

A Successfully Planned and Phased GIS Solution

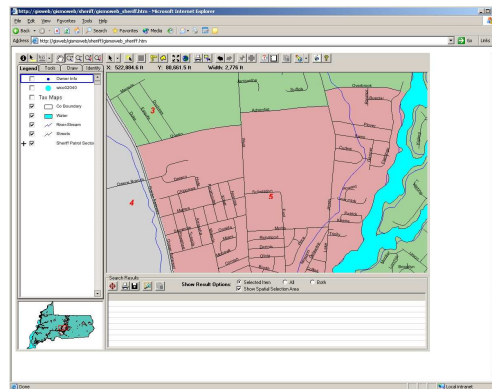
City of Salisbury/ Wicomico County, Maryland



Like many government planning professionals, a few years ago Frank McKenzie found himself at the center of a groundswell of interest in GIS. As officials began to hear about the new technology, they could see the possibilities it held for Wicomico County and the City of Salisbury, Maryland.

McKenzie, the City and County's Chief of Technical Services and environmental planning, saw the potential, too, but also recognized the challenge inherent in creating a GIS program that would be enterprise-wide, that would serve all departments in the City and County.

"It was great because there was so much support for GIS, and I knew that would translate into the commitment I'd need long-term to make it work for us. But I was determined to make this an organized, comprehensive program and not a patchwork of individual department initiatives."



McKenzie spearheaded the effort to create an RFP for a GIS needs assessment and implementation plan.

"Geographic Technologies Group won the contract, not only because of the great experience they had, but because they shared our enthusiasm and got everyone on the selection committee even more excited about GIS. At the end of their presentation, we could all see the full potential," McKenzie said. "I know that enthusiasm is an intangible quality and hard to quantify, but that's really what sold us on GTG."

GTG interviewed representatives of all County and City departments, and then returned with recommendations and a three-year implementation plan.

"The plan was great but we realized it would have been financially impossible for us to implement it in three years. We told David Holdstock that and he went back to the drawing board and reworked the whole plan to a five-year schedule.

"That made it achievable for us. It was an incredible amount of work on David's part—he really went above and beyond the parameters of the contract so we could have something that was realistic for us."

"It was our first step and it got everyone looking at GIS. GISmoWeb is so easy to use that just about anyone can do their own queries and some basic analysis without much training, so it's a great introduction."

Since the project began, McKenzie has developed and maintained all of the data layers and databases, and serves them to all of the users.

"GISmo Web is on 30 computers in the City and County now, plus we even have the state health department and federal agencies dialing in to use the system," he said. "The Health Department can see where the groundwater protection areas are, so if someone applies for a permit to build a well, for example, they can tell them how deep the well has to be dug to ensure the water will be safe."

Users have access to 15 to 20 different map projects, including zoning and tax maps, which have proved particularly popular. "All of the information that the tax assessor's

office keeps is available to everyone, and people really use it all the time,” McKenzie said. “You can click on a property; see who owns it, its value and many other useful facts. The planning and zoning staff can look on the tax map and see whether a property is in the flood plain, which subdivision it’s in, the zoning and lots of environmental information. They can get all of the information they need to issue a building permit just by looking at a single map.”

McKenzie has configured the program to limit the layers of data users have to look through to find the ones they need.

“We have 75 layers of data in there, but most of our users only need a handful. So I’ve customized the program so regardless of whether the user is an Administrative Director, the Mayor, the Fire Department, the Sheriff’s Department, or the Public Works Department, everyone has his own set of layers. It’s a lot of work, but I’m committed to keeping the maps as clean and useful as possible.”

And, as users have grown accustomed to GIS, they think of additional features they’d like to see.

“It’s been a quick evolution and our users are becoming more and more sophisticated, and more and more demanding every day,” he said. “We’re getting new aerial photographs and are working on a GPS data collection project to get centerline information which will be really helpful to our 911 dispatchers.” The dispatchers also use GTG’s LGviewer and LGdispatch. The city and county have formed a small committee of staff members who are receiving introductory training in ArcView and ArcIMS, so at some point, the process of creating and maintaining the data layers and databases can be shared by several departments.

“Decentralization is definitely the next level for us,” McKenzie said. “In the beginning, we needed to centralize the process so we could manage it effectively and avoid duplication of effort. Eventually, though, I envision each department will be responsible for its own data, but everyone will still have access to it.” Already, GIS has begun to capture the imagination and attention of elected officials in the City of Salisbury and Wicomico County.

“We get lots of requests for analysis from our city and county council members,” McKenzie. “From Day One, they recognized the value of GIS and provided the encouragement and support we needed to be successful. But as we actually start using the tools in our daily work, they are finding so many ways GIS can help them make better decisions and respond more quickly to citizen requests.” Of course, direct citizen access to GIS is also on the horizon.

“We’re working on the details now to put the information we have on the Internet. It’s easy to put maps out in PDF format, but true interactivity requires a lot more effort. But I’m confident we’ll get there.” Wicomico County and the City of Salisbury are also attracting attention from neighboring municipalities in Maryland, and McKenzie is happy to share his GIS experience with them. He’s especially eager to dispel a popular misconception about the technology: that’s it costs a small fortune to build a good system.

“We’ve been pleasantly surprised at how much we’ve been able to do with such a small investment,” he said. “We supplemented the money we had available with a core group of people who are dedicated, resourceful and committed to working together, and we’ve parlayed that into a great program. You don’t need a million dollars to capitalize on GIS technology.”

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