

City of Opelika Headed in the Right Direction – GIS Becomes Invaluable! City of Opelika, Alabama

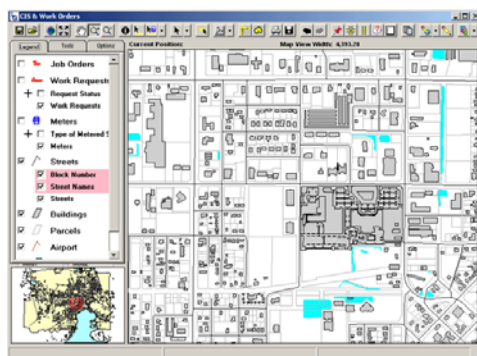


Citizens and city employees in Opelika, Alabama, are in for a pleasant surprise.

They are about to become the beneficiaries of technology that will make their lives and work easier, thanks to a small group of workers quietly laying the groundwork for the city's expanded and invigorated GIS program.

"Our approach is to devote whatever time is necessary to fine tune and finesse the details, so when we roll out GIS for general use, the foundation will be solid, and everything will work exactly as it's supposed to," said John Findley, the city's IT director.

"We do some really great things in Opelika, and our people are totally dedicated to quality. When it comes to GIS, getting the details right is the most important thing."



LGviewer

Opelika's GIS adventure began several years ago when it chose Geographic Technologies Group to do a needs assessment and implementation plan.

Since adopting the plan, the city has tried several different approaches to implementing the recommendation before settling in on the current direction. "Part of what we had to do was find the right people to fill our positions, but now that we have, we're moving ahead quickly," Findley said.

Once the staff was in place, GTG conducted training on the LGviewer, LGaddress, and LGcrimes, products Opelika had purchased.

"The person we hired had limited prior GIS experience, but because of his ESRI training and the onsite training of the LG products, along with the fact that the LG products are so easy to use, he was able to hit the ground running. GTG did an excellent job of taking what our staff member knew from school and reapplying it as they put the GIS layers together," Findley said.

One of the initial tasks was cleaning up and fleshing out the city's database of addresses.

"We used LGaddress to go from 8,000 to 16,000 addresses in our database. I was a little surprised at how many addresses were missing, but we had a lot of rural parcels that never had a street address assigned in the first place. Soon, every single parcel will be assigned a street address," he said. "We've made tremendous progress in leveraging the data on our AS400 and making it available enterprise-wide."

To ensure accuracy, the GIS team in Opelika has taken the basic layers and had them ortho-rectified.

"We had aerial photographs, and we had parcel maps, and the two didn't always match up. So we're having the parcels boundaries stretched to align them with the features on the photography. When that's done, we'll go back and redo the street layers, using the photographs that show where the streets actually are."

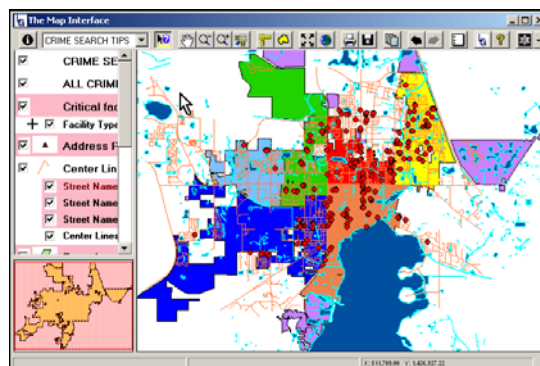
Findley said all of the adjusting, tweaking, and verifying will pay off in a big way when GIS goes into widespread use in Opelika.

"What we're doing now is very painstaking, but this will be the backbone of our GIS program. In six months, we will have made great strides, but for right now, we're just working in the background."

The next step will be to take the initial layers, build footprints, parcels and streets, and add additional layers such as sewer, hydrology, soils, and electric distribution system as we build a comprehensive GIS.

“We’ve taken the zoning layer for the Planning Department and tied it to the parcels. It is automatically updated from the AS400, which is something that could never be accomplished in CAD,” Findley said. “CAD is used throughout the City, and it’s a great tool, but there’s no information behind it like there is with GIS.”

At least one city department, the Police Department, can’t wait for GIS to be accessible.



LGcrimes

“They’re hopping up and down, wanting GIS capabilities right now,” he said. “I was a police officer for 10 years, so it’s easy for me to understand why they’re so eager to have GIS. It will be easy to plot crime locations, spot trends, and target enforcement efforts.”

“Experienced police officers generally know where crimes are going to occur, but the objective, the quantifiable information you get from a GIS map, goes a lot further in communicating with elected officials or with the public than an officer’s gut feeling.”

Police officers in Opelika are eager for the day they can literally produce a picture showing the concentration of law enforcement activities.

But Findley knows even departments who don’t see a need for GIS today will be excited when they learn how it can streamline daily tasks and help them better serve the city’s citizens.

“I know people will be asking, ‘Why didn’t we have this before?’”

Geographic
Technologies
Group

*Understanding
Local Government*

Geographic Technologies Group
1202 Parkway Drive
Goldsboro, NC 27534
Phone: 1.888.757.4222
Fax: 919.759.0410
E-mail: info@geotg.com