# Innovating a city government

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Innovation Team manager Daniel Hutton, standing, shares a map of transportation routes with Centennial Mayor Cathy Noon, far right, and others aboard light rail. The i-team has been creating data-driven ideas to improve mobility in the city.
Photo courtesy
of City of Centennial.

## Centennial's 'i-team' is rethinking it all

BY PETER JONES

STAFF WRITER

For anyone who has waited in line for a permit or suffered hours of a city council meeting, there is something decidedly nongovernmental about Centennial's Innovation Team.
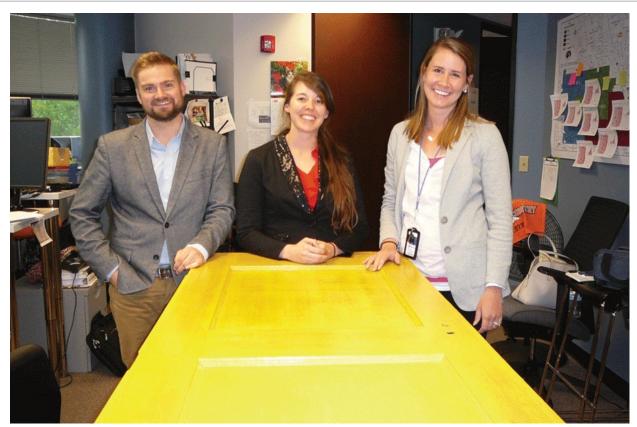
The shorthand "i-team," in intentional lower case, might suggest a garage of high-tech creatives more than an office with traffic engineering on its mind. To even use the term "innovation" in a government setting is inventive itself in this world of tax-supported bureaucracy.

"We pitch ourselves as a government startup," said Daniel Hutton, the i-team's 31-year-old manager, who says his office is distinct in some ways from more traditional functions of city government. "Taxpayers aren't at risk for us coming up with these wacky ideas. It's a key component of the program. It gives us a little more leeway to think outside the box."

To encourage more of that, Centennial was one of 12 U.S. cities selected in 2014 to participate in the latest round of a $45 million local-government program of Bloomberg Philanthropies, the foundation of former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

"More and more cities are becoming engines of policy innovation, searching for bold new solutions to tough problems that Washington has failed to address," the billionaire philanthropist wrote in a column for CNN's website. "Coming up with innovative new ideas requires creative thinking based on rigorous data analysis. And then, once the best ideas are selected, the hard work begins—implementing them."

The resulting "i-teams"—dotting everywhere from Los Angeles to Jerusalem—aim to advance the ability of city governments to effectively design and implement data-driven approaches to improving citizens' lives through what Bloomberg calls "open innovation" and strong project and performance management.



Centennial's Innovation team, or i-team, was created two years ago through a grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies. From left, Daniel Hutton, Melanie Morgan and Bailey Little. The team meets regularly around its yellow "idea door." Photo by Peter Jones

**Millennials ask why**

Back in Centennial, the three-year $1.5 million i-team is applying that model to the broad subject of mobility in the smallest city and only suburb to make the Bloomberg grade. Citizen surveys have consistently rated traffic jams as the No. 1 problem in a city that was never built with ease of transportation—especially for seniors—in mind.

"Traffic congestion is always a topic of conversation and a never-ending challenge, especially with the Denver metro area so attractive to millennials," Mayor Cathy Noon said in her State of Our City address last month. "… [The i-team] is working with our regional partners and coming up with innovative ways to help all of us get from Point A to Point B easier."

As a 21st-century-born city founded on principles of limited government and a "virtual" model, Centennial could be seen as the near-perfect laboratory for this sort of progressive government experimentation. What other city has outsourced public works and law enforcement while effectively bringing a consulting firm in house?

"We've always been different," spokeswoman Allison Wittern said. "Other cities are doing this, but I think they're doing it differently. No day is typical in any department, so that's why the i-team fits in with what already existed. Every department has some piece of innovation to it."

Although Centennial is a mere 15 years old, most of its i-team was not much older than that when the city was founded from a swath of unincorporated Arapahoe County in 2001—and it is not hard to understand how the millennial generation's "Why?" would be well suited for cities wishing to break through the stasis of group think.

"What tends to happen is engineers and planners have their own set of jargon that regular users may not understand," Hutton said. "Why don't we just ask the users in the first place? Let's see what makes it simple for them."

It makes sense that the three-member i-team—a fourth position in the special forces is in the process of being filled—is based at Centennial's Innovation Pavilion, a self-described ecosystem for entrepreneurs. Other partners in the nontraditional shared workspace include an animation studio, "angel investors" and at least three firms with the word "cloud" in their title.

The i-team is the only public-sector tenant in the building, but one would never know the team's municipal origins by the cubicle-free, stand-sit desks and the large yellow door on legs that functions as the "idea" table.

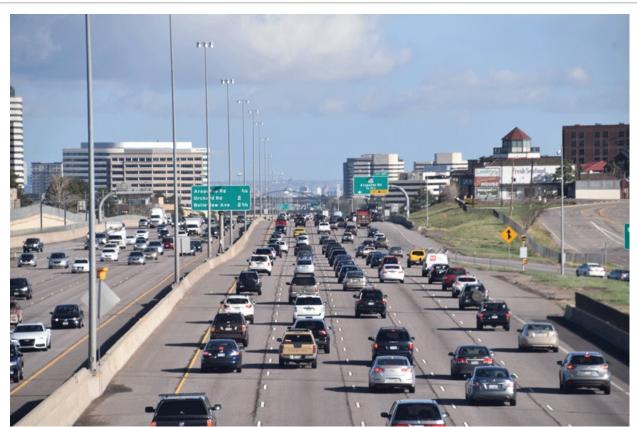This is where the magic happens.

"For me, good ideas come and go and the ideas feed off each other," explained Bailey Little, 29, an i-team coordinator with a public-education background.

Melanie Morgan, 25, the team's data analyst, holds a master's degree in city planning with a focus on transportation. She says research and thinking are key.

"I've always been a very creative person," she said. "I like trying to solve problems and I think I'm pretty good at being able to think through—if we do this, what are the outcomes of that?"

On the highway to that flowchart for better mobility, the i-team has thrown a range of ideas at the proverbial wall to see what sticks with themselves and the baby-boom-plus City Council. Many of the team's brain children never make it out of the think tank.

"There were some that were absurd that we had to throw out," said Hutton, who formerly nurtured ideas at his own high-tech startup. "A monorail down Arapahoe Road. That's going to cost probably $200 million and we don't own Arapahoe Road."



Traffic congestion has consistently rated high on the list of residents' concerns about Centennial. The city's i-team has taken on mobility improvements as a main issue.

## Seniors on board

Ideas still germinating include a "virtual transportation-management authority" and a soon to be implemented "mobility ambassadors program" that involves education and outreach to Centennial's growing senior population.

"If you have a smartphone or a computer, you can access all this in one place," Hutton said.

The i-team manager says his group has already introduced the Centennial Senior Commission to millennially popular ride-sharing programs.

"They loved it," he said, "and now the senior commissioners are talking about how they want to work for Lyft. Before that, some of them were pretty scared about even trying it."

The only required ingredient at the i-team's idea factory is data, preferably as disseminated through nonpolitical and institutional sources.

"A lot of it is transparency," Morgan said. "Here's the data we used and here's where it came from—and being open that there's always something new, and things could always change."

None of this should imply that the i-team's ideas are milked unmercifully. There is no quota system to encourage verbosity or pitchmanship.

"I don't think we ever go home from work stressed that we didn't come up with a good idea that day," Little said.

As the i-team transitions from mobility to civic parts unknown, hopes are to make it a permanent fixture well after the Bloomberg grant runs out.Sitting at the yellow door, one can feel the seeping of unofficial information not ready for public announcement as the busy team readies to go public with its next work.

"We're heading towards implementation" is all Hutton would offer.

The mayor was no more revealing—but equally roused—in her State of Our City.

"The i-team has much more coming so watch for exciting announcements soon," Noon said.