

Case Study:

The City of Virginia Beach Retains GTG to Develop the most Comprehensive and Sophisticated Strategic GIS Implementation Plan
City of Virginia Beach, Virginia

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You won't find a more sophisticated, robust GIS program than the one in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and you won't find a municipality more committed to the process of strategic planning.

Those two facts are not coincidental, nor is the following statement a misprint: Virginia Beach's GIS program is more than 30 years old.

The City's current GIS coordinator, Robert Jessen, wasn't there in the mid 1970s but is familiar with his department's amazing history. His focus, however, is totally on the future.

"GIS has been a vital technology for us to deal with the changes our city has gone through over the past 30 years. Our population doubled in the 70s and then doubled again in the 80s. Staying ahead of the curve on technology has enabled us to use our resources wisely and serve our citizens well."

It would be unthinkable for Virginia Beach to operate without a strategic plan, Jessen said. The first one for GIS was written in 1975, and for its most recent plan, now in the first year of implementation, the City turned to Geographic Technologies Group.

"GTG was a great fit for us because of their extensive experience with clients of all sizes in all stages of GIS maturity. They had great references and great examples of work they had done that was very relevant to what we wanted to accomplish, and we ended up with a plan that met the needs of the enterprise and the end-user departments" he said.

Virginia Beach had specific goals for the plan to address. The most pressing was evaluating and recommending options for a GIS governance structure.

"I think you could describe our previous governance structure as ad hoc—it was basically every man for himself when it came to planning and implementing new initiatives. We were competing for resources and moving in different directions."

Jessen said Virginia Beach followed GTG's recommendation for a structure which includes a GIS policy board, a GIS process management team and four functional teams, each focused on a specific business process: Engineering, Operations, Public Safety, and Community Development.

Implementing the new structure has been the primary focus for Year 1 of the strategic plan.

"Already we can see the value. We are now able to work through problems as a group rather than being at cross purposes. It's a big cultural change for our organization, but I think it's very healthy and it's been well received. It's easier now for everyone to understand how changes get made. We can already see how much more we'll be able to accomplish working more efficiently."

Jessen believes finding an effective organizational structure is one of the biggest challenges faced by larger municipalities.

"The bigger the organization, the more you need to work on communication and coordination. It would be easy for two groups to find they were working on digitizing the same layer, for example, and not even know it. When you have different budget units and different reporting lines and different offices spread throughout the City, you're vulnerable to duplication of effort."

“Also, I think in the more mature phases of GIS you are putting less effort into mass data collection and more into keeping the data layers up to date, and that lends itself to duplication, too,” he said.

Disseminating information is more challenging, as well, Jessen said, because of the sheer number of end users and the size of the database, which strains software and hardware.

The City has already seen quick results from the enhanced coordination that grew from restructuring the GIS program.

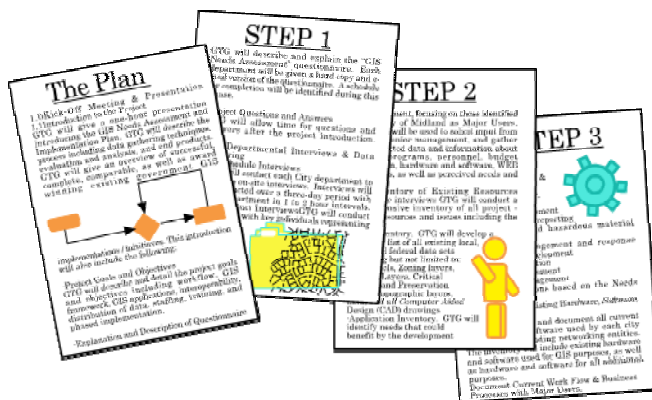
“This year’s real estate revenue collection process went much smoother than in the past, and I know that’s because the stakeholders are meeting and discussing the issues,” Jessen said.

When Virginia Beach retained GTG, they had a series of priorities beyond organizational structure they wanted addressed.

“Governance structure was our top priority, but we also asked GTG to make recommendations on emergency management, improving citizen accessibility to our services by making our Web services more focused on citizen needs, centralizing data services so users are all pulling the same information, and mobile GIS. That was a big one for us.”

The mobile GIS program will benefit Public Works, Utilities, Permits & Inspections, and Real Estate Appraisers.

As the senior statesman among GIS programs, Virginia Beach is often approached by other municipalities for advice.



“We do get lots of requests for onsite visits and to provide speakers for various users groups and we’re happy to share our experiences. But we know there’s plenty to learn from other organizations, too, who may have expertise in areas we don’t have much experience in.”

“The City of Richmond, for example, is big into asset management through GIS, and they’ve given us a lot of great advice. We’re more advanced in pictometry, so we’ve talked to them about that. And we have a well-developed parcel layer, so we’ve talked to the City of Norfolk about that. We really enjoy exchanging information with other agencies,” he said.

Not surprisingly, the one thing Jessen always advises other organizations to do is develop a strategic plan.

“I tell them to decide where they want to be in five years, and work back from there. Set reasonable goals and check them off as you reach them. I’m big on checklists; they give you a great sense of accomplishment as you make progress and it helps you track results, which builds confidence in the program.”

“Without a plan, GIS can be totally overwhelming. I completely understand that feeling,” he said.

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