

Dorch. business lab seeks start-ups

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A new resource will soon be available for enterprising individuals living near the Fairmount Corridor Commuter Rail Line. The Fairmount Innovation Lab, a business lab aimed at growing creative industries in the communities connected by the MBTA's Fairmount Indigo Line, is accepting applications for its LaunchPad initiative. The Fairmount Indigo Line is a commuter rail line running from South Station to Readville that passes through parts of Dorchester, Roxbury, Mattapan and Hyde Park.

The LaunchPad is a competitive program that will provide ten start-ups with a four-month immersion in business and financial training, access to a collaborative workspace and a community of entrepreneurs, multiple networking opportunities and support from expert mentors. At the end of that time, each business will pitch its idea to community members, investors and other stakeholders. Expert mentors are identified through a partnership with MassChallenge and expected to provide advice on business model development, marketing, finance, legal issues, technology and other business issues.

Cross-sector focus

Eligible start-ups can come from a wide range of creative industries: advertising, architecture, culinary arts, fashion, film, research and development, app and game design and more.

Applications are due March 31 and can be accessed at www.lab584.org. The first round of start-ups will be announced in April and will start in May.

The LaunchPad is just one of the Fairmount Innovation Lab's initiatives. The Lab also runs a non-competitive "business incubator" that is meant to serve as a hub for entrepreneurial development in the creative industries. It offers ongoing workshops, weekly office hours for more personalized consulting, free legal assistance for businesses through a partnership with Harvard University, regular networking opportunities and access to grants and loans. The incubator is available to anyone who has a business in the

Fairmount Corridor.

The Fairmount Innovation Lab, located in Uphams Corner, was created by local entrepreneur Liora Beer, who also is the founder and director of Artmorpheus, a nonprofit organization that seeks to support artists and creative entrepreneurs. Beer has a long history of launching creative ventures in Dorchester, including an open market pilot program in Uphams Corner that provided local artisans and food entrepreneurs with a place to sell their products. Before her time in the non-profit world, Beer spent a decade overseeing business development projects for the City of Boston.

Beer is passionate about art as a community resource. “The creative industries are a huge economic driver,” she says. “Most people are not even aware of that.”

Although Artmorpheus is the main entity behind the Innovation Lab, it was created in partnership with the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Design Studio for Social Intervention, and the City of Boston/Main Streets. The Lab also is backed by a number of funders: the Boston Foundation, Kresge Foundation, Surdna Foundation, and the Barr Foundation.

The Lab also is a part of the broader Fairmount Cultural Corridor, an initiative seeking to create a thriving arts and cultural scene along the Fairmount Commuter Rail Line.

Moving forward

The FCC project is a “placemaking initiative” that started in Uphams Corner and has since expanded to the Four Corners area, using strategies such as public art installations to celebrate local traditions and enhance community livability.

While these various projects’ connection to a commuter rail line may strike some as odd, it reflects a broader push from various community groups and city offices to use the Fairmount Indigo commuter rail line to guide development in the abutting communities. The Fairmount line previously had only five stations between South Station and Readville, including stops at Uphams Corner and Morton Street that were rebuilt between 2005 and 2007. However, despite these station improvements, a 2012 city document described the Fairmount Indigo line as bypassing “large sections of

predominately lower-income urban neighborhoods that have endured the environmental impact of the train without enjoying the benefit of access to it.” Since then, stops have been added at Talbot Ave, Four Corners and the Newmarket/South Bay shopping center. An additional station planned for Blue Hill Ave near Mattapan Square is slated to break ground this November and be completed by December 2017.

The new stations have elicited a wide range of public reactions. Some have welcomed the development as part of the answer to overarching concerns about social inequality that has long plagued Boston’s low-income communities of color. Others raise opposition to the Mattapan station plan in particular, due to concerns about the impact that construction might have on the foundations of nearby homes and what they see as a community development process that is too MBTA-driven.