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## Innovation: Telling a pothole from a curb

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Boston City Hall is offering a big reward to someone who can establish the difference between a pothole and a speed bump. One catch: the answer has to come in the form of a computer algorithm. And, for once, the city is looking in exactly the right place.

Back in February, the city's Office of New Urban Mechanics — an in-house think tank — released a prototype version of an application for Android smartphones that senses when a driver hits a bump in the road. "Street Bump" collects GPS data from the phones to alert city workers who, in theory, dash over to patch the pothole. But it doesn't always work as planned. Sometimes, the vibration sensed by the smartphone might be train tracks, speed bumps, or even a suicidal squirrel. What's needed now is an improved application that can actually isolate the signature of a pothole.

In the past, City Hall would have issued a request for proposals from research engineers and software specialists. Innovators now have a better idea. Boston has posted a challenge on InnoCentive, a global online marketplace where a network of 225,000 "solvers" — software engineers, techies, and scientists — register to respond to the proposals of "seekers" from the corporate and nonprofit sectors. The best solution, regardless of where it comes from, wins the posted reward.

The city administration believes it is the first municipality to tap into the expert network at InnoCentive. The winner of the Street Bump challenge will receive \$22,500 courtesy of a grant from Liberty Mutual. Another \$2,500 will be awarded to the best submission from a Boston resident or student. The rest of us will be satisfied with less damage to tires and suspension systems.

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