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# Business

## Ideas go underground with 'Innovation Express'

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BRIAN FEULNER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Kelle Sparta could pick out the car she was looking for the moment the Red Line train pulled into Andrew Station yesterday afternoon.

“Everyone in the car was standing, talking,” she said. “The energy was higher, and people were actually looking at each other.”

This wasn't just another subway crowd. The last car on the Red Line train that left the JFK/UMass station at 1 p.m. yesterday was the “Innovation Express,” a mobile networking event that was designed to connect entrepreneurs with members of the Boston and Cambridge start-up communities along the Red Line - including Sparta, a personal coach.

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The event was sponsored by Boston World Partnerships, a nonprofit created by Mayor Thomas M. Menino to raise global awareness of Boston as a center of intellectual capital and innovation.

“The train itself is a connector, so we thought we'd have fun with that,” said Yoon Lee, executive director of Boston World Partnerships.

About 50 Boston area entrepreneurs and business networkers took part in the trip, which began at the JFK/UMass stop and continued until the Davis Square station in Somerville. In between stations, representatives from start-up facilities and organizations addressed the strap-hanging audience. Speakers used a bullhorn to make themselves heard over the train noise and station announcements.

Most of the riders who just happened to be on that train, unaware that they were witnessing a networking event, took the spectacle in stride.

“Is this some sort of flash mob?” one young man asked casually, before he returned to solitaire on his smartphone.

The JFK/UMass station was chosen as the start of the run to feature the nearby UMass Venture Development Center, located on the UMass Boston campus. The center's director, William Brah, told the crowd that although the center is currently at capacity, hosting 20 start-ups, “we always have room for the next Akamai.”

As the train made its way under Boston, two representatives from the Boston mayor's office spoke to attendees, talking up the South Boston Waterfront “Innovation District” and City Hall's “new urban

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On board with the ‘Innovation Express’

mechanics” office, which is using new technology to improve city services.

“I’m happy to see the government getting involved,” said Kristen Ulwelling, a first-year Babson MBA student, who rode in the car for the entire length of the trip.

Somewhere under South Boston, Bill Jacobson, the cofounder of WorkBar, a shared office space facility near South Station, urged the crowd to take a break from their virtual lives and “go out and meet people, get together.”

Jacobson said that more than 120 people work at his facility, which hosts 40 companies and has kindled one marriage.

As the train crossed the Charles River, Tim Rowe, chief executive of the Cambridge Innovation Center, took over the megaphone to inform riders that they were approaching the “densest collection of venture-backed start-ups on the planet: 168 per square mile.”

Rowe’s Kendall Square facility hosts more than 400 companies, most of them start-ups.

In the tunnel between the Central and Harvard stations, Neal Doyle, coordinator of the Harvard Innovation Lab, invited all of the passengers to take advantage of the center, which will officially debut next month in a brand new facility in Allston. The lab is planning to host many events and offer resources to the public.

At the Harvard Square station, Pierre Dorsaz, of the Consulate of Switzerland, boarded the train with two visitors from his native country.

“I love this,” said Michael Mitchell, from the Ecole Polytechnique Federale de Lausanne, Switzerland. “I’m always looking for ideas that shake things up, take people out of their comfort zone.”

At the Davis Square station, the passengers, now in full networking mode, talking energetically, exited en masse and swarmed into a train on the other side of the platform, still buzzing uninterrupted, for a return train to Kendall Square.

Lumina Gershfield, director of Future Boston Alliance, an organization that advocates for innovation in Boston, was tweeting and snapping pictures for her group’s blog. “This is the kind of stuff that keeps me in Boston,” she said. “Some subway encounters are not so welcome, but these have been great.”

At Kendall Square, nearly all the car’s passengers exited the station and crossed a rainy intersection to the Cambridge Innovation Center, which hosted the group for lunch, more networking, and a variety of related events, including open office hours with visiting venture capitalists and free videos sessions for

entrepreneurs who were interested in making short “elevator pitches” to investors.

“The idea behind these events is to get people thinking that starting a company is the new normal,” Rowe said, as he waited for pizza to arrive. “It’s kind of wacky, but that’s part of the new normal.”

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