

MetroGIS: Performance Measures Case Study

Planning Assistance for Growing Communities

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Summary: MetroGIS data makes it possible for the nonprofit 1000 Friends of Minnesota to assist small but growing communities on the edge of the region to plan their future and involve citizens more effectively in the planning process.

Problem: Minnesota's population is growing steadily. Nowhere is that growth more evident than in a corridor running roughly from St. Cloud on the northwest through the Twin Cities metropolitan area and southeast to Rochester.

Many small communities in the path of this growth have a vision of maintaining their community character, open spaces and rural lifestyle, while also enjoying the economic development that growth can bring. However, they lack the financial and technical resources for adequate planning to make their vision reality.

In addition, it can be difficult for communities to engage their citizens in the planning process when the primary tools are abstract concepts like cluster housing or sustainable development. But when citizens can visualize their future using computer mapping tools, the concepts come to life.

Solution: Growing By Design Technical Resource Center, an initiative of the St. Paul-based nonprofit organization 1000 Friends of Minnesota, helps communities to think about their growth options, engage citizens in the planning process and forge a common base of understanding of planning concepts. It also brings geospatial data tools to small, growing communities that can't afford to set up their own geographic information system (GIS).

For example, 1000 Friends worked with the City of Dayton, in northwest Hennepin County, as part of a University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) program called "The Edge Project." Funded by The McKnight Foundation, the project aimed to study issues faced by growing communities at the edge of the metro area and provide tools to help those communities with few technical and financial resources to do their planning.

1000 Friends assisted Dayton to develop a plan for parks, trails and open space. In 2000, the city had a population of 4,693 – a figure that is expected to grow to 28,700 in 2030. To create its 2030 comprehensive plan update, the city needed to determine where that

growth will occur, what areas the city wants to preserve as parks and open space, and how to connect development and parks with a system of trails.

“Interactive mapping is a canvas to facilitate that planning,” said Sally Wakefield, Geospatial Services Manager for 1000 Friends.

One of the goals in Dayton’s open space planning process was to take advantage of the detailed and localized knowledge of city residents. To accomplish that, Wakefield and CURA’s Dan Marckel used Google Earth aerial photos as a base map. They then layered on other data obtained through MetroGIS. Adding data like land use, surface water, significant natural areas, streets and sewer interceptors gave residents a more complete picture of what’s already on the ground in their community.

During an all-day “note-taking exercise,” residents were invited to come in at their convenience, look at the computerized maps and add information about different points or areas on the map. People could even add links to videos posted online, Wakefield said, such as someone describing the history of a farmstead or showing local nesting sites of declining bird species.

The resulting map was “remarkably detailed” and was very helpful in developing the city’s parks, trails and open space plan, said Tim McNeil, who participated in the planning exercise and is now a member of the Dayton City Council. “But it will go way beyond that for our comprehensive planning process. I’m hoping to use the map to create overlays for our ordinances so that, for example, we can decide to establish a more stringent standard for low-impact development in more sensitive areas.”

Part of the process was putting the maps on CD for residents to take home so they could get more familiar with the data. “Before the advent of public mapping systems like Google Earth only trained professionals had access to land-based data,” Wakefield said. “These public tools help build trust and a better understanding of the data. They also help people better understand their entire community, not just the area they live in.”

Impact of MetroGIS: “We used a ton of MetroGIS data for this project,” said Wakefield, listing transportation, sewer interceptors, parcels, street centerlines, current and future land use, parks and metro greenways. “There are many datasets created and/or maintained by MetroGIS that are crucial to planning in the metro area. You can’t get it anywhere else. It’s great that people can search for regional data and get most of it in one place.”

“We were working with a planner who had some GIS background but who didn’t know where to get data or which data were most appropriate,” Wakefield added. “We were not only able to access the data through MetroGIS DataFinder but we were able to educate the community about what data is available for their use.”

“The mapping tools that 1000 Friends brought us were critical,” said Erin Swtora, assistant to the Dayton City Administrator. “We’re a very small city, and we don’t have

the cash flow to implement a major GIS and to maintain it. Sally was able to step in, set it up, and get all of the data we needed. She was essential to our planning process. I'm sure she saved the city money in the long run."

1000 Friends will continue to rely on MetroGIS datasets during its six-year Community Growth Options project being launched in 2008. Backed by a new \$1.5 million grant from the McKnight Foundation, 1000 Friends – in partnership with the CURA and the U of M's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs – will deliver direct planning and implementation assistance to 10 rapidly growing communities both inside and outside the seven-county metro area.