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The Walk designed as 'digital city,' and to bridge the digital divide

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Updated: August 18, 2020 8:38 PM CT | Published: August 18, 2020 3:52 PM CT

Driving to The Walk on Union, you'll be shown the best route that avoids any traffic congestion.

No need to circle for a parking spot. You'll be directed to the best available space among the parking garages.

Whatever walking route you take within the 21-acre, mixed-use development, the lighting will be timed for your safety and convenience.

Once inside any building — be it a hotel, office or apartment — the elevator should be waiting for you with open doors.

Package deliveries will be digitally efficient for apartment residents.

Diners, drinkers and shoppers? Five words: Nearly seamless, on-demand service.

Credit the fiber optic cabling, cameras, sensors and a brainy data-control center that will connect every building and public space in the \$741 million mixed-use development's first phase, as well as the analytics that will allow The Walk to adapt to, even predict, how people use its spaces.

The phenomenon has a name — Catalyst30 — and a lot of partners, led by The Walk's developers and the nonprofit nurturer of startups and entrepreneurship, Start Co.

"The whole premise of the Catalyst30 plan is centered around making the entire Walk development a smart and connected city," said Start Co. president Andre Fowlkes.

“There will be tens of millions of dollars invested in smart-city infrastructure, fiber (optic) connections to every building, and converging it into a data warehouse where this can become a test bed for new technology,” Fowlkes said on Tuesday, Aug. 18.

This digital city will serve two kinds of clients:

The users of The Walk’s, 1,168 apartments, 575 hotel rooms, 2,814 parking spaces, 75,270 square feet of retail and 403,544 square feet of offices;

And companies that will want to use The Walk’s extraordinary capabilities to collect data as a testing ground for creating or improving their products and services.

Those are the startups and established companies to which The Walk anticipates leasing space inside a 130,000-square-foot office building dedicated to innovation and entrepreneurship.

Most smart-city districts around the nation involve public spaces like sidewalks and intersections, Fowlkes said. The Walk will stand out as a digital city meshing the private and public realm, he said. The City of Memphis, Downtown Memphis Commission and University of Memphis will be among the entities collecting and making sense of The Walk’s data.

The Walk and Start Co. also will focus in spreading digital connections to the city’s underserved neighborhoods, especially the neighboring South City district.

Forty-eight percent of Memphis households don’t have broadband internet. It’s worse in South City, where 82% of homes are not connected, Fowlkes said.



Andre Fowlkes



Architectural rendering for The Walk’s planned “innovation” office building with co-working space. (Credit: LRK)

The goal for Catalyst30 is to bring quality internet connections to 1,000 homes in South City and other economically distressed neighborhoods such as Orange Mound and Binghampton.

And the initiative will use students from University of Memphis, Christian Brothers University and LeMoyne-Owen College to teach “digital literacy” to households that need a hand. In return, the students will receive college credit.

Catalyst30 also plans to run fiber optic lines to LeMoyne-Owen College and the MLK Business Center across from Booker T. Washington High.

The intensified effort to transform at least part of Memphis into a high-tech, “digital city” is designed to achieve in 10 years - by 2030 - what its leaders say would normally take 20 years to achieve, according to Start Co.’s related website, catalyst30.com.

Organizers described Catalyst30 as a \$103 million economic development plan.

Catalyst30 will have a \$15 million venture capital fund that invests in new tech companies. The fund features Black leadership and a goal to invest at least 30% of the fund in new companies with minority- and women owners.

The Walk’s 130,000-square-foot office building dedicated to innovation and entrepreneurship will include a 5,000-square-foot business lab, event space and co-working areas.

The Downtown Memphis Commission, City of Memphis and University of Memphis are described as “stakeholder partners” in Catalyst30, which is based on four pillars: Create a digital and connected city; design an urban campus Downtown for innovation; directly invest in technology and entrepreneurship; and close the digital divide in underserved Downtown neighborhoods.

Demolition has already cleared space for construction on the first 10 acres of The Walk, bounded generally by Union, Danny Thomas, Beale and Fourth. Construction is to start early next year.

“The Walk is where Memphians come together and define the path forward,” Kevin Adams, a lead developer of The Walk, said in a prepared statement. Adams also is managing partner of Big River Development.

“These partnerships, and the programs they make possible, are what will help connect Memphis to the future,” he said. “We’re in this together, but when we align our efforts the impact will be so much greater.”

Said Fowlkes, “I cannot emphasize enough the importance of The Walk on Union deciding to diversify their economic and community development agenda to not just incorporate innovation and entrepreneurship, but to materially invest their capital stack to position the building of a digital community, new ventures and capital, and creating a community that builds and attracts advanced industry talent to Memphis’ doorstep.”

On Thursday, Aug. 13, Fowlkes told board of the Center City Revenue Finance Corp. that Start Co. spent 2019 researching, designing and adding partners to Catalyst30.

City council reviews new financing plan for The Walk on Union

“It is an agenda like one we’ve never seen before in this community or this country,” Fowlkes said.

“... We’re working to close the digital divide in the city.”

Following Fowlkes’ description of Catalyst30 to the board that is affiliated with the Downtown Memphis Commission, DMC president Jennifer Oswalt said that the commission staff enthusiastically supports public tax incentives for The Walk because of “the exponential impact in our community...”

Other partners in the Catalyst30 initiative are Innova, Code Crew, Knowledge Quest, Intelligent Buildings, Greystar, Peachtree, Premier Parking, Streetsense, Women’s Foundation of Greater Memphis, The Hyde Foundation, Christian Brothers University, LeMoyne-Owen College and Urban Strategies.

