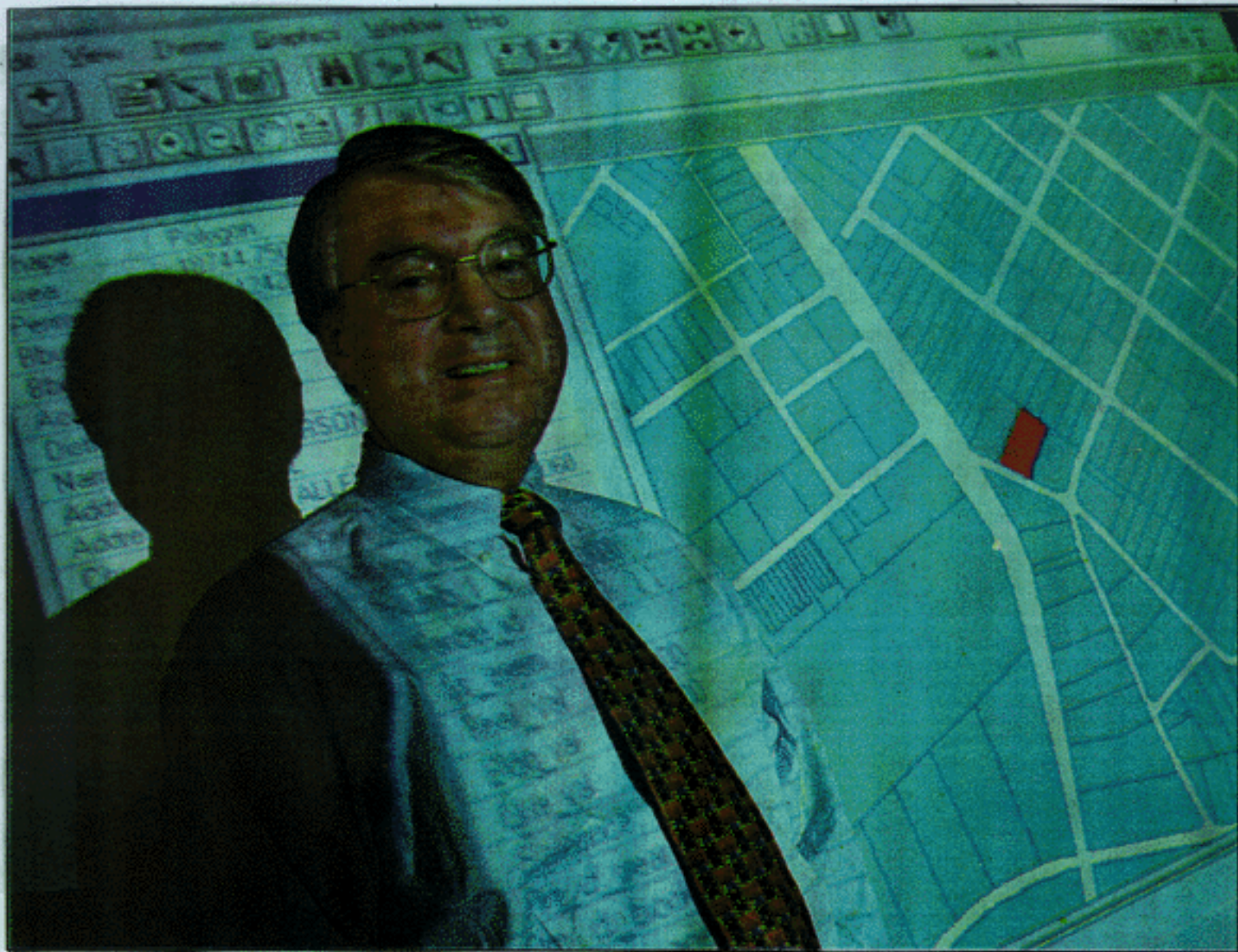


NEW RIVER VALLEY BUSINESS

A MATTER OF PUBLIC RECORD



ALAN KIM / THE ROANOKE TIMES

Ken Anderson of Anderson & Associates, a Blacksburg-based engineering firm, is helping to lead the effort statewide to build local government web sites combining two technologies — the Internet and Geographic Information System software, known as GIS.

Project weds Internet and new mapping technology

By STEPHEN GRIECO / SPECIAL TO THE THE ROANOKE TIMES

BLACKSBURG — A new Internet project could help New River Valley governments work more efficiently, save money and possibly save lives.

There is opposition, however, coming from two directions — from some local governments being asked to share information, and from some residents who do not want public records with information that can seem very personal on the Internet.

Want to find out the value of your neighbor's house? Check on the tax value of the office building around the corner? The idea is to use the Internet and new mapping technology to make real estate records and zoning maps as close as the click of a finger on your home computer.

Ken Anderson, chief executive officer of Anderson & Associates, an engineering firm based in Blacksburg, is helping to lead the effort statewide to build local government Web sites combining two technologies — the Internet and Geographic Information System software.

This software would enable local governments to create maps loaded with information such as local zoning dis-

PLEASE SEE GIS/8

tricts, emergency response data and fire hydrant locations.

With such comprehensive information available on a home or office computer, local government employees and other professionals would have a powerful tool for decision-making at their fingertips.

"Eighty percent of all local government decisions have a location component," Anderson said. "GIS is the best tool" to make that information easily accessible.

Anderson & Associates has helped set up an Internet site for Ashe County, N.C., and expects to sign a contract soon to do the same for Montgomery County.

The site would include public records, such as tax assessments on local houses and commercial property, now filed at the courthouse.

"You have to balance the advantages and disadvantages," Anderson said. "We are only divulging public information. We're simply making it available more broadly — like the phone book."

Some government agencies are concerned about generating revenue to pay for maintaining the site, Anderson said.

Putting information about New River Valley localities on the World Wide Web is being discussed by an informal New River Valley GIS Users Group, composed of several local governments, according to Katherine Smith, GIS coordinator for the town of Blacksburg.

"It's a decision that needs to be made by each jurisdic-

tion," she said.

A regional Internet GIS initially would be fairly simple. It could let a resident or a business hundreds of miles away find basic information on property, such as tax value and zoning.

In the future, though, additional layers of information could be added to the site, such as water and sewer line locations. Government or business users then could ask the computer for details such as flow capacity, elevation and pipe materials.

Blacksburg's internal town government GIS system can already handle such sophisticated queries.

Internet World Magazine writer Andrew Marlatt recently gave some examples of the benefits of such an Internet site in Oakland, Calif. (Check it out at www.oaklandnet.com.)

"With this system, a real estate developer in Chicago, say, can search for 1-acre commercial sites near transit lines, zoom down to photo level, and find out the property's

owner and zoning status," he wrote.

"The fire chief can see hydrant locations, measure distances between hydrants and fires, and calculate how much hose is needed — all before arriving at the scene."

Most local property owners understand that their tax information is available to the general public, but also know it is rarely scrutinized in the courthouse vaults.

"I don't like all of this information being available through the Internet, but I don't see any way to stop it," said Joy Tucker, a resident of Radford who works with New River Valley Community Services. "It feels like an invasion of privacy.

"I don't think the majority of people have a legitimate need to know this information," she added.

Tucker, who once worked for a newspaper, compared the Internet GIS system to publishing information about divorces in the newspaper. Divorces, too, are public information, but many consider their publication inappropriate, she said.

"Still, if it increases efficiency and cuts costs for government, that's a plus," she said.

If information is power, then this technology can empower the public, according to one public official.

Frank Kiewer, manager of Oakland's Internet system, told Internet World Magazine, "You'll have accountability. Governments will be uncovered. That's why on one hand some people are extremely excited, and others are saying, 'Oh, my God.'"

"It's coming," said Ander-

son, who was appointed by former Gov. George Allen to head the Policy and Standards Committee for the Virginia Geographic Information Network's advisory board. He is convinced of the benefits to everyone.

"Used properly, these two technologies [Internet and Geographic Information System software] have the potential to drive down the cost of government through the elimination of duplicate information developed and maintained in different departments of local government," he wrote. "Not only will costs come down, if all departments cooperate, but the quality of service to citizens will go up."

For Anderson & Associates' engineering business, work with Geographic Information Systems is one of the fastest growing parts of its business. Some local projects, not related to the Internet, include enhancing 911 systems in Giles, Floyd and Montgomery counties.

It is also conducting a study for Montgomery County on possible sites for industrial parks using GIS data to pinpoint land with the best slope, proximity to water and sewer lines, access to Interstate 81, adequate size and zoning designation. Without GIS, such a process would have required numerous maps and site visits.

In the long run, the site's usefulness to the real estate industry, its potential for tax savings and economic development opportunities will make the Internet project palatable even to skeptics, Anderson predicted.