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Wonk meets Geeks

May 18, 2009 by [Eva Schweber](#)

This week, as part of his “100 businesses in 100 days” effort, Mayor Sam Adams wandered into the Wonderful World of Geeks when he met with Portland’s open source tech community to discuss his [economic development strategy](#). A diverse group of folks, including: [Rick Turoczy](#), [Raven Zachary](#), [Audrey Eschright](#), [Scott Kveton](#), [J-P Voillique](#), [David Kominsky](#), myself, the [Mayor](#) and Skip Newberry (from the mayor’s office) gathered to discuss ways to support the ongoing economic development of Portland’s open source community and what can the City do to help meet those needs.

We began with a discussion of the strengths of Portland’s open source tech community. Portland is incredibly fortunate in having community leaders who have done very well in creating a vast array of peer teaching/mentoring opportunities. User groups, code sprints and events such as BarCamp provide opportunities for people to meet, share and develop ideas. The type of opportunities that one normally only finds in the context of a large university setting. What we lack are mentorship opportunities or the matchmaking necessary to bring together great coders with great businesspeople. The most effective solution to the mentorship issue must come from within the community itself. Better communication and collaboration is all that is needed to address that issue.

The communication and collaboration question naturally led to the mayor asking how to find the tech community. The group responded with a resounding “Twitter,” all in unison. Sam acknowledged that Twitter was a great conversation medium, but too transitory. What he really needed in order to adequately understand, and therefore advocate for, Portland’s open source tech community is a census. The group readily offered their respective networks to start building a census of Portland’s tech community.

The mayor also asked what distinguished Portland’s community from other cities. We came up with the following responses:

Telecommuting – We have all read about Portland’s “Brain Gain.” People move here from all over the world because of our high quality of life. What we rarely read about are the many new transplants who arrive with jobs. Portland is filled with people who work for companies based all over the world. Anecdotally, we all knew several people who fit into this category. How many are there and where are their companies located? That’s what we need the census to find out.

Affordable domestic coders – It remains true that the hourly rate of overseas coders is significantly lower than even entry-level coders in the US. However, time zone, inter-cultural communication and code maintenance issues can make overseas coders more expensive in the long run. Portland’s relatively low cost of living and highly skilled coders have made us an increasingly cost-effective alternative.

Geo-mapping/geo-location – Portland has more than its fair share of geo-location enthusiasts, as was evidenced by the success of the first [WhereCamp](#) event last year. This is a field with a huge amount of growth potential and Portland has an opportunity to make a name for itself here.

Mobile applications development – The hugely popular [Obama Iphone application](#) came out of Portland and that is only the tip of the iceberg. Portland has set the bar high for innovation in mobile application development, a field that remains in its infancy. With its low barrier to entry, mobile application development is looking like another niche that Portland is

looking to dominate.

So what can the mayor of Portland do to help support the open source community?

1. Advocate for open source solutions for government software – Governments have huge software needs, and proprietary software solutions require a significant up-front investment and updates are often delayed by other priorities. Open source software has a much lower barrier to entry, and much of the cost can be split with other jurisdictions. But, government bureaucracies, by their nature, are cautious and slow to accept change. A champion, especially one in a highly influential position, can expedite the rate of change. Having the mayor champion open source software, especially in these challenging economic times, can make Portland a leader in the field.

2. Advocate for a variety of funding options – Many of us have grown tired of hearing about how Portland does not produce companies that interest VC funders. If you want an earful on this subject, just go ask Rick Turoczy. However, what we also lack is access to the kind of startup capital that small businesses that want to remain small businesses need. Those companies where the founder(s) would like to make a living for themselves and their employees, but not make 30% on the original investment. This is another place where some targeted advocacy by our mayor could make a big difference.

In the end, everyone was pleased with the meeting. The open source community representatives felt that both Sam and Skip understood the value that they bring to Portland and were eager to help where they could. Skip commented that this had been one of the most productive of Sam's business visits. I attribute the meeting's success to the attendees' ability to articulate both their needs and what they had to offer. There had been no pre-meeting prep or preliminary discussions. Portland has a very self-aware and reflective open source community and that serves us very well.

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3. on [June 12, 2009 at 12:49 am](#) | [Reply](#)  xor

for almost three years i have been a remote employee for a company based in los angeles. that means i live in — and spend my money in — portland. i think this is more than a “brain gain”, its pulling money into the local economy. if portland made an effort to support this (say by helping subsidize shared office spaces for telecommuters, offering tax or other incentives, etc), perhaps portland could encourage more of this.

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