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How San Francisco Put Entrepreneurship in City Government

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San Francisco's tech courtship continues, and this time, it's all in-house.

On Wednesday, July 30, Mayor Ed Lee arrived at city hall to announce the fruits of the city's first [Entrepreneurship-in-Residence program](#), a four-month-long collaboration that paired six civic tech startups with city departments to craft tech tools to improve services. The initiative, Lee said, was about fostering the city's ongoing tech relationships and thinking beyond borders of basic government.

"My feeling is that both technology companies and their workers want to solve real world problems to improve people's lives," Lee said. "We need to get our heads out of the bureaucracy and suggest to ourselves, 'Are there better ways?' 'Can we use our data better?' 'Can we communicate with our constituents better?' 'Can they give us input?' and 'Can we turn that around to provide better and more efficient services?'"

As MC at the event, San Francisco Chief Innovation Officer Jay Nath introduced the departments and startups that showcased fresh pilot programs, prototypes and fully developed products. Among these were smartphone apps, notification systems and advanced platforms to assist planning departments in predictive analysis.

One of the more hands-on products came from a collaboration between tech startup MobilePD and the SFPD. MobilePD's VP of Business Development Jamieson Johnson conducted a demo of a field interview app for officers called MobilePD FI (Field Interview). Recounting officers' laborious manual note taking process and data entry, Johnson pitched the app as a kind of Evernote for law enforcement. The app allows officers to securely take field notes, photos and voice recordings during interviews while simultaneously syncing information with police databases. The apps, he said, could eliminate data backlogs, hours of data entry and time wasted driving back to police departments for recording.

The company hopes to sell the service nationally to the country's more than 13,000 police departments.

As a city known for its earthquakes, San Francisco's Department of Emergency Management was eager to highlight a new app created by the mass notification company Regroup. Still in development, the app uses data from seismic fault sensors that predict earthquakes in seconds and minutes, traditionally only available to governments, and could send immediate alerts to residents with safety tips before quakes hit as public warnings.

Other notable apps at the event included an advanced smoke detector pilot from Birdi that detects indoor air quality, a predictive analysis system from Synthicity that analyzes urban planning projects with mapped 3-D renderings -- similar to the popular simulator game SimCity - - and a geolocating system by indoors to help the visually impaired navigate the San Francisco International Airport using a voice-guided mobile app. And last but not least, the startup Buildingeye worked with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency on an app that chronicles permit and noticing information with a user-friendly mapping interface.

In summary of the open door partnership with city hall, Nath said the creations and startups showed genuine desires to improve city services. "It's an opportunity cost for them, so for them to actually invest their time and energy is big," he said. "They really tried to better understand what we're doing and better serve the needs of citizens."

When the Mayor's Office launched the Entrepreneurship-in-Residence program last March, Nath said it had no idea what to expect. The city imagined a good showing would call up 10 to 20 startup applications. When nearly 200 startups from 25 different cities and countries responded, Nath said he was equally "amazed" and encouraged by the outpour.

"We believe innovation can happen anywhere," he said, "and indeed, it happens everywhere."