



When I sat down back in late January with [TechBirmingham](#)'s Jennifer Skjellum, an ever-increasing level of optimism filled the room. Preparations were well underway for [TEDxBirmingham](#); BarCamp Birmingham and [Ignite Birmingham](#) were both aiming for mid-March events (both have since been pushed back to at least early summer); and the city was still basking in the glow of [being recognized as a major contender for the title of "Silicon Valley of the South."](#)

The organization had just spent the last year developing a strategic plan to determine what they wanted to do next and one of the components of that new approach, a new website (at www.techbirmingham.com), had just been launched. "The website serves as a primary way to demonstrate the existence of a community to both locals and those looking in from the outside," said Skjellum, who also runs her own company, [Runtime Computing Solutions](#), in addition to serving as president of TechBirmingham.

She pointed out the need for "a hub of activity and evidence of a community" for the region's tech sector, enabling them to find out information about existing user groups, networking opportunities, and potential job opportunities for both those looking to move here and those who have been here for some time. It should help are tech companies to feel more plugged in to area happenings and encourage connections within the region.

"If you've moved here recently and there's just not one place to go. But there's not a place where like minded technologists, entrepreneurs, and tech companies can come together and figure out what's going on."

It isn't the only thing long time observers of the organization will notice is changing.

"Probably the biggest change is going to be related to the level of organization," said Skjellum. She continued, "We've been supporters of events and sponsors of events. Now, we want to create a sense of community of and for people who have a sense of membership in." TechBirmingham was established as a 501©6, making its desire to function similar to tech councils and membership organizations elsewhere in the Southeast (and the country) possible.



It also provides a revenue stream. "We need a budget to start doing the things that TechBirmingham was started to do as well as some new things that have come out of the last 10 years of evolution of Birmingham," said Skjellum. She cited estimates that the Birmingham metro area is believed to have more than 700 technology companies. The breadth of that ecosystem was something Skjellum learned during the period of strategic planning.

"I thought I was pretty well connected, but there were a lot of companies I have learned about that I had no idea existed here," said Skjellum. She continued, "I would say there's not any technology that someone's not working on in Birmingham. They may not be large scale, but it's here. It's really important for us that those don't slip away. We need to identify them, recognize them, and figure out how to help those companies scale, including providing resources when necessary."

She and her 26-member board of directors are working to get at least 400 of those companies to join in addition to individual members and the organizations and businesses that support them, including law firms and accounting firms. There will also be sponsorship opportunities available for activities they will sponsor, though Skjellum is quick to point out how they will be different from existing user support and interest groups already active in the region. She says they will focus on "being an advocate for technology companies and doing what it takes to push it to the next level, enabling education and technology training that didn't exist before."

Some existing programs, like the monthly breakfast mixer TechFriday, have been tweaked to meet the evolving needs and demands of the community ([recently being renamed Tech Tuesday](#)) while others are introduced. One such program, Birmingham Women in Technology, has brought together 80 women working in our local tech community, focusing on mentoring in both early and late-career in addition to working on getting high school girls interested in tech. They have also started working with Birmingham City Schools to start reaching out earlier to make more people aware of the existing opportunities.

When I asked Skjellum what she wanted to see the organization become in the next 3-5 years, she didn't hesitate giving a reply. "My dream is that TechBirmingham has a healthy budget can support a staff - a vibrant, well-funded organization. The challenge is going to be getting people who don't have any idea of what we could be."

It's a challenge worth tackling, especially considering more than 10,000 people have participated in TechBirmingham activities already through the years. A noticeable reorganization of TechBirmingham as a tech council could significantly increase the opportunities for the Birmingham region to be considered for ecosystem-defining projects like Google Fiber. We would then be able to not just fight for the title of Silicon Valley of the South, but own it outright.

Photo: courtesy of TechBirmingham.