
TAG INFRASTRUCTURE TALKS PODCAST, S01 EP 06, THE EVOLVING LANDSCAPE OF PUBLIC PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS WITH DEBRA LAM OF THE PARTNERSHIP FOR INCLUSIVE INNOVATION
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Alan Poole:

Welcome to the TAG (Technology Association of Georgia) Infrastructure Talks podcast. I'm your host, Alan Poole. I'm a partner at Troutman Pepper and a board member of the TAG Infrastructure Society. My guest today is Debra Lam. She's the Executive Director and Founder of the Partnership for Inclusive Innovation, or PIN for short. Debra, welcome, and thanks for joining us.

Debra Lam:

Thanks for having me.

Alan Poole:

Well to get started, can you tell us a little bit about your background and how it led you to form PIN?

Debra Lam:

I have a background working as a management consultant and then in local government and federal government, and eventually went to Georgia Tech, moved to Atlanta, and ran Smart Cities and Inclusive Innovation across the university. Really trying to think about what is the applied research that can be used to benefit communities. And not only the community gets access to R and D (Research and Development), but the research advances because of implementation and feedback with the community. And then from there, obviously, I had this great opportunity to establish the Partnership for Inclusive Innovation (PIN).

Alan Poole:

Tell us more about PIN itself. As I understand it, it's a statewide public partnership model, which I'll call P3 (public private partnerships) or PPP for the rest of the podcast so I don't trip over those words.

Debra Lam:

The Partnership for Inclusive Innovation is really unique, actually. One, of course, it is a public private partnership in its truest sense of the word where we have funding coming from the state government and we have funding coming from the private sector. And it is very much a 50/50 split. It's also reflected in our decision making. So, our board of advisors is made up of C-Suite corporate leaders, as well as civic leaders and higher ed and state government officials. Larry Williams, actually, who is obviously the President of TAG is one of our board members.

Alan Poole:

What drew you to public-private partnerships or P3s?

Debra Lam:

Yeah, that's a great question. And the reason why we did it this way is that we wanted to be very intentional about long term sustainability. So, it goes beyond any one individual, any one organization. It goes beyond certain agendas or politics. It really is acting as a long-term checks and balances on what is the greater good for the collective state. It started with the mission that we saw that innovation technology data were important tools in driving shared economic mobility, but that they haven't been used or shared equally over the years. And so how can we harness the power of technology and innovation to really drive that shared economic prosperity which is the goal. And collectively, the partnership with the range of government actors, civic actors, and of course, private partners had that common mission in mind. So, they set it up as that PPP to withstand individuals, trends, different agendas, to set that up.

The other aspect of the partnership that makes it unique is that it is statewide. So, we cover all of Georgia. We embrace the geographic diversity challenges that come with rural, urban, everything in between. And we actually think that if it is done well in Georgia, in terms of these different types of models, it can be scaled and done elsewhere, it becomes a really strong demonstration site and a place of leadership for Georgia. And then the third part that makes the structure unique is that we have a definition of inclusive innovation. So, you might know that there's a lot of other organizations that might be doing innovation, but we're driven by inclusive innovation, meaning increasing access and opportunities for everyone to innovate. But that innovation isn't the end state, but a way to drive, again, shared economic prosperity, shared economic wealth for everyone. And so that changes the lens of traditional innovation that you might be familiar with.

Alan Poole:

Now at Georgia Tech, you focused on smart cities. And smart cities is a part of what PIN does. There's more to it now, isn't there? Can you tell us about that?

Debra Lam:

Yeah. And that's the fourth kind of hallmark or characteristic of the partnership. So, the first three I talked about, we're a public private partnership. We are statewide and even expanding beyond the state. And we are set up with an inclusive innovation definition or mission. The last part of what makes us unique is really what we do, which is we're a cross between a funding intermediary, like a foundation and a do tank, meaning the opposite of a think tank, if you will, in terms of action. And we did this because we, at the end of the day, see financial capital or finance as a critical part to driving innovation, but it can't be the only thing. What we saw was that social capital was just as important in terms of what you know, who are you connected to. So, we couple the financial grant given with the social capital to ensure that we can promote our projects and our programs.

And we have active programs on the ground to do that. Fundamentally, when we think about innovation, we want to open up innovation in terms of who can innovate. So, it's not just startups. To us, innovation can happen in local governments, small businesses, community

groups, non-profits, schools, they all can innovate as well as startups. Who can innovate, how they can innovate, it might be a little bit different and why they can innovate. So, you can innovate well and for good. It doesn't necessarily need to be mutually exclusive. And under that kind of big tent innovation, we think that opens up the doors for a lot more shared economic prosperity.

Alan Poole:

Can you give me some examples of some of the projects you've been working on lately?

Debra Lam:

Yeah, so we have four main pillars and each pillar has a flagship program. So, you can think about in student engagement, one of our pillars, we just graduated our largest and most diverse class of Smart Community Corps. We basically take three levels of intersectionality, so it's students of any year, rising sophomores, all the way up to PhD students in higher ed. We take students from any major, so you don't necessarily need to be an engineer or a computer scientist. And in fact, we really value the hard sciences working with the social sciences together in terms of multidisciplinary. And then now any university in Georgia and college. And we pair them up in teams fully funded, full time over the summer, working on civic tech public innovation projects.

So, we believe that you can learn about smart cities and infrastructure in the classroom, or you can actually be on the forefront doing it with a team, with a community. These students worked on a range of projects from building data maturity assessment model for local government officials to looking at entrepreneurship at the Savannah tech and logistics corridor, to build in stakeholder engagement in the west side with flourishing communities in the city of Atlanta. So just a range of projects that value experiential learning and public service. Our second pillar is around workforce development.

So, this is focused on early career versus active students, and it's a multi-sectoral rotational fellowship. So, we think that what we want to build in is next generation of innovators that are fluent in navigating the public sector and the private sector. So, you would do rotations, six months in public sector, six months in the private sector, along key growth verticals for Georgia. So, they include advanced manufacturing in the logistics. It includes sustainability and energy. So, thinking about all the different organizations that you can rotate under those umbrellas, which would then allow you to choose whether you want to work in one of those organizations when you're done with the fellowship, or completely something else, but you would have gained the subject matter expertise in that area.

And then our third one is really community research. So that's where smart cities still lives. So it's really taking whatever the problem in the community is, whether it's transportation or housing or energy, and then trying to pair up multidisciplinary and applied research. So, the research gets better and the community gets critical access to R and D that they otherwise wouldn't have. And what we've seen is that a lot of these projects move on to get additional funding because the relationship is so strong between the community and the researcher. So, they have a lot more kind of demonstration to showcase, and it's a lot more competitive.

We just announced our 20th community in terms of our Georgia smart community challenge. So, our fifth class includes the city of Atlanta, city of Warner Robins, Henry County, and Athens-

Clarke County. A good example is that with Thomasville Heights in the city of Atlanta, we're going to be using drones to conduct energy audits in the neighborhood. So again, if it can happen in Thomasville Heights using drones for energy audits, you can think about its scale in other neighborhoods and communities. And this project is a partnership between Morehouse School of Medicine and Georgia Tech providing the research.

Alan Poole:

Really cool. Tell me more about what is the smart city challenge?

Debra Lam:

Yeah, so the Georgia Smart Community Challenge is an annual kind of competitive selection process where communities across Georgia apply for a one-year funding engagement. So, they get technical and financial assistance to implement their smart cities project, whatever that is. And of course, they get into teams that includes a multi university multi-discipline. Might include private sector partners, startups, and essentially, they work on implementation over the course of the year. So that's just really a good example of that coming to happen. And then the fourth pillar is economic opportunity. So, our Innovate For All program, again, recognizes that if you have a proven program, service, or tech deployment that's ready to scale, then we want to fund that scale. And we funded various projects and programs that have increased access to capital, have created new and supported businesses. And really in our mind, is a reflection of Georgia, in terms of increase in minority and woman owned founders in that process.

Alan Poole:

What are the biggest challenges to overcome to form a successful P3?

Debra Lam:

I think it's, obviously people are understanding the start in the P3, right? And when we say P3, we are changing P3s versus probably your first generation of P3s that most people are familiar with. So, what we define as P3 1.0 is based on usually one large infrastructure project, and you're very much focused on funding and financing. Obviously, there's some legalistic kind of backdrop to this. And then of course you have an authority that's created to maintain it, et cetera. And that's, you know, what we've seen as a lot of the P3s. For us, it doesn't start with one large infrastructure project.

It actually starts with relationships and starting to form relationships that can really be a series of projects over time for a much longer-term duration. And it doesn't have a very formulaic legalistic backdrop to it, but it's really about how you can set up relationships that could build financial and social capital within the community. In our case, we did this around inclusive innovation and setting up that mission because that was the big unifier. But it's really about providing that larger social and financial and even digital infrastructure to support what we are calling a next generation of P3s.

Alan Poole:

So, if you're a private company, maybe in the past, hypothetically speaking, you might have been scared off from P3s because they were just one big project and big projects, things go

wrong. And P3s, those very formalistic ones are complicated, so that can sometimes magnify the problem. But it sounds to me, like in the case of an ongoing relationship P3, you have more of a chance to learn and adjust and get more invested in the community.

Debra Lam:

You can share the risk. You're more willing to innovate because the risks are shared. And you can see P3s really blossoming among all the sectors. So, Mayor Dickens, our mayor obviously, is now the chair of the task force that the US Conference Mayors set up on public private partnerships. And by being the leader of that, he's positioned in local governments to explore P3s in a whole new era. Cities are tasked with great responsibility. But they, of course, alone cannot do everything themselves. So, what are the other private sector nonprofits, foundations that need to be involved to improve the quality of life? On the flip end, or on the flip side, the *Chronicle for Higher Education* actually just did this massive survey of university leaders. And two thirds of those university leaders surveyed said P3s are growing and an important part of their campus plan or their campus strategy.

So even as higher ed is evolving into not just the singular providing education, they are really trying to see, oh, they have a role in workforce development. They have a role in continuing education. They have a role in the community. And if they do have these roles, who are the other partners that they need to get together with so that they can be an active citizen?

Georgia Tech has a great mission led by President [Angel] Cabrera, which is about improving the human condition. So that is very much a university wide mission that involves outside and really much partnership with public sector and private sector.

Alan Poole:

I'm aware of some companies that are following what's going on at the federal level. And with the infrastructure bill, a lot of it, especially in broadband, but also elsewhere is focusing on P3s. And they want to see private companies that are engaging with the communities they want to serve. Do you have any guidance or advice for a company that maybe hasn't had success doing that? What should they be doing? How should they be thinking about it to invest in a community?

Debra Lam:

Exactly how you said. I think it's important to realize that this is an investment with a community versus just one transactional kind of relationship. I think when we are talking about broadband, it's not just the singular hard infrastructure, if you will. We talk about broadband as a three-legged stool, right? Because you're talking about access, you're talking about affordability, you're talking about how they can actually engage beyond just the wiring, if you will. And so, I do think there is an opportunity for those that are in this space to think more holistically than just the maintenance of the hardware and think about an investment for the community. Because what you will find is that you will get a lot more out of it if you think more holistically in terms of that investment.

Alan Poole:

And is helping foster a relationship like that something that PIN can help providers do?

Debra Lam:

Yeah. We have a couple of projects that are working with communities, more rural communities, in terms of trying to get better choice and access and even increasing literacy. We talk about, again, it's great if you have it, but if you don't know how to use it, then it's wasted. We have two projects that think about digital literacy. So, one that's focused on local government officials. So obviously they have so much data, how can they actually use the data to inform their policy making, to inform their decision making? What kind of training do they need? There was a project that we worked with Neighborhood Nexus and GMA (Georgia Municipal Association), and of course, United Way in that process. So, trying to really understand where the needs are. And then another project that is with UGA (University of Georgia) and ABAC (Abraham Baldwin College), that looks at small and medium sized producers, more farmers.

So, thinking about, there's a lot of technology that's given at the industrial level of farming. But actually, there are many more smaller and medium sized farmers in Georgia. And agriculture remains a really important industry throughout the state. How can we empower these small and medium sized producers to understand soil conservation, to understand water, to think about incorporating data analytics into their decision making that would improve crop yields, improve their quality of life, improve their cost? And what kind of data and literacy do they need in order to do that? So UGA and ABAC are now in the process of looking at that type of research and training.

Alan Poole:

So, is this precision agriculture like sensors in the soil to make sure you've got enough water, too much water?

Debra Lam:

Yeah. But again, that's the technology. But then once you have the data coming out of that sensor, do people know how to use it? Do they know how to apply that data? So that's the next part of it. It's great that you have that technology, but it needs to be applied to show true benefit.

Alan Poole:

What was last year, your second year in operation?

Debra Lam:

Yes. We are just about to celebrate our second year, so we are very much in startup mode.

Alan Poole:

Congratulations!

Debra Lam:

Thank you, for surviving!

Alan Poole:

Would you like to tell us about any of your favorite accomplishments from the past year?

Debra Lam:

Yeah, fundamentally we spent the past year kind of building processes, so not very forward-facing sexy stuff. Building a team, now we have an incredible team. But really thinking about how to develop our system to make sure we're accountable, to make sure we're optimizing our impact. So, there is a lot of that kind of back-end building. But in terms of the forward facing, like I was saying earlier, we now have four pillars that each can operate independently. If you start to put them together, in terms of cross pillar collaboration, it really starts to deepen that impact and deepen that engagement and become more of a forced multiplier.

So, we're just super excited. We ended this year with 30 projects across the state. It covers 90 Georgia representative districts areas, 10 economic development districts. And I talked about the students earlier, but our students have contributed almost over 25,000 hours in work. That is really building up the next generation of innovators. We do a lot of outreach, whether it's virtually through our newsletters or our webinars. But we also do a lot of in person as well and starting to do across the state. And so, we're just super excited about that kind of impact. We were able to distribute about 1.3 million this past fiscal year, that led to a match of 1.7 and then secured some additional funding of 6.2.

Alan Poole:

Wow.

Debra Lam:

And that was just last year. And this upcoming fiscal year, we're hoping to distribute 2.8.

Alan Poole:

Wow, good growth.

Debra Lam:

In terms of just the growth. And again, showcasing the impact. At the end of the day, the numbers aren't as important as the qualitative as well. So, what's the stories, how can we celebrate these projects and these people and how can we position Georgia as that model for inclusive innovation? Because it's one thing if we say it ourselves, it's a whole another thing if people outside the state and in the region, or even nationally, think about Georgia being that leader.

Alan Poole:

Is Georgia the first statewide P3? Or PIN, excuse me.

Debra Lam:

Yeah. So, the partnership is one of the few that covers all four of the characteristics I said earlier. So, we might have organizations that have one or two or maybe even three of those characteristics, but we haven't found an organization that has a statewide model that has the P3 kind of set up the way we do that has inclusive innovation as our main mandate and definition and has that kind of hybrid model of financial and social capital with on the ground action. So, we haven't seen too many like that. And so, we think that this is a good model for others to kind share and celebrate together. Because ultimately, it's about trying to empower that next generation of innovators for shared economic prosperity.

Alan Poole:

Looking ahead now, and considering all the causes you're championing, in the next five years, what do you hope to accomplish?

Debra Lam:

It's really about scale, right? So, it's one thing if we say ourselves as the model. It's another thing if we really start to show the regional and the national impact. And so, we are really thinking about growth, in this next year, outside of Georgia to showcase that model.

Alan Poole:

Any particular states or areas you're looking at to grow yet?

Debra Lam:

I really have thinking that incremental is still good as much as we are very ambitious. So, I do think the regional, there's something to be said about the South and being a leader for how we define inclusive innovation. I think a lot of the innovation as you know in the past has driven more inequalities and we want to be very intentional about trying to share that economic prosperity across the state.

Alan Poole:

Great. I really enjoyed this conversation, learning more about what you do. And I feel like I've learned a lot more about why P3s matter to the stuff I do in infrastructure. So, I think that's really valuable and I hope our listeners do it well. Any closing thoughts on maybe others that are interested in PIN should do, or what kind of companies or other players you might be looking for to get involved?

Debra Lam:

Yeah, by all means, please visit our website, www.pingeorgia.org. I think that's a great starting point to reach out. We'd love to engage. And we really now love to include more private sector startups, anyone to come and really work on inclusive innovation for Georgia.

Alan Poole:

Great. Thanks very much. Thanks everyone for listening. We look forward to having you to our next episode. Make sure to subscribe to the [Technology Association of Georgia](#) and [Troutman Pepper](#) on LinkedIn and subscribe to our podcasts wherever you listen to them.

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