

Episode 32: Perspectives on the St. Louis geospatial ecosystem with T-REX's executive director

GEOINTERESTING: Alright, take two. It is recording. Sam, does it sound good? [LAUGHTER]

[MUSIC]

GEOINTERESTING: There's something exciting happening in St. Louis. Long considered a Midwest bastion of manufacturing and agriculture, the city is seeing an influx of tech entrepreneurship, fueled not only by legacy companies in the region embracing new technologies, but also by startups embracing a business-friendly environment flourishing in the area. Given NGA's nearly 70-year legacy in St. Louis and with a new high-tech campus planned for North City, the agency is now taking a thoughtful look at its next 100 years in the city. Recently, NGA partnered with St. Louis University to explore that future at the inaugural Geo-Resolution Conference, which brought together a number of government, academic and industry partners who are all committed to growing the geospatial ecosystem in the greater St. Louis region. A theme echoed by many panelists and keynotes at the conference was that the city of St. Louis is experiencing a unique moment in geospatial relevance.

NGA DIRECTOR VICE ADM. ROBERT SHARP: It's echoed by people in here, and, just, wow, what is going on here, not only what we're doing now, but the art of the possible and the enthusiasm. And I was really excited [about] a lot of the discussion. This crowd knows science, knows technology, but I was really encouraged that a lot of the discussion really focused, once again, on people and partnerships. And you heard me talk about that. That is goal number one for National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's strategic goals. Our vision focuses on people and partnerships.

GEOINTERESTING: To take a deeper dive into the current St. Louis tech outlook, we took the 3.3-mile trip from NGA's St. Louis campus at the historic St. Louis Arsenal to T-REX to speak with Patty Hagen.

PATTY HAGEN: Hi, I'm Patty Hagen, and I'm the president and executive director of T-REX here in St. Louis.

GEOINTERESTING: T-REX boasts a growing community of entrepreneurs and developers, designers, which even includes — you guessed it — NGA. The agency has hosted community hiring events at T-REX and also has a small footprint there supporting some of the agency's unclassified missions. T-REX Executive Director Patty Hagen sat down with the Geointeresting Team to talk tech and innovation in St. Louis and just how NGA fits into the city's growing geospatial technology landscape. This is Geointeresting.

[MUSIC]

GEOINTERESTING: So T-REX is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening the economic vitality of St. Louis. Can you tell me a little bit more about your mission and what value you bring the community?

PATTY HAGEN: Sure. Happy to talk about T-REX, my favorite subject.

[LAUGHTER]

So T-REX is a nonprofit innovation center. We're located in downtown St. Louis in a historic building built in 1896, and we own the building, own the facility. And we were created it back in — it was about 2011, 2012. It was in a different building, actually, called the Railway Exchange Building. [It] started off very organic, [a] grassroots kind of an effort on the part of some of the economic development leadership of St. Louis. [They] put in a little bit of money to get it started, and it grew. And it grew because we had some really good partners at the very beginning, and the timing was good. [We] have millennials moving to downtown to the urban core; that's a trend that actually internationally is happening, so it was really an opportunity to revitalize downtown by creating this tech hub. So one of the major reasons why T-REX was created was for revitalization of downtown but also to focus on advanced information technologies. So when we started in this old building called the Railway Exchange Building, that's where we got our name: "Technology in the Railway Exchange."

GEOINTERESTING: Oh!

PATTY HAGEN: T-Rex.

[LAUGHTER]

PATTY HAGEN: That's where it comes from.

GEOINTERESTING: I just thought maybe you liked dinosaurs.

PATTY HAGEN: Well, I do like dinosaurs.

[LAUGHTER]

PATTY HAGEN: But that has grown since —

[LAUGHTER]

PATTY HAGEN: — since I joined T-REX. So we started in the Railway Exchange Building. We purchased this current historic building, and we've converted it over the last four years into a real tech hub for St. Louis, and that includes partnership with the NGA — you know, lots of industry partnerships, a lot of work with a entrepreneurial support organizations in town, and then we have over 200 startup companies involved with us currently. So since we started, we count jobs that have been created as a result of the companies that have been a part of our community, and there's been over 4,000 jobs created in the region as a result of T-REX's presence and efforts.

GEOINTERSTING: So why — why St. Louis? We hear about tech hubs and incubators in places like Silicon Valley and New York. What makes St. Louis a viable city for innovation?

PATTY HAGEN: Well, I would say, “Why not St. Louis?” I think St. Louis — I think, just generally, every city should be looking to support innovation and entrepreneurship. In terms of how compelling St. Louis is — as a place where innovation and entrepreneurial activity can be successful, we absolutely do have a great position in terms of being recognized nationally and by having a great ecosystem to support startups here and especially with the geospatial industry. There's a lot of momentum around this industry as you know — as you well know — and it's clear, and research shows that having a great federal partner that is doing really advanced work — really high-level, either scientific or technological work — in a region and where there are partnerships that can be successful and can create a win-win for a region; that those can make a huge change. They can be transformational for a city and for a region, and that's what we really see here. You know, when I say ‘we,’ I mean T-REX, but we also have partners. We partner with the city of St. Louis, with the state of Missouri, and we have a federal partner also, besides the NGA, in the Department of Commerce, the Economic Development Administration. All of which have funded these efforts, because everyone sees that this can be a transformational moment for St. Louis in terms of supporting the NGA and geospatial industry.

GEOINTERESTING: Yes, along those lines, geospatial seems to be the talk of the town. We're sitting right here on a floor that's soon to be the GEOsaurus, which is going to be your geospatial hub within T-REX. There seems to be this concerted push by T-REX in the community at large to focus on the technologies and methodologies central to the geospatial tradecraft. To what do you attribute that effort?

PATT Y HAGEN: So we decided at T-REX to really focus on this because advanced information technology is part of our mission in terms of innovation and entrepreneurship. There are other areas and there are other ecosystems in St. Louis — or ‘sub-ecosystems,’ I should say — that focus on different industries, such as the bio-industry and the plant science industry. This was really an opportunity for T-Rex to create a hub that is very highly focused on advanced information technologies. So I mentioned how a federal partnership can help to feed that ecosystem in a way that is powerful. So that definitely is one of the elements of this decision for us to focus on the geospatial industry but also because the geospatial industry really encompasses and incorporates almost every aspect of advanced information technologies. So it can be a compelling draw. Sometimes, I use the word ‘hook,’ which sounds a little trite, but a hook for the community to understand the technologies that are needed to advance innovation, and that includes in data science, in analysis, in artificial intelligence, machine learning, in imagery analysis — there's so many aspects of geospatial technology that really feed into many, many different types of industries. And all of this together can help St. Louis grow in a way, in terms of that inclusive economic development, that is unique and that we can serve.

GEOINTERSTING: What attracts innovators to St. Louis and, in particular, geospatial innovators?

PATTY HAGEN: Well, so I mentioned, of course, the NGA presence here is incredibly important, so we see this geospatial innovation opportunity to be growing and that because of the strong

innovation and entrepreneurial ecosystem that already exists in St. Louis — lots of support organizations — we have venture capital groups, seed-funding organizations like Arch Grants. We have a strong ecosystem that can support innovation and entrepreneurship across the board. So if you bring together the universities, the governmental organizations, innovation hub, like T-Rex, together, along with these great federal partners, that is where the nexus of innovation can happen. And some people talk about serendipitous collisions. I think that's true, but I also think that there's an intentionality that needs to be included. We're very intentional here at T-REX about the development of a community that can support innovation and entrepreneurship in this industry.

GEOINTERESTING: Yes, as I was telling my colleagues earlier, the first time that I ever visited St. Louis, we had gone out, and we were telling [someone] where we worked — at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency — and the person kind of looked at us funny and said, "Oh, do you mean that old mapping place down by the brewery?" This time, I hop in my Lyft at the airport, and the Lyft driver is like, "Oh we're going to NGA. You know, I hear you guys are building a new campus here. I hear you are having a big event. I hear there's going to be a hiring event." So, along the lines of your serendipitous but also intentional — I think, really, the growth of the community here speaks to the agency's attempts at being more transparent and the city's engagement with that, and it's just kind of been this really great fortuitous and, as you said, serendipitous moment in the tech here and geospatial industry, so it's pretty cool to see. Is there any pitch that you would give someone for investing in St. Louis or like an elevator — how would you sell coming here, starting your business, to someone that might be considering it?

PATTY HAGEN: Well, especially for this industry, I think that St. Louis is the best place to start a business. There's high value here, and when I say that, I mean low cost for entry for entrepreneurial activities. We have great universities. We have good talent in St. Louis. We have a strong focus on building that tech-talent pipeline — it's needed nationally — and all the universities in the region are paying close attention to this and are getting deeply involved, and, for example, the University of Missouri system is going to be teaching geospatial classes here in Geosaurus. So you have talent, you have funding, you have a place that's very hospitable and very focused on the community. So it's a great opportunity to get involved.

GEOINTERESTING: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

PATTY HAGEN: Wow. I could talk forever.

[LAUGHTER]

PATTY HAGEN: We're thrilled with our NGA partnership, and we see our mission for our region to be in close alignment with NGA's mission for our country. And we feel very strongly about doing what we can to support both missions. And we're just thrilled to be involved.

[MUSIC]

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