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USING DESIGN THINKING TO ADVANCE DEMOCRACY EXPLORED AT PRINCETON TECH MEETUP

⏱ July 31, 2017 👤 Steve Shimchick / special to NJTechWeekly.com 💬 0 🗁 News, Photo Essay,

Ben Bakelaar brought design thinking projects to the Princeton Tech Meetup. |
Esther Surden

Normally, the Princeton Tech Meetup is all about the tech, but at the 52nd Meetup, on July 18, design was on the agenda.

That night was an introduction to design thinking and how it is being used within the civic-tech and startup spaces. After
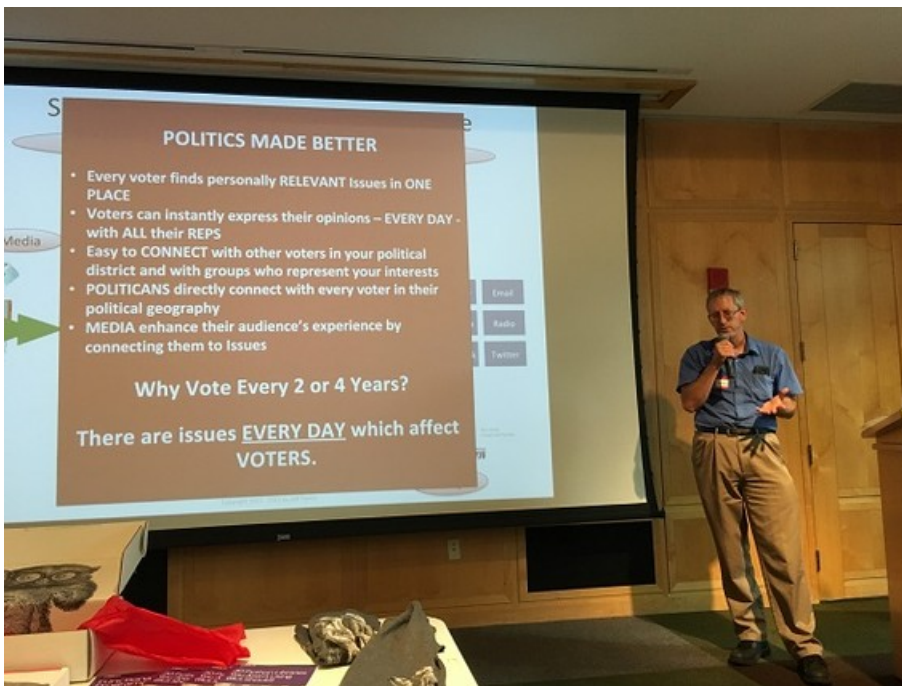
the networking and announcements from PTM organizers Venu Moola and Chris Boraski, the opening speech was given by Ben Bakelaar, who co-organizes the Central NJ Design Meetup (New Brunswick), as well as user experience (UX) startup Human Experience Systems (Highland Park) and the dSpace Design Bootcamp.

At dSpace, Bakelaar runs one-day workshops on Web design, UX, and design thinking. Also offered is a part-time, multi-month design bootcamp in which students work through a full design process and participate directly in the creation of a functional prototype for a real-world client.

During the talk, Bakelaar introduced his most recent dSpace team and walked the attendees through design thinking. He noted that design thinking was "first used to make physical objects, [and] is increasingly being applied to complex, intangible issues, such as how a customer experiences a service," quoting Jon Kolko in the September 2015 Harvard Business Review.

Bakelaar's team followed the design thinking methodology pioneered by IDEO (New York) and the Stanford d.school. They completed a full design cycle by first selecting a project, then conducting research and producing potential solutions, and finally generating digital prototypes and gathering feedback. Real-world organizations that mix together three key ingredients (design + technology + democracy), including the project chosen by the dSpace team, served as examples during the meetup. The others were:

- VoteLight – a platform to improve democracy by creating the only political network where voters, politicians, groups and the media can interact in one place.
- Coding for Community – a New Jersey-wide civic tech competition that focuses on local sustainability and public engagement issues.
- OurSociety – a nonpartisan campaign platform to promote issue-based elections and give third-party candidates equal exposure.

Jeff Pierce spoke about VoteLight. | Esther Surden

VoteLight, currently a "pre-formation startup," is a concept created by Jeff Pierce, who allowed dSpace to use it as the selected project for the design bootcamp. The main goal of VoteLight is to increase efficiency and transparency while maximizing voter influence and allowing voters' voices to be heard. Four main groups (voters, politicians, groups and the media) are offered a streamlined solution for creating and voting on issues, as well as influencing policies and getting results.

This platform will enable voters to share their political choices with every politician who represents them, politicians and groups to easily contact those voters based on issues, and the media to grow and retain audiences who share their stances.

Lauren Skowronski, program director for community engagement at Sustainable Jersey | Esther Surden

The Coding for Community competition, sponsored by Sustainable Jersey (Ewing), was last held earlier this year, when it matched tech participants with actual needs in municipalities across the state. Lauren Skowronski, program director for community engagement at Sustainable Jersey, spoke about the idea's inception, how Sustainable Jersey determined what solutions could be developed through data and other technologies, as it devised this first-of-its-kind event.

Encore Dev Labs won first place with "Waste of Energy," a program that "addresses a chronic overheating problem in the South Orange and Maplewood School District by collecting temperature data within classrooms and providing teachers a way to report overheating by creating trigger alerts that are sent to school administrators, enabling them to take action." [Ed. Note: *NJTechWeekly.com* covered the Coding for Community results here.

Ron Rivers spoke about OurSociety. | Esther Surden

Finally, Ron Rivers, founder and executive director of OurSociety, presented on his minimal viable product, which is currently in development. This project's purpose is to create a more transparent, collaborative and highly engaged democratic process that empowers grassroots leadership. The team is building a nonpartisan political information platform to empower political candidates and current officeholders to connect with constituents like never before. It will focus on issues, plans and vision, while removing sensationalism and showmanship. OurSociety is currently bringing on

candidates for the next New Jersey gubernatorial election, which will take place on November 7. Rivers also spoke about his own introduction to UX and design thinking, and how it has shifted his strategy.

OurSociety will serve as the business sponsor and real-world client for the next dSpace bootcamp, which will take place in Highland Park from September through December. The 53rd Princeton Tech Meetup will be held on August 17.

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