

# Montgomery in unique place to reap the benefits of data



## Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Earlier in the spring, global tech titan META — along side Alabama leaders and local officials from Montgomery and Montgomery County — announced the construction and operation of an \$800 million data center along Interstate 65, just south of Montgomery.

This news was met with much optimism, and rightly so:

- 1000+ construction jobs
- 100 high-tech jobs
- Montgomery receiving international recognition as fertile ground to launch and scale a tech company.
- META possibly establishing a regional technology beach head for other global high-tech firms to follow.

All of this is seriously good for Montgomery.

But what if we had more of a local and regional tech community building effort, something that's been lurking beneath the surface of the META Data Center announcement? What if for the past five years, parts and pieces of a clandestine regional tech community were being built with the most grassroots of methodologies? META's recent announcement could possibly serve as a public validation of these grassroots initiatives.

Some would say this is pretty farfetched, and the response is genuinely understandable. Shucks, in the minds of many we are simply the "little ol' central Alabama based Capital City." We're driven by city, county, state and federal governments, along with all the politics, politicians, bureaucracies, and a whole heap of civil servants and government employees that come with it.

Surely a tech community building exercise anywhere in Alabama should be left to experts somewhere like Huntsville, with its host of engineers, NASA and Redstone Arsenal Army base, and an array of governmental contractors who support all of the military weaponry needed for our national defense.

Or maybe high tech ecosystem building should be left to a city which possibly serves as both the financial and medical center of our great state — Birmingham. It has the corporate headquarters of Economic Development Partners of Alabama (EDPA) and its Alabama Launchpad Initiative, Innovation Alabama, the Alabama Power Company with both its Innovation and Economic Development teams. Not to mention Birmingham is the home of TechBirmingham, Sloss Tech and Silicon Y'all.

With these other cities' efforts, what could Montgomery and the rest of central Alabama offer in the way of a tech community building effort? The answer is our unique selves, which brings up another question. What do city, county, state and federal governments, politics and politicians, bureaucrats and civil servants create lots of? In a word: Data.

According to the latest in tech and startup community building science, the No. 1 ingredient in engaging with this type of work is being authentic. Regional community members must be who they are. What if Montgomery's and central Alabama's tech community efforts primarily revolved around the science and engineering of data?

It appears that central Alabama-based grassroots efforts may have cracked this code. Whether it's efforts of Dr. James Locke and the AI Research Lab, who are seriously crushing it better than any business school in the nation, or the nonprofit Alabama AI Center of Excellence (AAICE) which is currently working with regional HBCUs to train researchers and students on the latest advancements of Deep Learning and Generative AI — while also providing them access to some of the most cutting edged technology on planet earth, the NVIDIA DGX Platform.

Marry the particulars of these efforts with those of Montgomery Mayor Steven L. Reed and his administrative team — to extend the peering fabric of the Montgomery Internet Exchange Point (MGMIX) which has a location in Montgomery's NTTData managed RSA Data Center — to the world class infrastructure within the AUBIX Data Center in Auburn, and you have a set of circumstances that creates a seriously powerful story line around a density of colocated levels of governments, bureaucrats and civil servants who create tons of data each and every day.

Montgomery is the city of EJI, Rosa Parks, Southern Poverty Law Civil Rights Memorial Center, Freedom Rider Museums and the Alabama Archives Building. Central Alabama is the region of Tuskegee University, Alabama State University and the US Civil Rights Trail with its Interpretive Museums, and the Tuskegee Airmen Museum. Doesn't this add up to one of the major tourism capitals within the Southeast? That's correct, but I believe a more basic question should be: "What exactly is tourism?" One answer might be that tourism is the combination of the arts, in all of its various forms (visual, literary, performing, culinary, etc.) and facts, figures and history — ie data.

By the way, our regional arts community — through both its Buskin and Creative Place Making efforts — is seriously crushing it entrepreneurially.

Again, Montgomery and central Alabama only need to continue to build tech community efforts upon their unique and authentic selves.

Hopefully, META and its regional data center building efforts will provide the proverbial "carrot" that will continue to motivate these grassroots worker bees, so they continue to put in each day's efforts. We all must work together to build a robust regional tech and creative startup community, up and down our segment of I-85.

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