

## Local Governments Partner With D.C. Tech Incubator to Make Cities Smarter

Posted by **Aaron Wiener** on May 7, 2015 at 9:43 am

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A woman is biking north on 15th Street NW on a recent afternoon, in front of the Loews Madison Hotel. Suddenly, a taxi driver heading the other way U-turns into her, knocking her to the ground. A few passersby and the hotel doorman quickly help her up, and the driver gets out of his cab to check on her. She appears to be OK. Information is exchanged. The driver leaves; the cyclist lingers a while, then leaves, too.

A few minutes later, **Dan Hoffman** arrives at a coffee shop across the street, 15 minutes late for a meeting. He has just come from Capitol Hill, he says by way of apology, where he briefed Rep. **Darrell Issa** (R-Calif.) and several congressional staffers on the “Internet of Things”—a future of networked devices and systems that communicate with one another. When told of the incident that just occurred, he cuts in with a vision of the future, when sensors and “vehicle-to-infrastructure technology” will prevent such occurrences.

He lays out the scenario. “Someone’s in the bike lane. Someone’s pulling around. Car senses that that’s a bike lane, shouldn’t be going there. Or car senses biker. Car stops.”

Hoffman thinks he can help get us to that future. As Montgomery County’s first-ever chief innovation officer, a job he’s held since October 2012, Hoffman is responsible for bringing creative and efficient new approaches to the county government and its technology efforts.

Put another way, he’s the grown-up supervising the county’s tech playground. And the sandbox at the center of the playground is the Thingststitute, an innovation lab that the county opened in January in a historic Rockville courthouse. The Thingststitute serves as a test bed for local entrepreneurs to experiment with new technology, with the goal of getting a jump on the Internet of Things and incorporating it into the county’s development. The Thingststitute’s cornerstone project, the Safe Community Alert (SCALE) Network, builds sensors that can send automatic signals to first responders when they detect, say, hazardous gases at a senior housing facility.

Last month, Montgomery County took a step that Hoffman thinks will help get it to the smart-cities future he envisions. The county announced a partnership with 1776, the tech incubator that launched in downtown D.C. in 2013 and quickly became the epicenter of the District’s tech scene, with 285 member startups now. The arrangement is designed to give Montgomery County startups access to 1776’s resources and guidance, and to allow the county government to work with existing 1776 members to incorporate their technology into public infrastructure that could include everything from traffic lights to government buildings.

As part of the arrangement, Montgomery County is paying 1776. Hoffman won't specify how much, but he says it's less than the \$200,000 grant the District provided to help the incubator get off the ground. Perhaps more importantly for 1776, it gets to expand its footprint and influence beyond the District line. The company isn't stopping at Montgomery County. Three days after it announced that partnership, it formed another one with Arlington County, where it was taking over the tech hub Disruption Corp. Two weeks after that, it acquired a San Francisco co-working space, although no direct partnership with the city is imminent.

On some level, the arrangement with the D.C.-area jurisdictions is a peculiar one. Montgomery and Arlington counties are paying a private company (1776) for the privilege of connecting other private companies (local startups) to its resources. But **David Zipper**, managing director of 1776 Ventures, the company's for-profit venture arm, says the partnership will serve a more important function, allowing 1776 to screen the many tech ideas out there and then pitch the most promising ones to local governments.

"The problem is, if you're in government, it's very hard to separate the wheat from the chaff and figure out who has a product that will scale and improve people's lives," says Zipper, who served as D.C.'s director of business development under Mayor **Vince Gray**. "1776 is designed to provide that kind of curated system for public leaders so they can zero in on the startups that will have the biggest impacts throughout the region."

Zipper says this is the first major partnership anywhere in the country he's aware of between a tech incubator and local governments. If the jurisdictions in the region remain as committed to smart-cities innovation as Montgomery County appears to be now, the result of these partnerships could be cities that are safer and easier to navigate. Capitalizing on its location in America's hub of government, nonprofit, and advocacy work, 1776 has made city-building one of the main focuses of its startups. The company lists "cities" among its five core areas, but the other four—education, energy and sustainability, health, and transportation—are also central to the ways cities are trying to incorporate technology.

Take TransitScreen. The 1776-based startup uses public data from transit agencies and partnerships with companies like Car2Go and Uber to create live displays of real-time transit data, which can be mounted in building lobbies, bus shelters, or other facilities. Partnerships between TransitScreen and jurisdictions in the region could involve governments funding screens in public spaces or facilitating public-private partnerships where a company installs screens in public facilities in exchange for advertising revenue. (There's some question about how useful an arrangement like this would be for the D.C. government, which launched its own real-time transit info program, [Ride DC](#), in December, and an accompanying app last month.)

"Having this relationship with Montgomery County is huge for us," says TransitScreen CEO **Matt Caywood**. "Montgomery County is ready to deploy technology to make their urban cores, the Bethesdas and Rockvilles, a more walkable and transit-friendly place."

It's not an easy task, given how few streets in those cities are currently welcoming to pedestrians. Hoffman says that, as with so much of his work, it's still an experiment.

"We're learning what TransitScreen means in a more suburban environment," he says. "What does it mean to put a screen in a bus stop in front of a strip mall? Will it change behaviors?"

Other suburbs may soon have an opportunity to test out this thesis, too. Zipper says 1776 has had conversations with "almost every jurisdiction that borders the three where we're working right now." He adds, "I won't tell you where we're going next, but I'll tell you there's a lot of interest in the DMV region."

Here in the District, Mayor **Muriel Bowser** announced on Wednesday a partnership with 1776 to conduct workshops at THEARC, the cultural center on Mississippi Avenue SE, to expose residents to career opportunities in the digital economy. Zipper also says 1776 recently introduced Caywood to **Elliott Ferguson**, the head of Destination DC, the D.C. government's marketing arm for tourism and conventions. "Elliott and Matt just went right off to the races about the public infrastructure that would get the most value out of this," Zipper says.

All of this leads to a future of interconnected infrastructure, making it easier and safer to get around a city, says Hoffman. "In the future future state—and that's where we get into the Internet of Things—the 'smart cities' concept gets more pervasive," he

says. "I think that's just a matter of time."

Until then, it's up to the police to start cracking down on illegal U-turns.

*File photo by Darrow Montgomery*

