



CODE FOR DETROIT

Local group attempts to make city user-friendly

BY NINA MISURACA IGNACZAK

It's happy hour in downtown Detroit, but instead of hitting the bar, three guys with three MacBook Pros slide into the back room at D:Hive, pass around some cookies, and get ready to talk cities and code.

This is the weekly Meetup group for Code for Detroit, and Matt Hampel, 24, has an idea. "Have you read Detroit Future City?" (Not to be confused with The Engineering Society of Detroit Future City Competition), he asked the group. He is referring to the newly released comprehensive plan for the City of Detroit that culminates two years of talk about right-sizing, urban agriculture, green infrastructure, and vacant land. When most admit to having only skimmed it, he laughed. "It's not easy to read."

What he means is that it's not easy to read on a computer or a phone, which to Mr. Hampel means it is not accessible to most people. And making public information accessible to people—a practice known as civic hacking—is the mission of Code for Detroit. The document, formatted for traditional printing, is available in a PDF that is tricky to navigate.

So Mr. Hampel is developing a simple, HTML version of the document that can be easily accessed by anyone with a web or mobile browser. And that's not all.

Achieving this goal will require copying, pasting, and formatting text from the online PDF into a new HTML template, a tedious and time-consuming task. To fix that, Mr. Hampel is setting up a tool that will parcel the work out in chunks to volunteers, a technique called crowdsourcing. He hopes to tap the labor of many people to complete a task that will benefit the community at large.



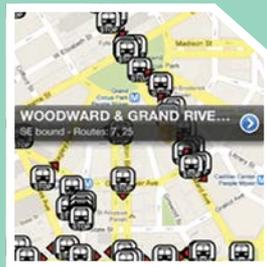
MAKING GOVERNMENT ACCESSIBLE

Code for Detroit is a local offshoot, known as a Brigade, of San Francisco-based Code for America (CFA), a nonprofit funded by the Knight Foundation, ESRI, and Google, among others. The mission of CFA is "helping governments work better for everyone with the

people and power of the web." CFA offers programs designed to help governments move toward harnessing technology to leverage the crowd (tech-speak for Internet users) with a goal of improving local government function and civic engagement.

An 11-month fellowship program, which CFA dubbed a Peace Corps for Geeks, engages web developers, entrepreneurs, and designers in a year of public service aimed at working with cities or counties on specific technology-related projects. Fellows are provided training and mentoring throughout their fellowship.

Cities and counties can apply to host fellows and they must commit public funds and additional private matching funds to support them. Mr. Hampel joined fellows Alicia Roualt and Prashant Singh for a 2012 fellowship hosted by the City of Detroit with the support of the Knight Foundation and the Kellogg Foundation. During the program, the three developed applications to focus on civic engagement, transportation information access, and city-owned property information. Code for Detroit is now working to refine these applications.



Route	Destination	Minutes
25	25 JEFFERSONFORT EASTBO...	5:43 PM - 2 min delay
7	7 CADILLAC-HARPER EASTBO...	5:58 PM - 4 min early
25	25 JEFFERSONFORT EASTBO...	6:02 PM - on time
25	25 JEFFERSONFORT EASTBO...	6:41 PM - on time

bookmarking of bus stops, and mapping. The app was recently approved and is available as Stop313 for free.

The CFA Brigade program offers an online service to facilitate hacker communities (communities of computer programmers) such as Code for Detroit through local online forums, a national email listserv, and a concierge service to help people network with others working on similar problems. A main goal of Code for Detroit Brigade is currently to establish a local hacker community in Detroit.

Mike Evans, 26, a Brigade captain, said, "People don't need to be techies to come to our Meetup group. They can come just for the cookies." Mr. Evans also said the group is interested in meeting anyone who interested in helping achieve this mission, including people with skills in outreach and communication. For 2013, the group is working on developing tech-driven solutions to common issues faced by local communities in Detroit.

"We are looking to address challenges of how to map neighborhoods, how to make a website that can be easily updated by community members, and how to communicate effectively about crime," he said.

The group is also interested in finding ways to continue to engage with the community, to keep a pulse on neighborhood issues, and discern where technology-based solutions may be able to help. The focus is on low-cost solutions, open data, transparency, and sharing.

Code for Detroit is planning to host monthly talks on civic hacking and skill-shares, where people can come together to learn from each other and exchange ideas. The group is also looking to partner with other tech-minded groups, such as Girl Develop it Detroit, a Meetup group focused on educating women in the ways of computer programming. The Meetups occur weekly on Wednesday evenings. More information on Meetups and events is available on their Facebook page.



BUS AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

The work of the CFA Fellows extends to many facets of daily lives. As many know, Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) busses are notoriously unreliable, and those who depend on the system sorely needed better information about local bus schedules. The CFA fellows identified a solution: make real-time bus information available via an Application Programming Interface (API) so riders can access it via text message. TextMyBus is now available for DDOT users, who can text their closest street address or intersection to 50464 to find out when the next bus will arrive.

Evol Mark Johnson, 45, is a Compuware software designer who moved to Detroit from Costa Rica to be near Detroit's growing tech scene. When he found the TextMyBus API, he set about developing an application to offer an enhanced user interface and added functionality such as location,



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