

# Citizens First!

## The Internet Brings Public Information Power to the People

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The Internet and software applications such as GIS make it easy for even the smallest government body to make public information easily accessible. But the big question is, "Will they?"

When municipal GIS was the "new kid in town," people didn't know much about the technology, but everyone was curious. Now GIS is the most popular kid on the block—information management is everywhere. But what do people do with the information? The issue now at hand is how local governments view providing that information to its citizens vs. only looking at how to make government jobs easier internally.

Jim Doherty, legal consultant at Washington State's Municipal Research and Service Center, wrote in a 1996 report, "Working for the government is like working inside a goldfish bowl. Almost everything is open to public scrutiny, like

it or not. One must respond to public disclosure requests efficiently and graciously [because] the public is not only your client, but also your employer."

Doherty believes that electronic data transfer allows citizens to quickly and inexpensively access public information. "With the rapid expansion of electronic data technology," he adds, "it's expected that efficient and inexpensive access to public records will eventually become commonplace and perhaps required."

### Local Government/Citizen Applications

The public, of course, always has the right to access information, but to do so must go to the local government office, find reference numbers, dig through thick books, fumble with outdated maps and spend a small fortune at the copy machine. Some departments now offer public-access terminals, providing an easier, "do it yourself" way to access information, but there's still a time factor involved.

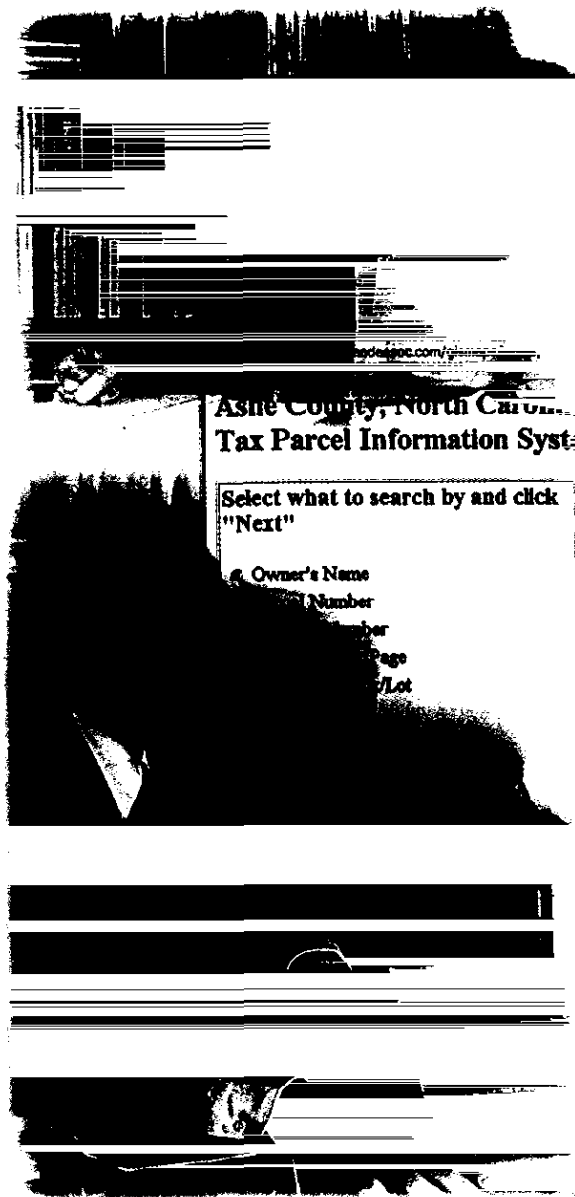
However, a handful of progressive municipalities now offer free parcel information access via the Internet. Avid users of the information, including realtors,

attorneys and surveyors, are singing the praises of online systems.

Municipal GIS is a hot topic, and it's never been easier to point, click and have a multitude of information available. Possible GIS applications include explaining zoning issues during public meetings, or determining school bus routing and utility locations. Citizens also benefit. For example, a GIS can show parents where a school bus stops, or allow users to access land values and deed information from the privacy of their own home or office.

### Common Issues

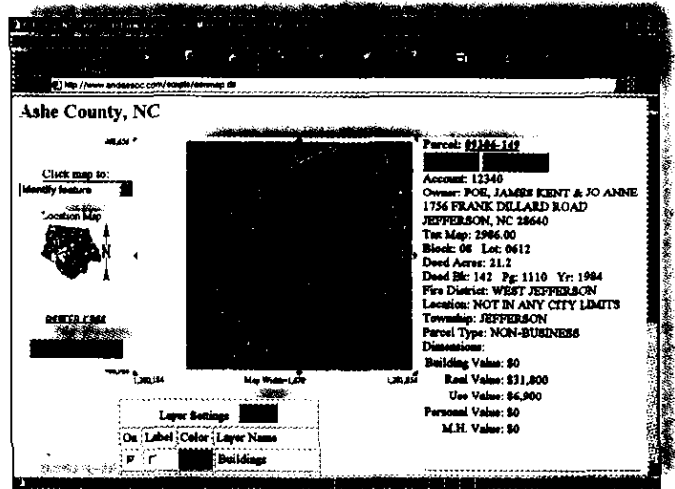
Project cost often is one of the first



sells its land base GIS data on the Web. The land use zoning layer costs \$17,000, with a \$7,000 monthly update fee (\$600 to update annually). A standard data fee structure was developed, using

and a scanned version of the original property deed.

Professional design services firm Anderson & Associates (A&A), Blacksburg, Va., helped Ashe County get its Web-based GIS up and running, and currently hosts the site



Via the APLUS system (<http://www.andassoc.com/gismaps/aplus>), a query on a specific parcel in Ashe County will show users information such as owner name, parcel address, acreage and value.

development/marginal costs and market value, to charge the public for commercial uses of the digital data. Many users will pay this fee, but the trend of free, public-access, Internet-based GIS sites soon will have such users wondering why.

#### Free Public-Access GIS

Ashe County, N.C., population 22,000, went online in late August 1998 with its Ashe Parcel Look-Up System (APLUS), a free, public-access parcel information system. The site, which can be found on the Web at <http://www.andassoc.com/gismaps/aplus/>, has approximately 30,000 parcels and allows users to choose how they search for a specific parcel, whether by owner name, parcel number, account number, deed book and page, tax map/block/lot or street address. After users find a parcel, they can choose layers such as roads, structures, hydrology (streams, rivers, ponds, etc.), and soil and aerial photos—all printable with maps. In addition, parcel pages can include a photo of structures on the parcel

on A&A's Web server. The company used Redlands, Calif.-based ESRI Inc.'s Map Objects Internet Map Server software to put the parcel information on the Web.

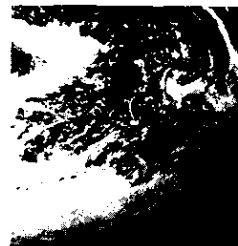
In 1997, the Ashe County mapping office started selling CD-ROMs with parcel information for \$150 plus an additional \$50 per year. The office also charged \$1 for legal-sized copies and \$0.50 for tax information copies requested by walk-in clients. Running accounts of these copies were set up, and users would be informally billed, with estimated fees of \$50 to \$150 for 20-30 clients during a three-month period. However, those accounts diminished when the system went online.

The county hasn't considered charging a fee for the Web-based system. "We decided not to go that route," says Jo Ann Poe, the county's mapping supervisor. "Besides, this information is free, public information, and if we're going to charge a fee for it and then have to hire someone to take care of that fee, that's not helping the public."

Poe, a former county appraiser, knows how difficult it can be to get information

issues to surface. It's easy to measure a GIS implementation's cost, but difficult to measure its benefits, including the services a GIS provides to citizens. Measuring the intangible values of a public-access, Internet-based GIS is much more difficult than measuring value or savings to a government agency. How do people put a price on the time saved by a real estate agent who doesn't have to drive to a mapping office and leaf through parcel maps, or the time saved by an attorney who accesses deeds from the Internet in minutes instead of hours?

Surfing the World Wide Web shows just how many municipal sites sell digital data. A large west coast city, for example,



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Rectification Services  
Feature Extraction

GPS Surveying  
Airborne GPS  
Utility Inventory  
Precise Geodetic Networks

Digital Photogrammetry  
Digital Terrain Modeling (DTM)  
Topologic Planimetry  
Change Detection/Map  
Updating

Digital Orthophotography  
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together from multiple locations. She saw the need and knew that the information needed to get to the public.

"I tried to think of things I could do to make life easier for all of us," she says. "It would be easy if all the information was in one place."

According to Poe, the system has cut down on office traffic, making office life easier in some aspects, and created a "wow" effect for other counties to follow.

### Using the System

Mike Burgess, owner of Parker & Burgess Realty in Ashe County, uses the Internet system daily. Burgess, who's been in the realty business for 26 years, believes there's no comparison between the way they do things now and the way things used to be done.

"We used to go and just fumble through the courthouse and do the best we could," he explains. "The new parcel system probably saves me a good hour every day. Now we have the majority of [what we need] right in front of us."

Brent Eisenhower, sales associate with Parker & Burgess, downloads parcel information and maps to use as marketing materials. "If you came in the office and were interested in a property—and wanted to go look at it—I can give you a fact sheet and a tax map of that property," he notes.

In addition, Larry Phipps, registered surveyor with Ashe County-based Phipps Surveying, uses APLUS at least once per day. "I have a business to run, and I'm also president of the Ashe County Chamber of Commerce," he says. "Juggling my schedule is a difficult task."

Phipps sees multiple benefits of having GIS parcel information on the Internet. In his business, it's required that all clients get an estimate to ensure they know how much a surveying service will cost before any work begins.

"If I get six calls from people wanting surveying, I'm probably going to use the system six times," adds Phipps. "It's also been able to extend the working day for me. As a surveyor, I'm out all the time, so it's allowed me to research and prepare cost estimates after mapping office hours."

Phipps said he would be willing to

pay a user fee for the system, realizing that the benefits far outweigh any costs he might incur. He was one of the first to purchase a CD-ROM from the county mapping office when APLUS was first set in place. And as the system went on the Internet, it was a driving force behind why he now has Internet access. "I had always taken the approach that there was no compelling reason for me to have [Internet] capability," he says. "But when the system went online, it gave me the reason I needed to make [Internet access] happen."

### More Municipal Sites

In addition, Montgomery County in southwestern Virginia soon will offer free parcel information via the Internet. Home to Virginia Tech and the Blacksburg Electronic Village, the area already has a "high-tech" reputation. The county, with a population of 75,000, put approximately 32,000 parcels and related information on its Web site (<http://www.andassoc.com/iplus>) in October 1998.

The town of Blacksburg, Va., in Montgomery County, along with surrounding counties, is developing similar sites as part of a larger municipalities scheme in Virginia's New River Valley. Blacksburg's site [also at <http://www.andassoc.com/iplus>] is expected to be up and running by the end of 1998.

Katherine Smith, Blacksburg's GIS coordinator, sees the system benefiting end users in several ways. "Someone coming here to relocate can look at our site, look up properties, property values and whether there's a school close by," she says. "It's going to be a wonderful way for people to find out more about the area. We hope to have community meetings to show residents how to use the system, and we want to use the public to grow this system. They will tell us what they want, and we'll build the system from their suggestions."

Smith doesn't believe the town should charge a fee for using the GIS parcel information. "That's not our business," she adds. "We're here to serve information to our customer base and should do it in the best means we can. That was the reason we decided to go ahead and give the stuff away." 