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Abell Foundation grants \$75,000 for tech community survey

The new Innovation Alliance to gauge community's needs

By [Gus G. Sentementes](#), The Baltimore Sun

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The Abell Foundation, a decades-old Baltimore philanthropic institution that increasingly invests in technology startups to spur economic growth in Baltimore, said Monday it is paying \$75,000 to fund a study to investigate the needs of the city's technology and innovation community.

The newly formed Innovation Alliance, a group of technology veterans and entrepreneurs led by attorney Newt Fowler, will lead the study.

"If Baltimore is going to progress economically, it needs to focus on startups and transferring the large amount of [university] research in this area into new businesses," said Robert C. Embry, Abell's president. "I have no preconceptions of what this is going to show," Embry said.

In the past, Fowler and others have floated the idea of a physical space that would act as a hub for entrepreneurs and startups, an idea that's gained traction in other cities, such as Toronto and New York, where technologists and architects attempt to design environments that foster creativity and learning for entrepreneurs.

But Fowler and Embry said Baltimore's technology community could be best served by first conducting a comprehensive survey of its needs. Fowler said he intends to open a community-wide discussion, in a series of town halls over the next few months, that discuss the survey's findings with the public.

"Are there things we can be doing in Baltimore to accelerate job and business formation?" Fowler said. "To answer that question, you need a deep dive into the community to figure out what's working and what can be improved."

The city's technology community has grown increasingly active online; one of its main online organizing sites is a dedicated Facebook group, called Baltimore Tech.

The survey can be found at this web address: <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/N9GSDMK>.

The Innovation Alliance's efforts come during a period of swift currents and changes within Baltimore's

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technology community. The city's main incubator, the Emerging Technology Center, is embarking this year on a new accelerator program designed to help quickly launch startups, after receiving \$110,000 in seed funding from Abell. At least one other accelerator is planned by private investors.

There was some turmoil within the community last year when the Greater Baltimore Technology Council, a nonprofit membership association representing hundreds of tech companies in the region, abruptly changed leaders.

The GBTC's new executive director, Jason Hardebeck, who last year sold his company to Facebook, has jettisoned the association's office space and now has his staff embed itself in the offices of member companies to respond more quickly to their needs.

And earlier this month, one of Baltimore's higher-profile tech companies — mobile advertising leader Millennial Media Inc. — said it intends to sell shares to the public in a \$75 million offering.

With so much churning in the community, Fowler said he thinks it's time to step back and assess what's happening, to make sure people are focusing on strategic needs and not duplicating efforts.

"I want a clear insight into the needs and challenges of the community," said Fowler, who is a past chairman of the GBTC.

In addition to making grants to nonprofits, the Abell Foundation invests some of its \$350 million endowment in Baltimore-based startups in return for equity stakes. The foundation does so to create jobs, spur economic development, and bring a profitable return to its investment portfolio so it can continue to invest, according to Embry.

Abell gave the \$75,000 to the Innovation Alliance, a nonprofit, as a one-time grant. The Innovation Alliance contracted with Facility Logix, a real estate consulting firm in Burtonsville, to do the survey.

Fowler said the survey will run for several weeks and will be open to all.

"The goal is not to get it done fast," Fowler said. "The goal is to get as much participation as possible."

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