SMART CITIES

Living Lab May Move Myrtle Beach, S.C., from Tourism to Tech

Four technology companies are part of the city's initiative, which is aimed at growing its tech industry and making strides in smart city and digital government work. A Living Lab facility is in the works.

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One South Carolina beach community is growing beyond tourism with tech entering the economic development mix, and a new project leading the way to becoming a testbed for innovation.

The four companies, announced last week, include Rep'd, a video messaging and engagement platform for local governments; and Polco, an "all-in-one community engagement platform [that] allows government leaders to collect and analyze resident feedback to make data-driven decisions," according to a city news release.

Also joining is dependbuild, a software platform that helps city projects stay on time and on budget; and Cocoflo Innovations, which offers cloud-based digital government services including emergency alerts, payment processing and licensing. (The former is also part of the new CivStart cohort announced Wednesday.)

An executive at Rep'd said it will be working with the city on a pilot to let it quickly record and share short videos, outlining updates for city projects or even responses to frequently asked questions.

"We're working with Myrtle Beach to help their staff connect more personally with residents," Mark Friese, Rep'd chief operating officer, said in an email. The partnership will work directly with the Myrtle Beach Parks, Recreation and Sports Tourism Department (PRST). Happening alongside that endeavor, Polco will provide surveying technology to gather resident input, and then use the Rep'd video capabilities to communicate those insights and corresponding actions, Friese explained.

"Myrtle Beach is establishing itself as an innovation destination, and the Living Lab program is a great example," he said. "It's a perfect fit for us because we get to bring our technology to a great new community and deploy it in a first-of-its-kind manner by way of our complementary partnership with Polco."

Numerous cities and regions have looked to these types of government-led innovation efforts to drive economic development toward the tech sectors, but also to grow smart city projects.

"The upshot is, the city gets a closer connection with its residents. Residents get better and more accessible information. And we get feedback to continue making our service as valuable as possible to the communities we serve," Friese said.

In a similar undertaking, central Ohio is home to The Beta District, an area stretching from Columbus through Dublin, Marysville and Union County. Officials there want to harness the region's strengths in the transportation technology sectors, to establish central Ohio as another tech innovation zone.

Doug McCollough, the newly named first executive director of The Beta District, described the effort as forming an "innovative ecosystem."

"We can engage with numerous participants in a smart mobility ecosystem to conceive innovations, validate ideas, find partners, convene thought leaders, engage institutions and initiate projects," McCollough said in July.

"It is a physical location. It has boundaries. You can locate it on the map," he said. "But its activity is larger than the physical location."

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