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Detroit launches Innovation District to spur job growth

By Natalie Broda

A new Innovation District will promote small business growth and create jobs throughout Detroit, Mayor Mike Duggan announced Thursday.

Duggan named Nancy Schlichting, CEO of **Henry Ford Medical System**, as chair of a 17-person advisory committee that will create the formal district. "We have right now some great creative energy occurring in downtown and midtown," Duggan said. "The focus of the Innovation District will be to create an anchor to support neighborhood business incubators across the city."

Crain's first reported the program's launch last month.

The 4.3-square-mile district already holds 55 percent of the city's jobs, while only being 3.1 percent of its land mass.

The exact geographic boundaries of the district have not been drawn, but officials say it will encompass downtown and Midtown and stretch from east to west roughly from I-75 to Woodward Avenue, and north to south from just north of Grand Boulevard to the Detroit riverfront.

The announcement follows a report from the **Brookings Institution**, co-authored by its vice president, Bruce Katz. The report outlines how formalized innovation districts can support metropolitan economies by facilitating and accelerating communication of ideas. *Detroit was among seven case studies in the report.*

"What's going to happen is we're going to have a two-plus-two-equals-five effect," Katz said. "Collaboration and synergy in this district are going to have unanticipated discoveries for the market."

After seeing the success that cities like Boston and Atlanta have had with innovation districts, Duggan starting thinking about bringing the concept to Detroit.

"The good news is we can look around and see what's already been done," Duggan said. "Land-use decisions, zoning decisions, mixed-use buildings help cities thrive."

The district will work to establish neighborhood small business incubators and bring entrepreneurial programs to neighborhoods. Duggan has appointed Jill Ford, who as worked the past decade with entrepreneurs, to lead that

Detroit Innovation District Advisory Committee

Committee chair: Nancy Schlichting, CEO, Henry Ford Health Systems

Committee members:

Joseph Mullany, CEO, Detroit Medical Center

Matthew Cullen, president and COO, Rock Ventures LLC

M. Roy Wilson, president, Wayne State University

Lou Anna K. Simon, president, Michigan State University

Rip Rapson, president and CEO, The Kresge Foundation

David Egner, president and CEO, Hudson-Webber Foundation, and executive director, New Economy Initiative

Faye Nelson, president, DTE Energy Foundation, and vice president of public affairs, DTE Energy

David Blaszkiewicz, president, Invest Detroit, and president and CEO, Downtown Detroit Partnership

Susan Mosey, president, Midtown Detroit Inc.

Leslie Smith, president and CEO, TechTown

Jean Redfield, president and CEO, NextEnergy

Mark Coticchia, chief innovation officer, Henry Ford Health System

F. Thomas Lewand, group executive for jobs and economic growth, Office of the Mayor, city of Detroit

Paula Sorrell, vice president of entrepreneurship and innovation and venture capital, Michigan Economic Development Corp.

Cynthia Wilbanks, vice president for government relations, the University of Michigan

Alicia George, owner, Motor City Java House

Espy Thomas, Sweet Potato Sensations

effort.

Partners in the Detroit Innovation District initiative include the Brookings Institute and the **New Economy Initiative of Southeast Michigan**.

NEI Executive Director David Egner described the district concept in terms of four buckets: the first bucket is assuring that entrepreneurs have everything they need; the second bucket is working with real estate and infrastructure to best facilitate the district; the third is policy, and the fourth is finance.

"I don't believe in entrepreneurial gardening," Egner said. "Seldom is everything in a neat row. It's more like a rainforest; it's going to grow wherever it wants."

Though the details are still being worked out, some entrepreneurs were on hand at Thursday's announcement at **TechTown** to talk about their excitement over the project.

Alicia George opened **Motor City Java and Tea House** on the northwest side of the city four years ago. At the time, she had no loans, no line of credit – but a big dream to bring hope to her neighborhood through entrepreneurship.

"We raised funds and renovated and stopped, raised, renovated and stopped, and did that for five years," George said. "It was a blessing to open. This is more than just coffee, it's a catalyst for entrepreneurship."

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