ATLANTA – South Bend, Ind., a city of slightly more than 100,000 residents where blighted buildings have long been a struggle, has deployed a smart sewer system that could save $500 million in government costs related to overflows. And at the MetroLab Network Annual Summit at Georgia Tech Dec. 13, Mayor Pete Buttigieg pointed to the project as an example of what cities have to gain from collaborating with academia.

South Bend’s sewer system now generates 16 million data points, making it “the most densely sensored sewer system in the world,” said Buttigieg, noting that info from the sensors helped reduce overflows by 70 percent. The $500 million in potential savings would be massive for any city, but is especially significant for a town like South Bend where per capita income is less than $20,000.

Throughout Buttigieg’s speech and the subsequent panel, a three-tiered picture of the relationship between college towns and universities within them emerged — College Town 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0.
Another obstacle discussed by the panel was creating innovation programs that can survive politics, entrenching them in government so they aren’t later disowned when a new administration sweeps into city hall or the state house and supports only the initiatives and programs created under its watch. The speakers agreed that transparency with the public can demonstrate value in a way that embeds innovation in culture, creating public expectations for it to continue that ultimately protect it from the fickle winds of politics.

“Even more than the crisis of politics,” Buttigieg said, “I think we can offer something when it comes to the current American crisis of purpose.”