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The Big Apps competition event at Grand Central Tech Thursday. | Bekka Palmer

EDC officially launches Big Apps competition challenges

By MIRANDA NEUBAUER | 01/13/17 05:38 AM EST

The city Economic Development Corp. officially launched the newest edition of the city's Big Apps technology competition Thursday evening, together with its new partner, Civic Hall Labs.

The event took place in Grand Central Tech in midtown, which is home to an Urban Technology Growth Hub launched with funding from EDC. Civic Hall Labs is the research and development arm of Civic Hall, which is envisioned as an anchor for a new tech hub planned for near Union Square by 2020.

Elizabeth Stewart, executive director of Civic Hall Labs, talked about the "human-centered approach" of the competition, which has a focus this year on immigrants, youths aged 13 to 18 and seniors over 65.

As part of the preparation last fall, Stewart said Civic Hall Labs spoke with around 100 people who serve those populations. Those conversations

informed the development of the three themes for the competition challenges: transportation, knowledge and community resiliency.

That entails using technology and public data to increase use and expand travel options for populations that can find navigating the transportation network difficult, providing them with better access to accurate and timely information and finding ways to foster more inclusion and connection among those populations in spaces where they live, learn or work.

The Big Apps competition was launched in 2009, when it was seen in part as a response to the financial crisis and as a way to diversify the city's economy. It has taken place annually since then with the exception of last year.

"Every year we have really sought to ensure that [the competition] adapted ... given the needs, the challenges and aspirations of the people of our city, and also given the aspirations and talents of the city's growing tech ecosystem," Maria Torres-Springer, president of EDC, said.

The grand prize winners will receive cash prizes sponsored by Microsoft and admission into CivicX, Civic Hall Labs' civic accelerator program, and the winner of a Judge's Choice Award will have the chance to pilot the technology on the LinkNYC tablets throughout the city.

Noelle Francois, executive director of Heat Seek, a 2014 Big Apps winner, which developed sensors that can measure, track and transmit data to help residents in buildings with violations, spoke about how participation in the competition helped the nonprofit partner with city agencies such as the Department of Housing Preservation and Development, connect with other community organizations, and receive introductions to two incubators after its win.

Brooklyn Borough President Eric Adams recently announced that he would partner with City Councilman Ritchie Torres to introduce legislation to codify the work of Heat Seek, which has installed sensors in 57 buildings in four boroughs. He also announced a partnership with another previous winner, Benefit Kitchen, earlier on Thursday in Bedford-Stuyvesant, where it is working with a food pantry, St. John's Bread & Life.

Civic Hall Labs will host seven workshops of the next several months before the submission deadline and winners announcement in April and May.

Torres-Springer said that the evolution of Big Apps represented an effort to break down silos. "It's not just about, 'here's the data, good luck.' In this process ... we've seen much more cooperation with city agencies, so at the end of this, it's about changing the culture and changing the dynamics ... and the technologists are not just there to look at the data, they're really helping city agencies [serve the public]."

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