

A smart city goes beyond free Wi-Fi — here's what West Baltimore residents want to see

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Jul 12, 2018, 2:48pm EDT



Local artist Lucinda Levine created renderings based on the content of community discussions around smart city initiatives in West Baltimore.

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What do you think about when you hear the term "smart city?" Some people probably conjure thoughts of a city full of autonomous public transit vehicles, automated lighting and electrical systems, web-enabled infrastructure and free Wi-Fi for all.

But for residents of some Baltimore neighborhoods with high poverty, low employment and limited connectivity, the kinds of "smart" needs they see in their own communities are unique. You probably don't care much about a smart, eco-friendly trash can system,

for example, if you are worried about running around from one Wi-Fi hotspot to another, trying to apply for jobs on your smartphone.

[Shonte Eldridge](#), Baltimore City's deputy chief of operation, pointed out that Baltimore ranks high on national lists in a lot of "tech" categories. She pointed, for example, to a [report from Entrepreneur magazine](#) which showed Baltimore among the "9 Hot Startup U.S. Cities That Aren't San Francisco or New York," and to a [study by SmartAsset](#) which ranked Baltimore at No. 3 among the "Best Cities for Women in Tech." She also noted Baltimore has been at the forefront of historical technological innovations, like electric elevators and manufacturing advancements.

"How is it that we are ranking so high in tech and we have all of this great history around tech, but we are not at the apex of smart city discussions?" Eldridge said. "We are late to the game...and there is a lot of work to do."

The city is [working to close the gap](#), and figure out how to put Baltimore on the map among smart cities across the country. But Eldridge said it is important to keep the "digital divide" in mind, and ensure that residents who do not have as much access to or interaction with smart technologies are not left behind as Baltimore moves forward with new tech initiatives. To that end, city stakeholders and researchers from local universities have been collaborating to develop a strategic plan for addressing the question: how can investments in smart cities technologies improve the lives of low-income, inner-city residents?

The work has been supported by a \$100,000 grant from the National Science Foundation, and included investigators from the University of Baltimore, Morgan State University, Johns Hopkins University and University of Maryland, College Park. Stakeholders shared what they have found in their research so far, during an information session held Thursday morning at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, Baltimore Branch.

Researchers from Maryland Institute College of Art and University of Maryland discussed some of their early findings around how West Baltimore residents think about smart city initiatives, based on surveys and community discussions conducted over the past several months.

Sheri Parks, vice president for strategic initiatives at Maryland Institute College of Art, said focus group discussions highlighted some of the specific hopes and concerns residents have about smart technologies. She said West Baltimoreans demonstrated sophisticated use of technology even as access is limited — mapping out local Wi-Fi hotspot locations and being able to use their smartphones for all of these tasks someone else might complete with their home computer.

They are also wary about the potential adverse effects of smart technology integration. For example, residents expressed concern about the idea of driverless buses, because they view drivers as the people who ensure buses stay safe and calm.

Mostly, Parks said, residents want to see that any new smart technologies introduced in the city can serve some benefit in the way of improving their overall quality of life, like helping to improve food, transportation or job access in their communities.

Early data findings point to particular tech needs among West Baltimore communities, like expanded Wi-Fi access. While most resident survey respondents indicated they do access the internet regularly, only 39 percent can get on the computer at their homes, explained Willow Lung-Amam, an assistant professor of Urban Studies and Planning.

About 68 percent said they most regularly access the internet on their cell phones. Adult residents reported commonly using the internet to search and apply for jobs and social services, while young respondents use the internet to complete homework or go on social media.

The researchers emphasized the current survey data is very preliminary and based on only small sample sizes — 116 respondents. The surveys are ongoing and more formal results will be presented at a later date.

Eldridge reminded community members and stakeholders Thursday to be patient. She said Baltimore has some catching up to do when it comes to smart city concepts and it will take ongoing cooperation among government, private industry and researchers to plan the best path forward.