What Baltimore can learn from other 'smart cities'

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Baltimore is trying to become a "smart city," full of integrated technology that helps improve people's lives. But we're a little late to the game, so we have a lot to learn from other cities that have already launched smart city initiatives.

Shonte Eldridge, Baltimore City's deputy chief of operation, thinks the city is actually at an advantage in trailing some other cities in this area. It allows Baltimore to learn from others' trials and errors, and "cherry pick" the things that could work here.

As part of the ongoing effort, city stakeholders and researchers from local universities have been collaborating to develop a strategic plan to address this 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.

Researchers interviewed representatives from five other cities across the country that have worked on smart city projects: Colorado Springs, Colorado; Columbus, Ohio; Kansas City, Missouri; Louisville, Kentucky and Portland, Oregon. Katherine Klosek, director of applied research for Hopkins' Center for Government Excellence, presented some of the lessons to be learned from other smart cities during an information session held Thursday morning at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, Baltimore Branch.

Here are some of the recommendations from Klosek's report:

Smart cities initiatives should be driven by city goals. Klosek said Baltimore should not integrate smart city technologies without first identifying a specific problem it is aiming to solve with that tech. For example, Columbus has integrated smart transportation initiatives specifically aimed at assisting pregnant women in getting to prenatal medical appointments, with the specific goal of decreasing infant mortality rates in the city.

Residents should be involved from the beginning, and cities should communicate updates and results of smart cities initiatives. Klosek pointed to information sharing examples like Colorado Springs' "Speak Up" online platform, which allows community members to keep track of different smart city projects going on and participate in discussions and surveys about them.

Smart cities plans should be integrated with existing data governance practices to preemptively address concerns. Most cities already have administrative data systems, tracking things like the number of vacant buildings or frequency of fires in certain areas. Klosek said smart city initiatives and data collection can be integrated with those existing systems. She referenced Louisville's IoT Smoke Detectors project, in which the city utilized existing information on vacant and abandoned buildings to install low-cost wireless smoke detectors that could alert firefighters to any fires before flames spread to surrounding homes.

Cities should work with vendors and other partners to address issues of data ownership, sharing, security and privacy. When working with contractors and other private companies regarding smart city initiatives, Klosek said the city should be mindful about potential data security and privacy concerns. For example, Portland worked with several private vendors on a traffic safety sensor project. One of those vendors was AT&T, and the city's contract with AT&T included language around data ownership and use, ensuring all rights to any data belonged solely to the city.