Where We're Headed

The annual CNT Urban Sustainability Apps Competition has sparked the fertile minds of individuals from Chicago's neighborhoods to create digital solutions to real community problems facing residents every day. The competition offers residents a toolkit for transforming ideas into deployable solutions. Even though they may have shied away from considering technology for solutions in the past, participants have found they can rally around their own experiences and leverage relationships during CNT's competition to create apps that begin to solve pressing problems. The CNT Urban Sustainability Apps Competition also introduces residents to the widespread availability of digital platforms and Open Government data for public use.

Highlights of this year's event, which corresponded with the National Day of Civic Hacking, included a visit and talk by Dr. D. J. Patil, White House Deputy CTO and Chief Data Scientist, as well as a presentation by the U.S. Census Bureau on their new data portal City SDK* (link is external). In his speech to competition participants, Dr. Patil spoke about the importance of using data responsibly while also making it work for everybody. He called the urban apps competition an "incredible" event.

The Problem with Our Problems

The variety and heft of community issues are as varied as Chicago's communities themselves. This adds a level of complexity for outsiders seeking to identify and design solutions for neighborhoods they don't live in. By connecting people from all across the city, the CNT Urban Sustainability Apps Competition has become increasingly important as a unifying platform for residents and technologists to systemically give voice to issues and birth community-driven solutions.

This year, our top three winners designed working apps that address unique issues that are relevant across community boundaries.

Food Deserts are a serious problem that reduce access to healthy options for residents in low-income areas. The notion that people cannot locate fruit, vegetables or low-cost healthy options is very real and negatively impacts the quality of life and cost of living for adults and youth in distressed areas. Two of the winning apps offered practical market-oriented solutions to improve food availability and affordability:

First Place Team

Purshable *Idea Leader: Elizabeth Zubiate*

Elizabeth Zubiate and her team created Purshable, an app that builds a demand for close-to-expiration food that grocery stores typically throw away. The average Chicago grocery store throws out $2,300 worth of food that is older, but still good, every single day. Purshable dynamically repurposes these goods, marketing items from member stores at a discount to low-income and environmentally conscious consumers. Purshable transforms what was previously lost grocery store revenue into lower household food expenses. The app uses U.S. Census CitySDK and City of Chicago OpenGov data. Elizabeth says she's mulled over this problem for some time but that the CNT Urban Sustainability Apps Competition gave her and her team the resources, focus and confidence to design an app that addresses this pressing issue.

Purshable, First Place Team

* http://uscensusbureau.github.io/citysdk/

Third Place Team

Fresh Eats *Idea Leader: Lydia Moore*

Fresh Eats, Third Place Team

Lydia Moore and her team created Fresh Eats, an app that provides members alerts, maps, and search capability to find fresh fruit and vegetables in neighborhood food deserts. Some fresh produce is available in many neighborhoods at corner convenience stores, but since availability is spotty, demand is weak. This results in food waste and unprofitable operations. Fresh Eats utilizes U.S. Census CitySDK and City of Chicago OpenGov data to identify all the places other than grocery stores where fresh produce is sometimes available. Fresh Eats allows residents to "tag" specific fruits and vegetables when they're available so that other residents know where to find them. Residents are then notified about when and where produce on their "want lists" is available. When the supply runs out, participants then "untag" the items. By continuously tracking what fruits and vegetables residents want, Fresh Eats will increase demand and profitably, creating a "virtuous circle." Lydia says that although the problem is one she has faced for several years working at a community development organization, she didn't have the tools to create a solution until participating in the CNT Urban Sustainability Apps Competition.

The Digital Divide is another issue facing Chicagoans due to the growing disparity in digital development skills between low-income and higher-income communities. While an increase in tech jobs is a huge benefit for a great number of people, people in distressed areas don't often experience the potential personal rewards and community impact of becoming producers of technolology.

Techspace, Second Place Team

Second Place Team

Techspace *Idea Leader: Matt Lee*

Matt's team created TechSpace, an app that connects tech training programs with available spaces in neighborhood churches, community centers, and other places. TechSpace utilizes City of Chicago OpenGov data to provide a dynamic exchange of spaces available for tech training events and revenue potential for venues with spaces to rent. Matt says his team had the concept for TechSpace and leveraged relationships from the CNT Urban Sustainability Apps Competition to hone the app and address the need for tech training organizations to provide increased reach and access to distressed communities.

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