

Geography Matters: How GIS Will Make Things Better

By Ben Fousek

What is the purpose of the Vernonia GIS? That is a good question, and one that I have been asked more than a few times recently. Well, here's the answer. The Vernonia GIS is a data collection and analyzing system with two primary goals: first, to help the City of Vernonia to provide its citizens with more effective government, and secondly to help provide a more cost-efficient government.

Over the next year, the Vernonia GIS is going to be computerizing all permits and development applications the city uses to manage development here in Vernonia. Therefore, it seems the best example of how the Vernonia GIS can help to provide more effective government at less cost.

If anyone were to walk into City Hall and ask someone there to explain exactly how a certain kind of permit, say a permit for a new dwelling, makes its way from the initial application for the permit all the way through to final approval and occupation, at worst no one could tell you, and at best you would get an answer, but it wouldn't be the same answer that the persons before and after you received. Not because we don't have knowledgeable city staff, but because the process has never been completely delineated. In fact, it's safe to say that no two permit applications have ever made their way through the process from start to finish in the exact same way. This is not only unfair and inefficient, but it is costly. Just imagine how much more a car would cost if the assembly-line process was switched up for each vehicle produced. It wouldn't be efficient, nor would it be cost-effective.

So what makes a vehicle assembly line, or any manufacturing process, efficient and cost-effective? First, you have to have a plan; a well thought-out system that has been thoroughly scrutinized, and refined. Secondly, you need tools specially designed to help handle repetitive tasks, and perform the more complex operations of the plan that would be hard for a person to do the same way every time. You also need tools that manage the plan as a whole. These tools are especially important, because the overall management of the plan is the hardest part. Finally, you need people who know

their place in the system and can use the tools provided to produce a consistent, quality product. Now let's apply that same system to the permit process. The city government is the assembly-line, the Vernonia GIS is the tools and city staff are the people working together with a well thought-out plan to produce effective and efficient government.

This project is quite an undertaking, and it isn't going to happen overnight. The first big step is going to be coming up with a plan. In computer program development, it's called a work flow. This work flow is absolutely necessary for the Vernonia GIS staff to create the databases, computer programs and web-based applications that are the tools in our assembly-line of effective and efficient government. The first of many meetings have taken place, and were primarily brainstorming sessions with some of the parties involved.

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One of the issues that has caused some of the inefficiency within the permit and development application processes in Vernonia has been a lack of good communication

between all of the departments and individuals involved in these processes. Luckily, our above-average interim city administrator, Jim Johnson, and our new city planner, Carole Connell, are working to bridge these gaps. This project is part of that effort. As we work out who's responsible for what, and when in the process they are responsible for it, a lot of the communication problems will be resolved.

Another big issue is city staff spending large amounts of time performing repetitive and complex tasks better suited to a computer program, which can perform the same tasks instantaneously and without the possibility of error associated with some of the more complex aspects of handling permit and development applications. For example, if someone applies for a permit that involves a piece of land within a flood

zone, the permit must also go through the Flood Plain Development process. This happens to currently involve separate paperwork and someone has to look at a map and decide whether or not that particular property is affected or not. With a computerized system utilizing the geospatial capabilities of the Vernonia GIS, the permit or application would automatically be tagged for review as a Flood Plain Development the second the address or tax lot ID was entered into the system. No one has to even think about it. I'm sure anyone with an imagination could come up with a few more examples of how this kind of system could be more effective and cost-efficient.

Ultimately, coming up with the work flow process has two beneficial effects. First, the city will have that well thought-out plan for effectively handling permits and development applications from start to finish. Secondly, the Vernonia GIS will be able to use that plan to develop tools to help the city to provide you and all Vernonians with cost-efficient government.

In closing this month's article, I just want to say that no one is to blame for the inefficiencies of some of the city services, except maybe time itself. The world is rapidly changing. Things like building permits and development application processes are far more complex than they were even a few short years ago. The computer is as common as the telephone. Our lives revolve around the continuous flow of well-organized information and machines that can make complex decisions for us in an instant. So here we are, getting ready to apply these very modern ideas to the production of effective and cost-efficient government. What a great time to be in Vernonia! Next month, I will be discussing how a by-product of a database-driven permit and development application system will help city leaders make the best policy decisions when planning for the future. I sure hope you'll check it out.

Contributor's Note: The Vernonia GIS website will be down for a few weeks starting in a week or so due to hardware and software upgrades to the Vernonia GIS.

What's the Plan Stan? A Monthly Update on City Planning

By Seth Lenaerts

The Vernonia Planning Commission has been hard at work the last few months and has an ambitious docket for the rest of 2009. Many people don't realize the role and power that Planning Commissions have in the state and Vernonia. First off, it is important to understand that a commission is not a committee. Vernonia has many committees such as the Airport, Unmet Needs, Economic Development and Parks Committee. The committees primarily play an advisory role to City Council. The City's committees make recommendations to City Council, but it is up to Council to decide if it will act. Committees are a great informational resource to the Council and allow them to stay in touch with City issues. (If interested in volunteering for a committee, please contact Vernonia City Hall or check the city website: www.vernonia-or.gov).

The Planning Commission, unlike City committees, has the right to make certain decisions on its own and is generally more autonomous. The Vernonia Planning Commission has the authority to draft planning policy and ordinances with final approval made by Council. The Planning Commission also has the power to make decisions that have been delegated to them by City Council. A few examples of decisions that the Planning Commission makes are Flood Plain Development Permits, Conditional Use Permits, and subdivision approvals of lot lines. However, there. To avoid waste you should check in Planning Department changes to your property of any applicable. Yes, it can be inconvenient to go through a permitting process, but it's better to make a small change early on in the planning/building process than to have spent time and money on plans or equipment that are illegal in the City.

Who wants their single family home next to a loud factory, a 10-story building or a provocative establishment?

Flood Plain Development Permits, and determination the list doesn't stop time and money, with City Hall or the before planning any ty. They can inform permitting or regula-

I once had a conversation with an owner of a chain of coffee shops and I told him that I work in city planning. He said back to me, "Oh, I see, the people who always tell me what I can't do to my property."

It may sometimes seem like that, but rest assured that most building standards and regulations are a good thing. Consistent standards can help communities keep a certain feel or theme, such as Cannon Beach's beautiful downtown, or they can protect residential areas and the environment, i.e., who wants their single family home next to a loud factory, a 10-story building or a provocative establishment? Although it creates an extra step, going through the proper channels from the start will certainly save people time and money. Not to mention not doing something illegal.

The Planning Commission itself is made up of seven local volunteers. To be a member of the Planning Commission, one must apply and subsequently be appointed by City Council. The final person associated with the Planning Commission is a city staff member. Carol Connell is the City's consultant Planner and one of her responsibilities is to work with and assist the Planning Commission. Carol is responsible to help guide the Commission including answering questions, writing ordinances, researching past cases and clarifying language. Think of Carol as the administrative arm of the Planning Commission.

Since Carol began working with the City in November 2008, the council has been and

continues to work on an ambitious review of current ordinances. Primarily, the Planning Commission has been working on City Ordinance 711, which regulates development. This ordinance is commonly known as the City's zoning ordinance. Some of the more significant parts of the ordinance the Commission is reviewing are Flood Plain Development Permits and home occupations. Of course, some parts of the ordinance are not as exciting as others. Added credit goes to these people (and spectators like me who sat through it) for discussing fence standards for three hours.

Be sure to stay posted for more updates on the Planning Commission. Till next time, you don't have to be coy Roy, just listen to me.

You can reach Seth Lenaerts at seth@vernonia-or.gov

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