

Innovation in exurbia

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) July 29, 2021



In earlier times my work would occasionally take me to meetings at the Carroll County government offices. Leisure trips on a weekend would take me to some of the county's small towns or a visit to the Carroll County Farm Museum. While I rarely get out to Carroll County these days, I did "visit" the county, virtually, by telephone and email recently. And, I discovered MAGIC.

Yes, I was introduced to MAGIC – standing for Mid-Atlantic Gigabit Innovation Collaboratory – by Westminster's recently elected mayor, Mona Becker. According to its website, "MAGIC's mission is to build a tech ecosystem that creates and nurtures talent, entrepreneurship, and tech businesses, elevating the Westminster Gigabit Community to lead the Mid-Atlantic region. We strive to make the Westminster Gigabit Community a premier technology hub in the Mid-Atlantic region."

Beyond those lofty words, MAGIC is making serious progress in extending broadband services to enhance the ability of local businesses and households to connect with the rest of the world. As part of this, the [City of Westminster](#) has committed significant resources to bringing fiber to its community.

Leaders claim that this ambitious initiative "has distinguished Westminster as the first City fiber in the Mid-Atlantic region. Every city resident and business owner can enjoy a competitive local marketplace for broadband services and the fastest internet on the planet."

Autonomous corridor

To gain further insight into MAGIC, I spoke with its board chairman, Dr. Robert Wack, chief medical information officer at Frederick Regional Health System. He explained that MAGIC is pursuing three tracks: 1) developing technology talent in local high school and college students, in such areas as coding and cybersecurity; 2) promoting start-ups and entrepreneurship; and 3) deploying technology to offer new transportation options to area residents.

In this case, new transportation takes the form of autonomous vehicles. The goal of MAGIC's Autonomous Corridor Project is to increase connectivity in the Westminster area. The project, which will deploy driverless vehicles, aims to connect parts of the community that are otherwise cut off from [Westminster's](#) Main Street and the shopping centers along Route 140, due to the lack of public transportation options.

According to MAGIC, “The expectation is that developing Autonomous and Smart City technologies will bring more businesses and residents to the area while increasing the quality of life of its current residents.”

In May, a ribbon-cutting event was held to mark the launching of the Autonomous Corridor project. The proposed route of the corridor would connect key nodes in the Westminster area, including the retirement community, Carroll Lutheran Village, the McDaniel College campus, Main Street in Westminster and Carroll Community College. After a period of further detailed planning and testing, the Autonomous Corridor is expected to be operational in two years.

Water recycling project

Westminster is also using innovative technology to address the challenge of a severely limited water supply. Unlike other towns in the county, such as Sykesville, which can draw water from the Patapsco River, or Taneytown, which can tap into the nearby Monocacy for fresh water, Westminster lacks a natural body of water. Becker noted this is currently crimping the ability to accommodate new development. But she also alerted me to the city’s pilot water recycling project.

In this project, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation has committed to contribute 50 percent of the funding for an initiative designed to take already-treated water from the wastewater treatment plant and purify it through a state-of-the-art process. The processed water would then be returned to the city’s reservoir, where it can be reused. A pilot of this recycling effort is now underway.

My overall impression from speaking to several county leaders was that of an area showing resilience in the face of current challenges. I spoke with two of the county commissioners, Dennis Frazier, who represents the Westminster area, and Stephen Wantz, who in addition to representing the district including Manchester and Taneytown, serves as chairman of the Baltimore Metropolitan Council.

Both men reported that the county is coming out of the pandemic in a position of strength. Carroll was the first jurisdiction in Maryland to use its own funds to provide direct relief to local businesses, particularly the restaurants that had to close their doors in the early days of the public health emergency.

As a result, very few businesses were lost due to the closures. The county’s main streets are now enjoying an uptick in business. And, in recent weeks streets have been closed to allow for community festivals.

I don’t know when I will get back to Carroll County in person. I’ll be delighted to take in some of the “magic” when I might enjoy a ride along the Autonomous Corridor.

Joe Nathanson is the principal of Urban Information Associates, a Baltimore-based economic and community development consulting firm. He can be contacted at urbaninfo@comcast.net