Parking Panda, FlightCar among 'disruptors' setting up shop in Austin

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Parking Panda Corp. joins a growing crowd of companies developing disruptive technology for the transportation sector in Austin.

The Baltimore-based startup, which develops a mobile application designed to enable drivers to reserve parking places, plans to launch its mobile application in Austin this month. Other companies already in the game locally developing tech for transportation include General Motors Co., RideScout LLC, Silvercar Inc. and FlowBelow Aero Inc.

In addition to Austin's burgeoning tech startup community that develops such applications, the city's deep pool of early adopters has provided an ideal breeding ground for national and local companies to test tech tools in a city facing its own transportation problems.

"What's happening right now in Austin is that we're a little bit behind other cities because we're so car-centric," RideScout CEO Joseph Kopser said. "We're absolutely a city ripe for seamless disruption."

RideScout — which was acquired by Car2go North America LLC in September 2014 — developed a mobile application designed to provide users with information about various transportation options and related details. It employed 11 workers last year.

Parking Panda already operates in 40 cities including Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, Partner Account Manager Bryan Lozano said.

The startup, which was established in 2011, has agreements with operators obtaining a
commission for each reservation. Similar to Airbnb, it aggregates each partner into a centralized platform that allow customers to view all options in real-time based on distance, price, and availability through the Parking Panda website and mobile apps, the Baltimore Business Journal reported.

The company sells parking spot reservations for the same price as the customer would pay if they simply drove up to a garage or lot. Parking Panda generates its revenue by taking a cut of the garage’s revenue because the service allows the garage to optimize each of its spaces. The Parking Panda app can be downloaded for free.

Here's a quick rundown of some of the other new tech-based transportation companies in the local market:

• California-based companies Uber Technologies Inc. and Lyft Inc., known as transportation networking companies, have already established Austin operations to compete with the established taxi companies.

• Last month, FlightCar Inc. launched its app-based peer-to-peer program at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport that allows users to rent out their vehicle to other FlightCar users while it would be otherwise sitting in an airport parking lot.

• Austin-based Car2go is operated by Moovel, a division of Daimler AG. Car2go is best known for its tiny blue and white cars that pepper downtown streets in Austin.

• FlowBelow Aero, which was founded in 2009, develops wheel covers and products to improve the aerodynamics of vehicles such as tractor-trailers, saving operators fuel costs in the process. It employs 11 workers.

• In November, a New York-based software maker Transfinder Corp. revealed plans to open a 10-person satellite office in Austin. The company, founded in 1988, develops school bus management systems and provides related services. Its products, which include routing and scheduling software for logistics, are used by more than 1,500 school districts in 47 states, according to the Transfinder website.

• In 2012, Detroit-based General Motors Co. (NYSE: GM) opened a tech center in a former Dell Inc. building on East Parmer Lane at the Tech Ridge Boulevard intersection. It is expected to eventually employ 500 workers.

• Austin-based Silvercar operates a car rental service based on a mobile application. CEO Luke Schneider said Central Texas is fertile ground for developing transportation-related technologies.

"I think, as a city, Austin has set the table to become the showcase for what the next generation of transportation should look like."

Christopher Calnan covers technology, finance and clean energy for the Austin Business Journal. Subscribe to the Energy Inc. newsletter