

This Isn't Private Information



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NSGIC certainly believes that individuals have a right to privacy. However, there are many privacy issues being debated across the country that, if enacted in law, will destroy the government's ability to conduct its business. In addition, some of the proposed changes would negatively affect government and commercial services that citizens expect and demand.

This document was created by NSGIC's Outreach Committee. It provides a sample of these privacy issues and tries to introduce reasons that these data shouldn't be protected under privacy laws.

Please attend NSGIC's meetings to learn about the latest privacy issues and network with the managers of state and Federal GIS programs.

<http://nsgic.org>

For NSGIC and other organizations that work with information technology, privacy and confidentiality are critical issues, especially with regard to locational information. Government agencies must respect individual privacy rights and take great care to avoid releasing protected or confidential information about individuals. However, there are widely divergent views on what should be considered private or protected information and what is inherently public information. These views, and the lack of consumer awareness about using already available privacy controls (e.g. setting privacy controls while web browsing, turning-off GPS signals on mobile devices, or securing account information with online services) are fueling the debate.

Because *geographic* is our middle name, NSGIC is particularly interested in what is commonly termed as '*locational privacy*.' Digital mapping technologies allow us to map and analyze objects, activities and events of all kinds as they occur in the physical world, including the movement of individuals through devices like GPS-enabled smartphones and tablets. Without their explicit knowledge and consent, most people think this is a clear invasion of their individual privacy as the information collected can be attributed to a specific person. However, many of those same people believe that it is OK to aggregate and track groups of individuals to identify and report information of public value, such as traffic congestion on a



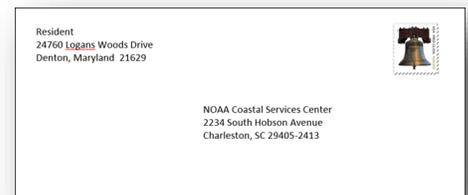
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Bel Air, Maryland 21015
<http://www.nsgic.org>
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freeway that is causing reduced speeds.

Debate is warranted on the issue of 'locational privacy.' We enter that debate by giving 5 examples where individual privacy is not breached.

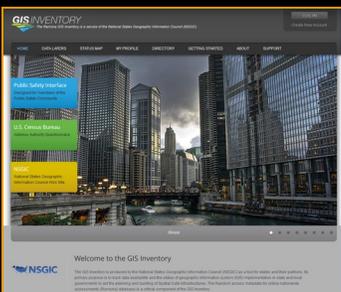
- 1) A street address and its associated x-y coordinates by themselves are not private or protected information. This is critical information for emergency responders, utili-



ties, and the delivery of mail or goods and services. Address locations must be publicly available to enable these services, and consumer-level GPS navigation devices, if they are to perform at desired levels.

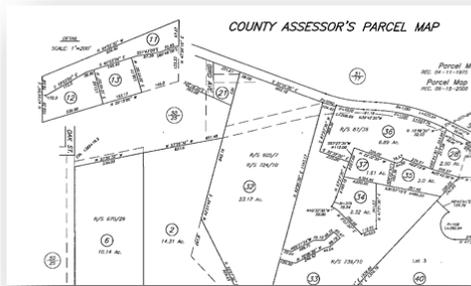
- 2) Property ownership and assessment records have been considered public information since our states and local governments began officially recording documents and levying value-based property taxes. Among other purposes, this information allows citizens to ensure that they are taxed fairly. If

NSGIC is a 501 (c) (6) organization committed to efficient and effective government through the prudent adoption of geospatial information technologies. Voting members include the senior state geographic information system managers and coordinators. Other members come from federal agencies, local government, the private sector, academia and other professional organizations. NSGIC members include nationally and internationally recognized experts in geospatial information technologies and policy. NSGIC provides a unified voice on geographic information and technology issues, advocates State interests and supports its membership in their statewide initiatives. NSGIC reviews legislative and agency actions, promotes positive legislative actions and provides factual information to public and private decision-makers. It also provides services such as the GIS Inventory.



<http://gisinventory.net>

property data had been widely accessible prior to the 2008 housing



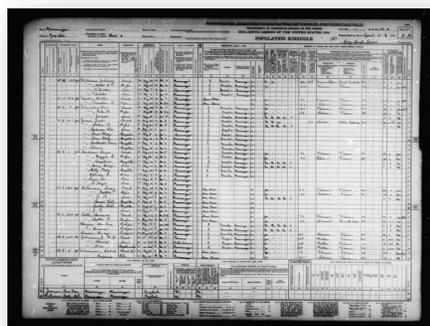
crisis, the issue might have been identified earlier when the consequences were much smaller.

- 3) Aerial photography does not contain any private or protected information, because you cannot identify individuals at the level of resolution that it is collected – even if individuals are looking straight up at the camera. In government acquired aerial photography, individuals contained in the images are portrayed by less than 1 to as many as 6 pixels which makes conclusive or even suggestive identification impossible. This is in contrast to ‘regular’ photographs that contain hundreds or thousands of pixels over a face to show discernable features clearly.



A face with 154 pixels

- 4) Published Census data, while tied to locational information, does not



compromise privacy, because it consists of summary counts, not individuals' information. Individual names and responses are not available from Census Bureau records until 72 years after the date of collection. Similarly, geographic data (such as road and address point data) collected by the Census Bureau in preparation for conducting the Census does not contain any personally-identifiable information and should be made publicly available or, more preferably, be openly sourced from state, regional, and local government.

- 5) Google's Street View™ and similar images are not an invasion of privacy. These image products are acquired by driving public roads and



accessible private roads, in well-marked vehicles, taking pictures according to a predetermined, unbiased data collection plan. The resulting photo dataset is not searchable by any personally identifiable information. Pixelization of individuals depicted in the imagery, upon request, is an appropriate response by industry.

NSGIC is a member of the GIS Certification Institute – www.gisci.org. We abide by the GISCI Code of Ethics that says we have obligations to individuals in society that include respecting their privacy and respecting them as individuals.