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Hacking For Homebuilding Winners Announced, Positioning Boise As Construction Innovation Headquarters



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Real Estate

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The VandalEyes team was a winner at the Hacking for Housing event this week. The team includes Boise ... [+] BOISE STATE

Levi Smith grew up on a cattle ranch in central Texas. He started his first business at 11 and since then has been part of the healthcare industry, has practiced law, and also has a degree in marketing and management that ended up being the main thrust of his career path during the past couple decades.

Through all of those roles, Smith found ways to leverage technology. Now, as the president of [Franklin Building Supply](#), a regional lumber and building material dealer with more than 17 locations across Idaho and Nevada, he brings that eclectic background together with a passion to inspire innovation in construction.

After joining Franklin Building Supply in 2016, Smith was exposed to the opportunities for efficiency and collaboration in home construction and started looking for ways to influence and catalyze improvements.

“I used to work in the healthcare industry; it’s so complex and regulated,” he said. “What we see in healthcare will be what we see in housing. In healthcare, the innovation is limited to a better stethoscope, something small and siloed, but the process is still as hellish as it has ever been. Insurance tells us what they won’t cover, we get passed between four specialists, we wait forever for an appointment, everyone has their own agenda. In housing, it’s similar, everyone is doing something in their own silo, building codes can be a hurdle and most of the innovation is in products, not people or process. I want to unlock and accelerate innovation in a way that isn’t happening today because it’s too fragmented, too complex and there’s no single place for everyone to gather routinely to genuinely collaborate and coordinate.”

From there he started talking to people in the Boise startup scene, where he saw the primary companies involved were either marque public companies

or financial services and insurance, or as he puts it “the folks wearing suits.”

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Small- and mid-sized companies were only looking at innovation for lead generation, and not necessarily looking at how to help or contribute to industry-wide challenges. So, Smith went on a listening tour to identify where and how he could be part of change.

“Looking at our industry, you don’t see a hub of innovation for home construction anywhere in the US,” Smith said. “There is a rich history of building material companies in Idaho and an ever-maturing startup ecosystem here, so establishing an innovation hub in Boise makes a lot of sense. With a front row seat to innovation, we and all the other stakeholders involved, will be able to be part of the solution rather than on the sidelines observing innovation from afar.”

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His conversations led to the [Venture College](#) at Boise State, where he made some alliances to create the [Hacking for Home Building](#) program that launched last year. Nic Miller serves as the executive director of the Venture College at the College of Innovation and Design at Boise State and became Smith's counterbalance on the program.

Last year the team launched the inaugural Hacking for Homebuilding event that was strictly a student competition that had 14 teams and 36 participants. This year, the event opened to the public and grew to 16 teams and 46 participants. Plus, the industry partners increased from 5 to 15 year over year.

This year's entrants were presented with problem statements that their innovation should solve for that ranged from more sustainable construction solutions to job site security. A first round of pitches were presented in September and then the top three in each track were selected by a panel of industry judges to pitch during the finals of [Boise Entrepreneur Week](#) on Thursday, October 21.

Betsy Scott serves as the executive director of programs and engagement at the [Housing Innovation Alliance](#), a member-based organization connecting stakeholders and opportunities for a better housing industry, and was a judge at the event. She was impressed with the innovative solutions that were presented after just two weeks with the problem statements.

"It was great to see the tech companies taking more of an interest in the housing space outside of the consumer focused proptech that we have seen recently," Scott said. "The group really put effort into solving the problem statements and digging into the issues around them."

The six winners were announced during that event, and this year's winners in the public track include Flashpoint Building Systems, Revonate, and CrewNotes by BetaCanon. The student track winners are VandalEyes, SiteSeer and NeighborWood Surplus. The winners walked away with cash prizes up to \$10,000, along with a strong network to help them launch.

Founded by Nick Stoppello and Pat Churchman, [Flashpoint Building Systems](#) developed a patented process that laser engraves building information and plans directly onto the subfloor sheathing.

“When the subcontractors come in to build, then the plans are right there on the subfloor and it's down to a fraction of an inch,” Miller said. “Instead of waiting for an architect or engineer, Flashpoint Building Systems provides highly accurate information on the jobsite right there on the subfloor.

[Revonate](#) uses 3D modeling to save time on remodel projects and to ensure consistent profit margins. The technology can do a lidar scan of a project, and from that, provide a 3D render for the remodel. The technology is evolving to be able to convert a 2D picture into a 3D render.

VandalEyes and SiteSeer focused on jobsite security to protect contractors and builders from things walking off the jobsite, which increases the cost of the home and delays. Miller points out that it can even mean that the general contractor loses the job or goes out of business. VandalEyes is a multi-pronged solution with security kit installation, a monitoring app that utilizes crowdsourcing to monitor the site, and a centralized system designed for trailers with GPS and cellular monitoring capabilities.

“VandalEyes solution was interesting because it was an approach and the builder would integrate their own equipment into it,” Scott said. “It looked at all parts of the ecosystem of theft, combining notification of the owner, police and also closed the loop and connected back to the insurance. It would deter theft and get better rates on insurance. It was very impressive for a student group, it seemed like a professional business group.”

Isaiah Grover created SiteSeer as a solution to theft and vandalism of equipment trailers on construction sites.



CREWNotes was a winning pitch at this week's Hacking for Housing competition at Boise State ... [+]
CREWNOTES BY BETACANON

Crewnotes by BetaCanon is an innovative communication tool to simplify the process of sharing legacy knowledge with project stakeholders. The app creates QR codes that can be left on the job site as a sticky note, allowing subcontractors to communicate with each other efficiently and effectively.

Landon Barney and Jesse Rasaka hope to reduce the waste of unused materials on job sites with their new venture, NeighborWood Surplus. The

startup helps contractors save money on disposal costs, while offering affordable construction materials to the public.

During the event, the entrepreneurs learned about customer discovery, developing a minimum viable product (MVP) and testing a prototype over 10 days. Miller and Smith want to send them on a path for success to jump start innovation that is desperately needed in the industry right now.

“This was really an effort to bring together a housing construction innovation hub, to get these individuals together, united and sharing insights, perspectives, lessons learned,” Smith said. “Our goal is for it to happen on multiple occasions throughout the year so that Boise itself becomes an effective place for stakeholders to innovate and launch, which will also get the city and county be more amenable to letting new ideas be tried.”

Scott sees an opportunity for more universities to do this type of innovation around construction if they aren’t currently. She also sees a huge opportunity for companies to use these types of competitions to identify new employees, future interns, and hires out of college, at a time when the industry is in desperate need for good talent.

While housing continues to be built, one of the biggest issues facing the industry is if anyone can actually afford to buy a home. Smith is excited to identify and lead innovation that can solve for that, and encourages all walks of collaboration.

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