The Portland Tribune

Portland: Smart City, USA

By Shasta Kearns Moore
April 12, 2016

A city the size of Portland is almost like its own living organism: It has arteries of traffic, multiplication of buildings, and the respiration of buying and selling.

But could it also have a brain?

That's the new challenge that cities across the nation are scrambling to meet as technology described as the Internet of Things makes it possible to have "smart cities." The automation, sensors and data analysis could have huge impacts on citizens' daily lives in coming decades.

Imagine having a single smartphone app that would show you the fastest or most affordable route across any form of transportation — TriMet, Uber, bikeshare, car, walking, or a combination thereof — in real time.

Imagine walking alone at night and being able to shout "Help!" to a microphone in a lamppost and have a police car automatically routed to your location.

Imagine streets that could self-report potholes, or car crashes, or unusually high levels of air pollutants.

These are all dreams of the future, kernels of ideas that could be possible thanks to a new computer lab and data center being installed at Portland State University. Called FIWARE — for "Future Internet"-ware — this is the first time the open-source technology used all over the European Union for its smart cities will appear in the United States.

FIWARE is basically a group of standards, a platform for creating applications that would power a smart city. With it, nonprofit groups, private businesses, or teenagers in their garages can begin to build software that takes advantage of all the data being collected all around us. With the open-source and widely used FIWARE as the parameters, these ideas could then scale up across the nation and the globe.

"There is a very large potential market," says Portland State University research professor Wilfred Pinfold, who is leading the FIWARE Lab project. "Portland is incubating some very interesting businesses in this space. And not only at the big level, the Intel level, but all the way down to the start-ups."

Pinfold believes that technologists and city planners are on the cusp of something as big as the Internet, mother of Google, Amazon and Facebook.

"Something of the similar ilk is going to happen, and right at the heart of that is smart cities," he says. "This same opportunity is here, and as a city we want to be able to take advantage of it."

Smart Cities Challenge

Portland is a leader in this arena, jockeying with only six other cities in the final round of a $50 million prize to become the nation's first federally funded Smart City.

Skip Newberry, head of the Technology Association of Oregon, says the push to develop standards for smart city technology began about a year and a half ago.

"The standards that would be established as part of this work could really position Portland as a global leader in this space," Newberry says. The idea of the federal grant process, pushed by the Obama administration, was to bring a lot of players to the table to create a common language.

"The cities will start to come together and say: Here are some emerging standards. Private companies will then follow the needs of the cities," Newberry says.

There are several possible ways the standards could still go in this country, but FIWARE seems to be leading the pack so far.

"FIWARE has already received considerable investment in Europe and has the advantage of not being tied to a particular company that may be more interested in sales than service," Jonathan Fink, vice president for research and strategy at Portland State University, says in an email. "Having Portland as the first U.S. city to implement FIWARE gives us some first-mover advantages in the highly competitive world of integrating big data with urban services."

With the new FIWARE lab, Portland has also bolstered its position in the federal grant process called the Smart Cities Challenge. The U.S. Department of Transportation has put up $40 million with billionaire Paul Allen of Microsoft fame offering another $10 million. The city is one of seven finalists, with the final round of plans due May 24.

John Brady, spokesman for the Portland Bureau of Transportation, says even if the city doesn't win, the process of bringing together stakeholders for its grant proposal has already catalyzed change.

"It's fantastic in that respect," Brady says. "The hope is, win or lose, we're really laying the foundation for future collaboration."

If they do win the $50 million jackpot, PBOT's proposal is to build a "personal mobility platform" currently called UB Mobile PDX. The idea is to take all the different forms of transportation currently available in Portland and mash them into a single app that will calculate the best way to get from point A to point B, whether that's through TriMet, Uber, Lyft, driving, walking or biking.

The way to integrate all of that in a common network would be through Portland's FIWARE.

Surveillance state?

But as with any new technology, the potential for unintended consequences also exists. Critics of FIWARE say the technology could lead to a powerful government surveillance system and omnipresent law enforcement.

Pinfold, who is leading the new PSU lab, says the safeguard against that is to simply keep a priority focus on what the people of Portland want and what they don't.

"It's a matter of getting it right, and getting it right means we have to do what the people in Portland want us to do," he says, noting that technologists often don't understand cities in the way that city planners do — that they are a series of communities and neighborhoods. Solutions have to be unique because neighborhoods are.

"We think the (FIWARE-based) services need to be available really at a community level," Pinfold says.

He says the new PSU lab also will include a "decision theater" that will help developers play with the data and see what's possible.

"When we talk about changing Portland," he says, "it's really about enhancing the things we love about Portland."

Willamette Week

Portland Will Pay $25,000 to Settle Lawsuit by Former Aide to Mayor Charlie Hales

By Beth Slovic
April 11, 2016

The Portland City Council this week will vote to settle a pending federal lawsuit by a former aide to Mayor Charlie Hales who alleges that Hales' former chief of staff, Gail Shibley, pressured him into revealing he was HIV-positive, then verbally harassed him because of his illness.

WW, which first reported the allegations in 2014, is declining to name the ex-employee to protect his medical privacy. He filed the lawsuit in 2015.

If the City Council approves the settlement agreement on Wednesday, Portland will write a check for $25,000 to the ex-employee's attorney to cover legal bills and other costs.

The former aide had sought $350,000 in damages.

Documentation from the city shows Portland officials thought it would be cheaper to settle.

"The claim has been investigated by Risk Management Services and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and no violations of law were found," the report reads. "However, there is some risk that the claims in the lawsuit could proceed to a jury trial.

"Because of the costs of proceeding through litigation to trial would extend the controversy into the next mayor's administration and cost more than the negotiated settlement amount," the report continues, "Risk Management Services recommends the lawsuit be compromised for the total sum of $25,000, inclusive of plaintiffs attorneys fees and costs, subject to the claimant providing the city with a release in a form to be approved by the city attorney."

The Portland Business Journal

Why now is the time to speak up about smart cities, digital equity and open data

By Skip Newberry
April 11, 2016

As someone who is passionate about open data, digital access, civic innovation and smart city projects, the past month or so has been pretty incredible.

This week promises more twists, turns and excitement. Read along for more context and ways you can get involved.

Smart Cities

In case you missed it, on March 12, Anthony Fox, the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation announced that Portland was one of seven finalists chosen for a smart city challenge that will culminate later this spring in one city being awarded $40 million from the federal government and another $10 million from Paul Allen's Vulcan Ventures in Seattle.

Each of the finalists is vying "to become the country's first city to fully integrate innovative technologies — self-driving cars, connected vehicles and smart sensors — into their transportation network."

Digital Equity

Last week, the Portland City Council voted unanimously to adopt a Digital Equity Action Plan. This plan is the culmination of more than a year's-worth of work on the part of the city's Office of Community Technology and other bureaus, as well as Multnomah County and several nonprofits.

The plan outlines numerous policy and operational proposals to advance digital equity throughout Multnomah County in the coming years. According to the action plan, more than 15 percent of Portland households do not have access to the Internet.

The primary reason for this is cost, followed by lack of training and devices. During testimony at city council, Mayor Charlie Hales noted that the action plan greatly bolsters the city's efforts to win the U.S. Department of Transportation Smart Cities Challenge. The city's first-round application linked transportation and climate outcomes with equity and inclusion.

Open Data

This week, at 6 p.m. on April 14, Portland City Council will hear testimony regarding the city's proposed Comprehensive Plan.

Why should the tech industry care about a land use planning document? Because members of the Portland Planning Commission are recommending to City Council for the first time that open data be treated as a priority in the city's Comprehensive Plan.

Lee Van Der Voo recently explored this topic in an article for InvestigateWest where she frames some of the key issues. If you have an opinion about open data and what it means for efforts related to smart cities and digital equity, I encourage you to share your thoughts with the City Council either in writing or in-person on Thursday evening.

If nothing else, the Planning Commission has stoked the fires of a critical debate that will be playing out in cities around the country and world for years to come as municipalities look to balance obligations concerning public safety and privacy with innovation, transparency and equity.