

# Ford and Newlab partner to test new transportation ideas, from robot delivery to EV rideshares

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Detroit is big and spread out. Ungenerously, it could be called empty. But in polite terms it could be defined as having lots of open space between various neighborhoods. However you phrase it, getting around the city often involves traveling long distances, usually in a car. For residents without their own vehicles, moving in and around the 143-square-mile city is incredibly challenging. A new group of startups is hoping to make it easier.

Addressing areas ranging from pedestrian safety to real-time transit information to neighborhood-focused car sharing, the startups are the recently announced first cohort of the [Accessible Streets Studio](#), a technology business accelerator program that is helping city-focused startups pilot their products in a few of Detroit’s neighborhoods. If the pilot projects work in their initial test bed, they may be able to spread to other parts of the city, or even to other cities facing similar issues.

The Studio is led by [Newlab](#), the New York-based innovation lab and business incubator that was *Fast Company’s* [2020 Innovation by Design Company of the Year](#). Since early 2020, it’s been working with Ford Motor Co. and local stakeholders to identify mobility challenges in the city.

The effort is focused on Michigan Central, Ford's new mobility innovation district in Detroit's Corktown neighborhood. The heart of this project is Ford's \$740 million renovation of the long-abandoned Michigan Central train station, a project led by Practice for Architecture and Urbanism (PAU) that will anchor a 30-acre "mobility campus" that could bring 5,000 jobs to Corktown and two other adjacent neighborhoods. It's an investment with transportation at its heart. For the neighborhoods around the train station, which have relatively higher population densities than the rest of the city but little access to public transit, transportation and mobility need significant improvement.

A primary focus will be bridging transportation gaps. "That's a huge issue in Detroit. We're a really large city from an acreage perspective," says Julie Roscini, who leads the Michigan Central development's external engagement strategy for Ford. "Having connections to public transit, connections to the larger suburban area that's here, those are real issues that residents face."

The Accessible Streets Studio is the latest of Newlab's accelerator-like Studios, which target problems endemic to specific places or industries by narrowing down a pool of applicant startup companies offering potential solutions. By working closely with the community and local stakeholders, Newlab first identifies the problems to solve, then picks the companies best suited to help. It supports the selected companies with a pool of \$200,000, and advises them through the establishment of pilot programs in their target market.

"Of course we want to be supporting startups that we believe are building scalable products," says Shaina Horowitz, vice president of product and programs at Newlab. "But ultimately what they're building from the ground up is based in their understanding of solving a real problem and having a sound technology solution."

The project is the kind of corporate initiative that tends to follow big developments in underserved neighborhoods, and Ford is clearly aware of the impact its mobility innovation district will have on the area. But supporting the development of potentially acquirable startups may also be in the corporation's own interests as it shifts from car company to mobility company.

About 50 companies applied to be part of the Accessible Streets Studio. The selected companies include:

- Kiwibot, a neighborhood-focused autonomous robot delivery infrastructure.
- Solartonic, which creates local wireless networks that integrate street lighting and security cameras.
- Numina, which measures curb-level activity and travel behavior of pedestrians, cyclists, and vehicles.
- Kuhmute, which developed a universal charging network for shared and personally owned micromobility vehicles, such as scooters.
- Sway Mobility, which creates electric vehicle car-share programs for communities.

The cohort also includes Soofa, which builds solar-powered real-time transit-information signs with an e-ink display. “It sounds maybe like a fleeting consideration,” Horowitz says, “but the e-ink was actually a differentiator because one of the chief complaints that you hear in cities with these new kinds of signs is that they’re just glaring, and they’re frankly unwanted, and they’re adding screens to yet another dimension of city life.” She says Soofa’s pilot program will use information from the city department of transportation to provide live updates on transit and navigation.



[Image: Soofa]

Another company in the group is Lazarillo, which provides a navigation app for people who are blind and visually impaired. Horowitz says this kind of product is unfortunately too rare. “More recently there has been a focus on making sure that smart city technologies are inclusive by design, but we’re still not seeing a ton of companies who have this mentality of not just making that an afterthought, but really making that the premise of the product that they’re designing,” she says.



[Photo: Lazarillo]

Ford's Roscini says each of the seven companies in this cohort is directly responding to local issues and community concerns that Ford and Newlab heard throughout their feedback-gathering sessions over the past year. However, of the seven companies selected, two have local connections: Kuhmute, the micromobility charger company, is based in nearby Flint, and Solartronic is based in Ypsilanti. For others, there may be some inherent wariness around tech companies coming from outside the city offering solutions.

This summer, the startups involved in the Accessible Streets Studio will begin rolling out their pilot programs in the neighborhoods surrounding Michigan Central train station. Roscini says that may just be the start. "There are a lot of other interesting neighborhoods in Detroit," she says. "Our hope is that the studio continues on and spreads across the city."