AT&T, Samsung team up to create 5G 'Innovation Zone' in Austin

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Tech giants AT&T and Samsung announced Wednesday that they will create the country's first manufacturing-focused 5G "Innovation Zone" in Austin.

The zone, designed to test 5th generation wireless broadband technology, will be on Samsung Austin Semiconductor's 160-acre campus in North Austin.

The site will feature AT&T's 5G wireless technology along with Samsung's 5G network equipment, according to a news release from the two companies.

Technology experts say 5G—which is essentially ultra high-speed wireless connections—will not only power future waves of mobile devices, but also will evolve technology in other industries like automotive and health care. Companies have said they expect 5G to be up to 100 times faster than the current 4G networks.

"This collaboration with Samsung Electronics America and AT&T will help us test how a 5G network can improve mobility, performance and efficiencies within our plant," Sang-Pil Sim, president of Samsung Austin Semiconductor, said in a written statement.

South Korea-based Samsung has operated in Austin since 1997. About 3,000 employees work in the 2.45 million square foot Austin chipmaking plant. Samsung has invested $17 billion in its Austin campus

through the years, according to the company.

The two companies say they expect to test location services to improve safety, industrial "Internet of Things" sensors that monitor environmental and equipment conditions and more.

The companies selected Austin as the site of its innovation zone because of the city's strong semiconductor manufacturing industry, said Jonathan Taylor, vice president of production and systems technology at Samsung Austin Semiconductor.

"I'm not aware of any other innovation zones like this one," Taylor told the American-Statesman on Wednesday. "There are none that are trying to capitalize on manufacturing and smart factory."

A smart factory is a tech term that refers to a production facility which relies on technology-driven manufacturing like Internet-connected machinery.

AT&T recently opened a 5G testing lab in North Austin. The lab, one of several AT&T has throughout the country, is a testing ground for 5G signal transmitters and how they handle certain conditions.

But to fully prepare Austin for 5G-enabled devices, the city will need to approve hundreds of small-cell networks for installation, Digneo told the American-Statesman earlier this month.

The new lab at Samsung's Austin campus is different because it is focused on manufacturing, said Mo Katibeh, chief marketing officer of AT&T business.

"This is a first. We'll be testing the real-world impact 5G will have on the manufacturing industry," Katibeh said. "Ultimately, we plan to use

what we learn from this 5G Innovation Zone to help create better technology experiences and improvements in Samsung Austin Semiconductor's plant along with creating a future blueprint for people and businesses across all industries."

AT&T expects to deploy its commercial mobile 5G network in parts of dozens of cities by the end of the year.