

Fast-Paced Community Moves Toward GIS Forsyth County, Georgia

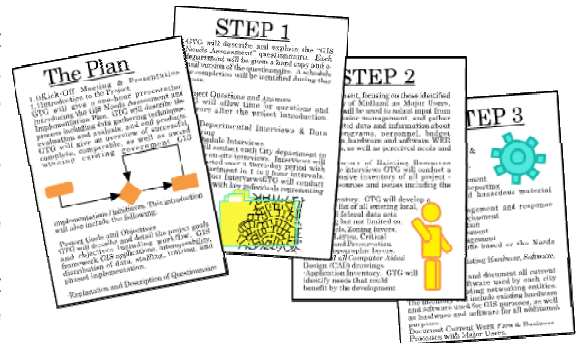


The key to success in Forsyth County, Georgia, lies in understanding one simple fact: life moves quickly there.

The county itself is the third fastest growing in the United States, thanks to an influx of affluent, well-educated, tech savvy residents from all of the country. They bring high expectations for county services that challenge officials to stay on the cutting edge.

But balancing the need to move quickly with the need to do things right can be equally challenging. Implementing the county's GIS program is a perfect example. Just a few short years ago, GIS was an emerging technology. Today's it's hard to find a department in Forsyth County not using GIS. GIS Manager John Kilgore came into the picture just as interest was beginning to sweep through the staff and immediately recognized it had the potential to spin out of control.

"Channeling the interest without dampening enthusiasm was a struggle," he said. "The questions started coming up about which department would drive the process and who would control the data and I could foresee turf battles derailing the project. So I pushed for an outside firm to come in and do a needs assessment and implementation plan and the commissioners agreed to it."



The County formed a selection committee, developed an RFP and sent it to seven GIS consulting firms. Geographic Technologies Group was one of three invited to make a presentation to the committee.

"David Holdstock and Curt Hinton came from GTG, and they connected with the selection committee in a way none of the other firms did," Kilgore said. "We really liked their seven steps plan and we felt like they would be able to best bring our department together and foster cooperation and teamwork. They brought more to the table than anyone else we interviewed, and they won the contract." GTG presented the needs assessment findings to the county commission, then worked with various county department managers to develop a three-year implementation plan.

Once the budget developed, the group went back to the commission for funding. "We had to go the commission three times before we finally got approval and funding. They were sold on the value of GIS, but it was a big financial commitment and they wanted to feel comfortable with the return on investment," Kilgore said. Ultimately, the plan was revised to a four-year schedule.

The first step in implementation was the installation of GISmo™ Web on 50 machines. GISmo Web is a desktop application based on ESRI's MapObjects™ technology that allows users to dynamically configure existing GIS data. "It is absolutely amazing all of the people who are using it, and all of the people who call me to get it installed," he said.

Public safety officers are among the most enthusiastic GISmo Web users. "The detectives in the sheriff's Criminal Investigation Department are frequent users. We had an incident recently where we had a rash of arson fires. The investigators were using it to put together their case. And the Fire Department is working on putting laptops in their vehicles so they can run pictometry images, which give them 12 images of each structure."

Kilgore expects that technology to be particularly helpful to SWAT teams responding to situations requiring extensive knowledge of geography and the layout of buildings. "Think of a hostage situation, for example. You couldn't tell from a simple aerial photograph that there might be a fence or wall surrounding a house. Now think how helpful it would be to know that, and to be able to see escape routes, other obstructions, surrounding woods, etc., in devising a rescue strategy."

Firefighters could measure the distance from a fireplug to a home or business and know how much hose would be required before they got to the fire.

"If they didn't have enough, they could have another unit bring more, rather than waiting until they got to the property and then calling. Every minute is critical in public safety situations and GIS technology saves time," Kilgore said.

GISmo Web allows parks and recreations managers to effectively evaluate their overall plans, to see where growth is occurring and where new facilities might be needed.

The Planning Department has set up kiosks for public use.

"People come in and look up property values, print out maps and answer a lot of their own questions, freeing our staff up for other responsibilities," Kilgore said. The planning staff uses the information to research zoning issues and provide quicker service to developers.

"Even our county commissioners are using GIS, for decision support and to resolve citizen complaints," he said.

"We recently did a review of the county's insurance coverage by overlaying the flood maps over the aerial photographs to see which insured properties were in the flood plain. We discovered some of our county buildings were actually outside the flood zone and our insurance premium was adjusted as a result."

In Forsyth County, GIS delivered something for everyone.

Commissioners have seen the return on investment they expected, county departments got the functionality they wanted and the whole process was completely quickly enough to satisfy even the most impatient users.

But the big winners were the demanding citizens of Forsyth County, who got state-of-the-art technology efficiently and economically, with no duplication of services. "We got the best of all worlds," Kilgore said.

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