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Techs and the City

By ALEC APPELBAUM

THIS spring New York City is rolling out its much-ballyhooed bike-sharing program, which relies on a sophisticated set of smartphone apps and other digital tools to manage it. The city isn't alone: across the country, municipalities are buying ever more complicated technological "solutions" for urban life.

But higher tech is not always essential tech. Cities could instead be making savvier investments in cheaper technology that may work better to stoke civic involvement than the more complicated, expensive products being peddled by information-technology developers.

Of course, you'd never hear such an idea from the likes of I.B.M., which has plastered airports with ads about how its consultants help municipalities cut costs with its "Smarter Cities" analytics platform, or Cisco, which has teamed with Toyota and other companies to sponsor annual conferences about how to automate cars and gather information on urban activity through streetlight-mounted sensors. For these companies, the more complicated the technology, the more cities can save — aside, of course, from the eye-popping price tags of the technology itself.

To be sure, big tech can zap some city weaknesses. According to I.B.M., its predictive-analysis technology, which examines historical data to estimate the next crime hot spots, has helped Memphis lower its violent crime rate by 30 percent.

But many problems require a decidedly different approach. Take the seven-acre site in Lower Manhattan called the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area, where 1,000 mixed-income apartments are set to rise. A working-class neighborhood that fell to bulldozers in 1969, it stayed bare as co-ops nearby filled with affluent families, including my own.

In 2010, with the city ready to invite developers to bid for the site, long-simmering tensions between nearby public-housing tenants and wealthier dwellers like me turned suddenly — well, civil.

What changed? Was it some multimillion-dollar "open democracy" platform from the Big Data program to suss out the community's real priorities? Nope. According to Pisciotta Berg, then the chairman of the local community board, it was plain old dialogue it facilitated. "We simply set up an e-mail box dedicated to receiving



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comments” on the renewal project, and organizers would then “pull them together by comment type and then consolidate them for display during the meetings,” he said. “So those who couldn’t be there had their voices considered and those who were there could see them up on a screen and adopted, modified or rejected.”

Through e-mail conversations, neighbors articulated priorities — permanently affordable homes, a movie theater, protections for small merchants — that even a supercomputer wouldn’t necessarily have identified in the data.

The point is not that software is useless. But like anything else in a city, it’s only as useful as its ability to facilitate the messy clash of real human beings and their myriad interests and opinions. And often, it’s the simpler software, the technology that merely puts people in contact and steps out of the way, that works best.

Even San Francisco, one of the most technophilic towns in America, understands the limits of “smart city” technology. It has a chief innovation officer, Jay Nath, and sponsors “hackathons” to develop software to, say, bring more fresh produce to the underserved Central Market area. But Mr. Nath talks proudly of how San Franciscans helped retool taxi-dispatch systems by meeting in person. “We decided to do an ‘unhackathon,’ ” he told me. “And we had about 100 people from our community” at the meeting.

“Technology doesn’t walk into a room and take over everything,” San Francisco’s mayor, Edwin M. Lee, said last year. “It has to be combined with a spirit that people from all skill sets can solve problems that government over the years has kind of done in silos.”

Indeed, some high-tech solutions being offered to cities run roughshod over urban values. Cisco is marketing [cafe-like spaces](#) in residential neighborhoods where creative workers can telecommute to their offices, using powerful communications technologies unavailable to the average home. Take that logic to its limit, and only low-wage workers whose employers can’t afford the jazzed-up satellite sites will actually show up, physically, for work.

That’s because the answers that make cities run more smoothly only inadvertently end up being the ones that make cities run more equitably. Deep data can learn and display policy cues that used to flow from guesswork. What it can do less reliably is reflect democratic action.

For that, you need more people discussing issues with more equal information and franchise. And that can most easily come from decidedly low-tech, but widely accessible, technologies like Facebook pages and e-mail chains. After all, cities don’t have to buy “smart” software to get smarter.

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: June 9, 2013

An earlier version of this article misstated the title of a San Francisco official, Jay Nath. He is the city's chief innovation officer, not chief information officer.