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MONTGOMERY

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**The County's Innovation Chief
and His Internet of Things**

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GETTING TO KNOW





A Few Questions with **DAN HOFFMAN** **(WHO?)**

Interview by Carolee Noury // Photograph by Bill Kamenjar

What do autonomous vehicles, the Internet of Things, and projected housing demand have in common? They (along with many cousins – close and distant) have significant implications for county residents which means Dan Hoffman keeps tabs on them. As Montgomery County's first chief innovation officer (CInO), Hoffman labors where urban planning, technology and risk coalesce, which basically means he figures stuff out. When new innovations come along, he helps the county government make the most of them.

His projects span areas like education, food systems, internal efficiency and process improvement, and the Thingstitute, the county's "Internet of Things," which focuses on how quality of life and governmental processes can be shaped by connected devices and the data they collect.

We asked him a few pertinent questions, which for a guy with such an esoteric job was no easy task.

WHAT'S THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTION PEOPLE HAVE ABOUT YOUR WORK?

That it's all about technology or that it's all related to some type of mobile app. I look at things that are experimental or risky, those projects that need extra support to develop and really make a difference. My team isn't dealing with your normal day-to-day tech. We don't just make mobile apps. We don't look at our work as technology advances in themselves; sometimes it's just a new process or a new way of doing things that has nothing to do with technology.

WHAT DOES THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY OF THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE THROUGH YOUR PROFESSIONAL LENS?

Like similar jurisdictions – large urban counties that border a major city – we will need to retrofit the suburbs. Younger generations are drawn to town center-type areas with multifamily mixed-use space, where they can live, work, and play in the same area, especially near Metro stations. We won't get rid of the single-family homes, of course, but we have a growing demand for different options.

WHICH OF YOUR CURRENT PROJECTS HAS THE LONGEST REACH FOR COUNTY RESIDENTS?

Our transit work is a project in conjunction with the Montgomery County

Department of Transportation, but really, it's a project that impacts the whole country. We're looking closely at what changes autonomous vehicles will bring. I think they're going to sneak up on most people. The cars available for sale right now already have a degree of autonomous functions to them. In 10 or 15 years when those vehicles are much more common, it's going to change things at least as much as the Internet did.

The impacts will touch a number of things in our communities. For example, if we build new parking garages which are generally designed to last at least 40 years, they run the risk of being unneeded within their useful life.

With the transportation department, we're collaborating on a project to investigate how this advancement will impact public transportation. What can we do now, with our buses, for example, to future-proof some of these investments?

WHICH LIFE EXPERIENCES BEST PREPARED YOU FOR BEING CINO?

It might sound odd, but really it was my work in radio. I was on a morning show where every day was different. We had a process, but what I learned from the host of the show was what's not real isn't legitimate. Nothing in our show was faked – no staged phone calls or anything.

We talked about current events in the D.C. area every day for half a million listeners. The conversation often shifted to unexpected places, and through it all we had to be real and authentic . . . for a lot of people. We had to be able to shift, or even pivot, in a split second. That kind of work is excellent flexibility training. You need a flexible brain and a flexible way of interacting with the world around you.

WHAT IS YOUR PASSION PROJECT?

That's too much like trying to pick a favorite kid. There isn't one thing that I'm most passionate about; I love them all equally. I'm lucky that way. The project that gets a good chunk of my time these days is the transit work. But my work is all interesting and has potential to have major impacts far beyond me and our county.

Our Internet of Things projects – the smart city, smart community work, like services that

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– Chief innovation officer Dan Hoffman

help elderly residents to age in place for longer – will shift the way government functions.

WHAT DREW YOU TO THE ROLE OF CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER?

I was drawn to the position because not only can I flex my creative muscle, but I can work on projects that are local. In this role I work on things that affect me, my neighbors, my friends . . . At the same time, I work on things that have impacts with a longer reach.

HOW COMMON ARE PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION OFFICERS?

When I first started, I was one of maybe eight to 10 public sector innovation officers, but now the number is closer to 25. We're mainly in the more urban counties and bigger cities. There is a group of us that have a regular phone call where we trade our stories: what's working, what's not. It's a privilege to be part of.

WHO INSPIRES YOU MOST?

My sons. In them I see a lot of me and they're overcoming things I was never able to. My older son, for example, is going to turn 11 soon and I see him trying to figure out who he is as a person. I see his wit and intelligence, but I also see his ability to be kind and brave. When I was that age, I was too insecure to be as kind and brave as he is. That inspires me. My younger one . . . he's a handful. He finds his passion and jumps in with both feet without regard for

what other people think. I like that. Sometimes I just need to remember that I should get out of their way.

WHAT RESOURCE DO YOU WISH MORE PEOPLE WOULD USE?

I wish more people would use their civic outlets and other channels to engage with local government in a constructive manner. It'd be wonderful to have more voices and more perspectives represented.

WHAT IS YOUR MANTRA?

On paper any project can succeed or fail. You have to do the experiment to know what's possible.

WHAT'S THE BEST WAY FOR PEOPLE TO STAY INFORMED ABOUT YOUR TEAM'S PROJECTS?

Our websites (mcinnovationlab.com and www.thingststitute.com) and on Twitter (@thingststitute & @mocodanhoffman).

WHAT NATURAL GIFT WOULD YOU LIKE TO POSSESS?

I'm going to go with a superpower here, assuming immortality is off the table, the ability to see the future. Sure, it'd make my job easier, but I also have this curiosity. Everyone I meet has a story and future that interests me. I want to see how it all turns out. My kids, my grandkids, our society, I'm very curious to see what the fruits of our labor are.

WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO MONTGOMERY COUNTY?

My roots are here. I grew up in rural South Carolina, but went to college in D.C. I've been in the area for almost 20 years. I stayed in Montgomery County for many reasons, a major one is my network. My friends, colleagues, and professional network. This is where they all are.

There are many things that make me proud to live here . . . the excellent quality of life, that it's such an easy place to live. Montgomery County provides a significant amount of amenities to give you the best of both worlds. We've got a lot of open space and an amazing park system, but at the same time you're a Metro ride away from things like the Smithsonian museums.