

Can Sidewalk Labs kick parking, congestion headaches to the curb?

June 29 2016, by Nancy Owano



The downtown Dallas, Texas (USA) skyline from a levee along the Trinity River. Facing southeast. Credit: drumguy8800/Wikipedia

(Tech Xplore)—The grass is always greener in some other yard. Especially when the envious one is in the big city, caught between traffic jams, late bus arrivals, unhealthy smog, and high-rise office life, mutant sardines caged up in the clouds.

Rural people, meanwhile, are caught up in their own dreams of bright lights and big sidewalks that never end. City people are caught up in the dream of seeing some green grass, a cow or two and nothing much else.

Sidewalk Labs is a company focused on the latter population, at least on their city problems that make them want to pack up every Friday and head for the hills.

City leaders, meanwhile, are interested in better, more viable ways of running these big cities.

Sidewalk Labs carries technology skills that involve the "tremendous untapped power of data" to re-invent city services. The company has built a set of applications and platform toward that end.

Shaina Doar, senior policy director, in *Medium*, said, "unlike other major industries, government hasn't yet realized the power of big data to help with its biggest problems. In its recent digitization index, McKinsey ranked 'government' a dismal 18th out of 22 economic sectors in terms of overall adoption of digital [technology](#)."

The Guardian said that "Flow applies Google's expertise in mapping, machine learning and big data to thorny urban problems."

Earlier this year, Bryan Clark in *The Next Web* talked about Flow: "The [platform](#) is a partnership with the US Department of Transportation, working with Smart City Challenge participants. Transportation patterns from aggregated, anonymized data could be used.

"The program would install over 100 kiosks in 4 neighborhoods in the winning cities. These kiosks would double as mobility solutions for citizens by offering free Wi-Fi and real-time transit information."

The latest news is that Sidewalk Labs is offering cloud software Flow to Columbus, Ohio, to upgrade bus and [parking](#) services – and bring them under Google's management, as reported in *The Guardian* on Monday. "It's offering Columbus a three-year demonstration project consisting of

100 Wi-Fi kiosks and free access to Flow," said Mark Harris.

Digital Trends said it was a management solution that Sidewalk Labs presented to the city of Columbus, Ohio, for consideration.

The solution in brief? Reports said Sidewalk Labs will use camera-equipped cars to track empty parking spaces and combine methods of transport under one app, integrating car-sharing services, bus routes, and bike lanes.

Digital Trends said Flow would work like this: vehicles with cameras attached would drive around the city, recording parking signs and map out all the public parking locations in the city. Then using data from drivers using Google Maps, Flow would estimate which parking spaces are still free.

Private parking lots could participate. Adding their database to Flow would let retailers and offices "temporarily rent" private parking spaces.

"Flow is about using data and analytics to help cities work with their citizens to increase the efficiency of road, parking, and transit use, improving access to mobility for all," Anand Babu, COO of Sidewalk Labs, told *Digital Trends*. "Flow will allow cities to understand their transportation systems in real time, and could be used to improve and plan public transportation, guide drivers directly to parking, or point commuters to shared mobility options they can use when public transportation is not an [option](#)."

The city vision held by the company is one of a coordinated, outcome-focused transportation system. That system makes use of technology to reduce congestion and enhance what Babu called "transport equity." Flow analytics help cities understand how roads are being used. It's an open platform; it can share insights to any interface.

[Flow](#) can integrate aggregated, anonymized smartphone data from billions of miles of trips to create a real-time view of road and curb use.

Uh-oh. Do not expect unanimous applause. *The Next Web's* headline: "Report: Google has a plan to screw everyone over via 'smart parking.'" Nate Swanner said, "Finding parking in a city usually sucks, but a new report claims Google is trying to make it more like reserving a hotel room—replete with fluctuating [pricing](#)."

The Guardian report had mentioned that Flow would also vary the cost of parking [spaces](#) according to demand. On weekends, prices might drop in business areas while they climb near music venues. Sidewalk claims this would increase income from parking by 10%.

Digital Trends' headline suggested positive aspects in this development. Parking and traffic problems could soon be alleviated with Sidewalk Labs' Flow, said its story headline on Tuesday.

Sidewalk Labs is described by several sites as a subsidiary of Alphabet. What's next in the Columbus plan?

The Guardian: "Columbus now has to decide whether it wants all or any of Sidewalk's services. Rich McCormick in *The Verge* said, "If the Ohio [city](#) does see value in Sidewalk Labs' vision of a future [city](#), it could reportedly put its parking plan into practice as soon as next January, with its Flow Transit app working from July."

More information: www.sidewalklabs.com/flow/index.html

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