

GIS: Integration: A Solid Foundation

City of St. Helens, Oregon



The people in St. Helens, Oregon, believe in solid foundations. Their city, after all, is built upon a layer of basalt rock, a challenging geological feature that defines life in the Columbia River area and guides the engineers and planners that oversee the development of the community's infrastructure.

So it's not surprising that city leaders recognized the need to base their GIS program on a solid foundation, as well, a well researched, well thought out plan that focused on goals important to the citizens of St. Helens.

"Our GIS program had been evolving for about 10 years, but a few months ago we saw a demonstration of Geographic Technologies Group's services and products, and we saw right away we could benefit from their help developing a needs assessment and implementation plan," said Skip Baker, the City Planner for St. Helens.

A customer of Springbrook Software, St. Helens appreciated the fact that GTG products are fully integrated with Springbrook applications.

"Knowing GTG was a partner of Springbrook told us we wouldn't have to worry about being able to access the data we'd spend years accumulating, and that the recommendations they might make in the planning process would be consistent with the upgrades and new features that are in Springbrook's future," he said.

City officials first researched GTG programs online, then spoke with company representatives by phone. A formal presentation to an interdepartmental committee completed the evaluation process.

"The planning process we went through with GTG ended with recommendations to buy a new server, install new software, schedule staff training and continue to update our data in the first year," Baker said. "In the second year we move to more sophisticated applications, and by the third year we have a top-tier GIS program in place."



Baker said the top three uses for GIS in St. Helens are to improve efficiency in city operations, to be able to more quickly and effectively respond to citizen requests and to optimize data collection. "And, we have to do all of this without adding staff."

"Having more electronic information is a huge payoff, with benefits for every department in the city a high-level GIS program gives us the ability to pull data from any number of different sources and use it to solve problems that up until now were either impossible, time-consuming, or too expensive to solve. We can easily use data from the county tax assessor to improve operations in our library, police department, court system, water department and building permits. There are lots of good pluses," he said.

Baker's department is currently involved in a statewide project to standardize geographic information from all of Oregon's municipalities. "We supply the information about St. Helens to the County and they send it to the state. Everything will be in a common language."

City officials look forward to the day when citizens can go on the Internet to get the information they want by accessing data that are controlled and kept current by the City. In the meantime, they are excited about the immediate efficiencies internal users will see.

"It's a great tool for us to respond to various needs," Baker said. "The police have land use questions; they need to know which areas have repeated criminal activity. Our engineers need to know where facilities are needed, and developers always have questions about land they're considering buying. Now we have to research all of these questions using paper maps, but soon, GIS will provide all of the answers faster and more accurately than we've ever been able to before."

In communities experiencing rapid growth, land development is an area of key concern, and St. Helens is no exception.

Baker said the GIS program will be a great tool for the planning and engineering departments. "When developers want to do a subdivision, they bring us a proposed layout. Using GIS, we can look at the geographic conditions and the current infrastructure, we can anticipate what road systems will be needed and we can have an intelligent conversation with the developer about how the subdivision will impact the area and what resources will be needed.

"Without the right tools, it's very hard to do the things we need to do to serve our citizens," he said. "We believe GIS gives us the ability to lay the foundation for the future of St. Helens."

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