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Why Amazon HQ2 Will Need An Evacuation Plan



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I write about risk and resilience both personal and professional.

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Amazon is just one small example of a bigger problem that demonstrates why organizations need to include risk and resilience planning in their strategic planning process.



Visitors take a selfie with a smartphone in the bar area at the Amazon.com Inc. Photographer: Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg © 2018 BLOOMBERG FINANCE LP

Amazon finally announced that its [second headquarters](#) would be split between Virginia and New York. As a proud New Yorker, I am personally excited about Amazon choosing Long Island City, Queens. I love the neighborhood and have spent much time there. It's conveniently located and has multiple public transportation options, and it's really hard to beat the views of the river and Manhattan skyline. Overall, the decision will result in a positive economic outcome for Queens and its residents as well as a great fit for Amazon. What could possibly go wrong?

Remember that Hurricane?

Despite my overall optimism, my work as a resilience professional gives me pause. Long Island City is [prone to severe flooding](#) from coastal storms like hurricanes. Much of the area is in the 100-year flood plain (or [Flood Zone AE](#), according to the NYC Flood Hazard Mapper), and during Hurricane Sandy in 2012, it was under a whole bunch of water, including [Anable Basin](#), which will house the Amazon facility itself.

I saw the effects on a personal as well as professional level. My then-fiancé, now-husband lived in Long Island City (okay, Hunter's Point if we are splitting hairs), and I requested that he evacuate to my apartment located on much higher ground. Several of our friends' homes were flooded, which caused severe damage and evacuations that lasted months. It was a sad time of great loss for many, and it's going to happen again. Is this the experience that Amazon wants for its present and future employees, and if not, what is Amazon prepared to do about it?

A Growing Problem

Coastal flooding and sea level rise are projected to increase as the climate changes. Rising seas worsened the impact of Hurricane Sandy, leading to an estimated [\\$65 billion in damages](#) in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

Climate change is making the problem worse through increasing the intensity of storms and [the frequency of Category 4 and 5 hurricanes](#).

Despite the gravity of the headline-grabbing impact, information about the actual risk is difficult to find and filled with technical jargon. Federal laws [don't require disclosure of flooding](#) to property buyers; state laws vary. Sellers and developers have a vested interest in downplaying this information, [including in Long Island City](#). And while it's generally a case of caveat emptor, or buyer beware, it's also a case in which the consequences can be exceptionally dangerous and expensive. For relocating workers, this is a scary scenario.

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Amazon is just one small example of a bigger problem that demonstrates why organizations need to include risk and resilience planning in their strategic planning process. [🐦](#) Taking a disciplined approach to risk as a part of decision-making and not just as a stop gap, operational-level measure once decisions are already solidified could help leaders make better choices and save money in the long run.



The Manhattan Skyline is seen from the East River Ferry terminal at Gantry Plaza State Park in Long Island City. Photographer: Christopher Lee/Bloomberg © 2018 BLOOMBERG FINANCE LP

What Should Amazon Do?

So using this Amazon example, what should be done? If Amazon is planning to build a new facility, as is likely the case, it should include resilience planning from the very start of the process. Building can be done sustainably in a floodplain, but it has to be done differently. [The Whitney Museum](#), which was also affected by Hurricane Sandy, is a great example of how a building can be both stunning and safe and how an organization can make responsible building decisions.

Even if Amazon take measure to ensure that its exact location is safe from the flood waters, it's likely that many of its employees will choose to live nearby and will also be vulnerable. Amazon should provide them with assistance and information about the risks in advance. It also will need a corporate resilience plan that includes communications with employees to let them know what to do in the event of a storm, evacuation plans and information about exactly how Amazon will, and will not, support them.

In addition to taking care of itself and its employees, Amazon would be well-advised to promote a community preparedness plan. They would do well to remember, for example, the terrible press that [Goldman Sachs](#) received for their resilience success after Sandy. Goldman was able to keep their lights on during the storm when the rest of lower Manhattan was dark, including hospitals and they ended up taking a reputational hit for what should have been seen as doing the right thing. Including the community in their recovery in some way would go a long way toward establishing positive relations with the locals. It would demonstrate that Amazon's leaders care and are actively working to make Long Island City a better place to live and work for everyone. An investment in resilience may help win over suspicious Queens residents worried about the strain on infrastructure, overcrowding, and resource drain. Amazon will need to make early and visible investments in the community to assuage these understandable fears.

Lastly, Amazon should work closely with the New York City government to make sure that it gets this right. The city's coffers will have fewer funds for resilience-building initiatives due to the competitive bidding process, so Amazon should help fill the gap. NYC Emergency Management's [Partners in Preparedness](#) is a logical start for many companies. However, Amazon is likely to have a significant impact and should reach out to public partners directly to see how it can maximize its positive impact on its new second headquarters home--and keep everyone's heads above water.

I am the president and CEO of Disaster Recovery Institute International (DRI), where I help organizations prepare for and recover from disasters both natural and manmade. Through DRI and as an adjunct professor at New York University, I have worked with the public, private a... MORE

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