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ALAMEDA COUNTY WORKS WITH GOOGLE TO BOOST INNOVATION IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Alameda County this week concluded an unusual collaboration with technology giant Google in which teams of County employees were challenged to re-imagine the delivery of basic government services to be exponentially more effective, efficient and accessible.

The unusual collaboration was the result of Google's newly launched Government Innovation Labs, an initiative designed to bring the same audacious "10x" thinking to government that Google employs in its never-ending search for new innovations – such as driverless cars and high-altitude WIFI balloons – that just might revolutionize the way we live.

In May, Alameda County became one of the first two counties to participate in the Google pilot project. Company representatives worked with County leaders to identify areas where innovation might reap big rewards in boosting the efficiency of County operations, maximizing the impact of limited public resources and achieving the greatest customer satisfaction. Teams of 10-12 County employees then embarked on an extended innovation journey to collectively brainstorm and apply solutions to community priorities: Education and Jobs; Safe Communities; Service Improvement (through better collaboration between County departments); Hunger/Health/Housing; and Emergency Preparedness.

With Google representatives acting as "mentors" to stoke the teams' creative fires, four collaborative sessions resulted in several new concepts that already are being added to Alameda County's menu of tools to help residents access core services.

Concepts include a video series highlighting local career and educational resources and their power to transform lives for the better; an integrated online portal that guides customers through the multiple steps involved in obtaining government permits and service contracts; and an expansion of the County's existing emergency preparedness site, ready.acgov.org, that

leverages GPS mapping elements to allow quick exchanges between emergency providers and residents who may possess vital, time-sensitive information.

Susan S. Muranishi, Alameda County Administrator, said teams arrived at strikingly similar solutions to a disparate array of challenges. A common theme throughout, she said, was making local government more “customer-centric” in its day-to-day operations.

“This project clearly is adding to our arsenal of innovative new tools that are helping residents obtain the information and services they need,” Muranishi said. “More importantly it has offered us a vivid example of the culture of innovation we are working to create – a culture where all employees are encouraged to offer their boldest ideas without fear of failure.”

Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson, who began discussing the project with Google more than two years ago, said the experience helped to blur boundaries between County departments and opened the door to powerful exchanges between local government leaders who in the past rarely worked together.

“We do believe that these small teams of people are showing the rest of the country and the world how to take an idea and lead it through the steps needed to create lasting change that benefits our community,” Carson said.

Tim Dupuis, Alameda County’s Chief Information Officer, said Google’s selection of Alameda County as an initial participant in its Government Innovation Labs project was testament to the County’s long-term commitment to technology – and the promise it holds for bringing to government services the same huge leaps in efficiency and customer control it has brought to commerce, travel, communications and other basic endeavors.

That feeling was only reinforced by the interactive sessions with Google developers. According to Dupuis, company representatives were particularly impressed with concepts produced in earlier County sessions focusing on innovation – community and employee hackathons, an Executive Development Program, a Task Force comprised of “millennial” employees and an ambitious Climate Initiative that partners with local governments around the country to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

To Muranishi, these and other initiatives are proof that Alameda County had wet its feet in the churning waters of innovation long before its collaboration with Google. In the coming months, she said Alameda County will build on its commitment to innovation – through a series of Town Hall sessions and a new website soliciting ideas for improving service delivery - so that all of the County’s 9,600 employees to feel empowered to take the plunge.

“If we all are encouraged to reach high, we just might come up with that idea that truly revolutionizes the way government provides solutions for the people it serves,” she said.