge this whole notion of placing communities in competition with each other to offer the biggest tax breaks to attract corporate dollars. Such efforts never work as a develop strategy. Study after study has demonstrated that the net benefit of giant tax breaks never goes to the city that offers them.

A recent report documenting the futility of these efforts to attract business noted that “When many localities compete to offer incentives for a new business facility, the economic consequences are likely to be perverse for all … Because the leaders in each locality will offer incentives to avoid sending a discouraging signal about their business climate, everybody jumps into the competition – and the incentives escalate until the firm gets pay-offs equal in value to all of the economic benefits the new firm will create for its lucky home locality.”

These high profile spectacles are degrading distractions to the real business of recreating and redeveloping our economy. Thinking about developing our people, protecting our place, and strengthening our communities are the keys to creating economic relationships of real value.

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Check out an Eater's Guide to the Farm Bill
Invest in the Commons

“It’s like a Swiss Army knife.”
- President Obama 2/14