

MetroGIS

Collaboration: Never a better time

The current economic landscape is requiring everyone – families, businesses and government alike – to figure out ways to trim budgets, and deliver products and services ever more efficiently. One way for government agencies to do that is by joining forces with each other, creating synergy for better, more cost-effective solutions.



Chair, MetroGIS Policy Board
Victoria Reinhardt
Ramsey County Commissioner

That's exactly what MetroGIS has been doing since its inception nearly 15 years ago – bringing together multiple governmental, private sector and nonprofit interests to identify shared information needs and develop regional solutions to meet those needs. "Build it once and use many times" continues to be our motto.

Despite resource cuts, our collaboration continues to seek solutions for the needs of our respective participants. In 2008, as you will read below, we began to identify shared needs for applications and web services that will help our stakeholders meet real-world needs – like emergency preparedness and response, economic development, and drinking-water protection, to name only a few.

Geographic information is most often behind the scenes in public policy and service delivery, but it is absolutely critical nonetheless. I'm very proud of the GIS professionals and other government employees and elected officials who have devoted so much of their time to the MetroGIS collaboration. Our work is more important than ever.

Investigating shared needs beyond data

In order to stay relevant and meet the evolving needs of participating organizations, MetroGIS must widen its scope to seek solutions to shared needs for applications and web services, according to the 2008-2011 MetroGIS Business Plan. MetroGIS kicked off 2008 by hosting a workshop to explore this expansion of activities.

Key roles for MetroGIS. Participants at the workshop determined four key roles for MetroGIS in pursuing solutions to shared needs for applications and web services. They include leadership, coordination, policy/procedures and seed funding for projects.

Activities to pursue. Participants ranked potential application-sharing activities for their importance to each participant's organization and for their appropriateness for promotion by MetroGIS. The top four ranked activities include:

- Writing web-based services that can be used regardless of the development environment (i.e., the kind of software you use)
- Sharing expertise and best practices in writing and implementing applications
- Hosting applications and services for others to use and/or using same from others
- Hosting data services

Participants were clear that in order to fully pursue the activities outlined in the business plan and affirmed at the workshop, additional technical leadership support is needed in the form of a Technical Coordinator.

Next steps. Based on the workshop results, the MetroGIS Policy Board endorsed the key roles and following highest priority next steps:

- Define a strategy to secure a Technical Coordinator and initiate negotiations
- Define priorities and shared needs for applications and web services
- Populate metadata for GeoServices Finder, a web services and applications search tool and catalog
- Define a more fully developed geographic data, applications and services broker
- Explore methods for establishing trust in the reliability of shared services.

Note: The state's budget challenges and subsequent hiring freeze has hindered efforts to establish a Technical Coordinator position funded by the Metropolitan Council (the primary financial sponsor of MetroGIS). In the meantime, the Technical Leadership Workgroup and other volunteers are moving forward, as time permits, on prioritized projects.

Sharing parcel data

All seven counties participating in MetroGIS adopted the latest parcel data sharing agreements, which allow MetroGIS to distribute the regional parcel dataset. The agreements also authorize a new opportunity referred to as "view-only" access. Licensed organizations may now host web-based applications designed for access by general public viewing that incorporate the parcel data, provided the source data cannot be downloaded.

Developing solutions

Regional geocoder service. MetroGIS helped fund the development of a regional geocoding service. A geocoder connects an address with its exact geographic coordinates,

and is used in mapping applications. The regional geocoder is open source and available for use on any server.

In 2008, the Policy Board approved spending an additional \$5,000 to make the geocoder web service recognize landmarks, so that a person may also type in the name of a landmark and map the location.

Synchronizing data from different sources. With MetroGIS pilot project funding, Carver County developed a tool needed to establish a regional address points dataset. The tool will allow address points data created at a city or county to be synchronized with a regional database at a central location on a nightly basis.

In 2008, the Policy Board approved funding to develop an online address points editing tool to make it easier for small cities with little or no GIS resources to create and update address points data. A prototype tool is in development.

Mailing label web service. The Policy Board approved funding to help develop a mailing label web service. The service will not require users to have regional parcel data on their desktops, and will provide a web-based tool for producing a custom set of mailing labels.

Leveraging the MetroGIS model

MetroGIS leaders played important roles in shaping recommendations for an initiative called "Minnesota Drive to Excellence: Functional Transformation." A key component of the initiative is creating a statewide GIS coordinating council.

Networking to expand data-sharing activity with counties adjacent to the seven-county metro area was initiated, as called for in the MetroGIS business plan.

MetroGIS Policy Board Members – 2008

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www.metrogis.org – For current information on MetroGIS activities
www.datafinder.org – For a directory of available geographic data in the region