

MetroGIS recommends 7 counties make geospatial data free and open

By Alan Palazzolo | 12/11/13

MetroGIS, a metro-area government-administered collaborative tasked with ensuring that geographical information systems (GIS) are used and shared effectively in the area, has formally made a recommendation to the Seven Metro County governments to make their public geospatial data freely and openly available to all.

The Minnesota Government Data Practices Act (often referred to as the DPA) is the set of legislation that defines how data that's managed or collected by government agencies in Minnesota are or aren't available to the public. It's fairly open in that it "establishes a presumption that government data are public and are accessible by the public," but then goes into many cases where data is not public for different reasons — such as privacy and security.

But even though the DPA has been updated many times since it was created in the 1970s, many things remain nebulous and open to interpretation, especially in the digital age where data can be reproduced exactly and delivered at little to no cost.



Research backs request

This is why the MetroGIS letter is such a big deal; an expertise-oriented government agency is formally requesting that the metro county governments provide their GIS data freely and open to all, and has the research to back the request.

Currently, the different counties in the metro (and all agencies across the state) have very different ways of providing GIS data, such as administrative boundaries, tax parcels, land use, transportation routes, and more.

Even though state law says the data is public (and even that is not always clear), it does not define how that data

can be obtained or how much the agency can charge for it. Some counties, like Clay County, make their data freely available to download on their [website](#), and have for years. Others, like [Ramsey County](#), have a fee-based system — like charging \$60 plus a per-parcel cost — while requiring an application.

In the [letter](#), MetroGIS requests that the governments “pursue and adopt policies which make its public geospatial data freely and openly available” and they define “free and open” specifically.

Free includes that “no monetary charge would be assessed to consumers for this data as it is made available in its native electronic format.” And open would mean that “data consumers would not be required to sign a license agreement to access or use the data, that they are able to share the data with other parties and there are no restrictions on their use of the data.”

Multiple benefits listed

The MetroGIS Policy Board, made up of metro area mayors, county commissioners, and more, [argue](#) that adopting such a policy would have the following main benefits:

- Saves money, as their research has shown that the practice of charging for data has not proven to be profitable.
- Data should be thought of as a public asset and therefore made more openly available to the residents that are being served.
- Increases transparency and shows a “willingness to provide good public service.”
- Promotes economic growth, especially in a “digital economy” where businesses depend on data such as this to make decisions.
- Allows for innovation; providing the data in the open and in open formats means that it is more accessible for anyone to use in novel and innovative ways.

There are definitely many who feel that opening up or making data more easily accessible has risks. The [75-page research report](#) that MetroGIS compiled before making an official recommendations addresses many of these concerns, including cost recovery, liability, and data source control issues.

Geoff Mass, the MetroGIS coordinator, says that with the support from the Policy Board and the other county-level GIS managers that participate in MetroGIS, he hopes the Letter of Support will drive some positive changes.

"I think this caught the attention of the policymakers, also, we tried to demonstrate a range of examples of private businesses, civic technologists, etc., making use of the data and we are working to demonstrate how Minnesota can get closer to the front of the pack and lead with data availability.

"I am trying in my outreach to demonstrate that creating a ‘data rich Minnesota’ is a triple bottom line benefit strategy: good government, good for business and good for civic action and advocacy work."

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