

# Innovation, inclusion should be foundation of an ecosystem

HIGHLIGHTS

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Panelists discuss "The Big Business of Civic Innovation" at The LAB Miami. | Dante' D. Fillyau

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Is South Florida's entrepreneurial community an ecosystem or a springboard?

It's an important question, says Carla Mays, an expert in civic innovation, which is focused on models for nurturing and supporting diverse and inclusive ecosystems. She visited Miami last week from Silicon Valley and participated in a community event on the topic.

A springboard is a place that may be starting to grow an ecosystem, but entrepreneurs have to go to Silicon Valley or another ecosystem to get all the resources they need to grow, she explains. "If you aren't careful to build an ecosystem where there are connections to capital and resources ... you are not creating something here, you are creating something that helps the Valley. That's the brain drain."

Mays runs Mays Civic Innovation and has launched programs, think tanks and innovation labs in civic and social innovation, entrepreneurship and funding. Joining her on the panel last week were South Floridians Matt Haggman, Miami program director of the Knight Foundation; Pandwe Gibson, founder of EcoTech Visions; Armando Ibarra, a public affairs and corporate development executive; and Michael Hall, founder of Digital Grass, a South Florida organization aimed at promoting a diverse ecosystem.

In the packed event room at the LAB Miami, Haggman said he sees a young ecosystem, not a springboard. We have places to network, to get mentorship, to secure funding and to find talent, said Haggman, who has spearheaded Knight's focus on entrepreneurship the past three years.

Yet, there is much work still to do, he said, and much of the conversation at the event was focused on building an ecosystem for all of South Florida, well beyond Miami's urban core. That includes examining how we do civic innovation in a way that the whole community benefits.

Some broad themes tackled:

**Economic development needs rethinking.** "It's not about big business attraction, it's about nurturing entrepreneurship," said Mays. And that means making sure the playing field is level when it comes to acquiring skills to participate in the innovation economy. "We have to bridge the knowledge divide as well as the capital divide. That includes providing hacker spaces in underserved neighborhoods."

**Build on South Florida's unique assets:** Gibson said that before opening EcoTech Visions, an incubator for green manufacturing companies, her team inventoried the area it would service in order to build the right tool set for entrepreneurs. That also means aligning

programs and goals with industries and areas of expertise South Florida is already strong at, Ibarra said. Bigger picture: Creating a startup ecosystem built on civic innovation is also about solving the problems of our economy, such as lack of affordable housing and urban mobility as well as education, he added.

**Think beyond the VC world:** Whether it's funding for individual companies or the organizations that support them, the reality in civic innovation, Mays said, is that funding, particularly the first money, is most likely to come from public sources such as government and economic development partnerships, foundations like Knight and corporations. This money can also fund things like office space, hacker space and computers loaded with cloud tools – “this is what we mean about a level playing field,” Mays said

**The co-operative model can work in civic innovation:** While it hasn't taken off in Miami yet, co-ops have been quite successful in California and work very well in communities with people of color where you are taking care of serious gaps, Mays said. Lending circles, food enterprises and legal services as a few examples where co-ops can work well.

**Procurement processes need a rethink:** Processes and regulations need to be integrated with the innovation economy, said Ibarra, and that means updating our laws and our institutions to make them more relevant.

**Educating our youth means reaching deep into the communities:** “Our best entrepreneurs are our troubled youth. They are very entrepreneurial. We need to reach them in their own communities and provide them with guidance ... and beef up entrepreneurship education in schools,” Mays said. “The new model is not us telling them, it is them telling us and we getting the resources in place.”

The next day Mays visited the Idea Center at Miami Dade College and heard some of the companies in the incubator CREATE pitch. She was impressed with the companies and with the Idea Center's programs for lean startups and design thinking. She also visited with the Beacon Council, Rokk3r Labs and EcoTech Visions.

David Capelli of TECH Miami, who met Mays at a conference in California earlier this year and helped organize this event with Digital Grass, said events like this will continue. Audience members were also encouraged to continue the conversation on Ideatrr.com. “It takes all of us to get out of the silos and start tackling the problems and being honest and transparent because innovation is the system of human networks,” said Capelli.

Entrepreneurship is in Miami's DNA and diversity is our greatest asset, said Haggman. By continuing to have this conversation we can avoid the mistakes of the Valley, he said, referring to the horrible diversity numbers we've been hearing about at Valley tech companies.

Said Mays: "You can be the model for doing it right."

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