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County to go high-tech in 'smart' mapping

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Muskegon County government is on the verge of getting computerized "smart maps."

City and township governments, along with the computer-owning public, will eventually benefit from the same service.

Staffers in the Muskegon County Equalization Department have been developing a countywide "Geographic Information System" for the past few years. The system will be a computerized database of maps and information, blended together so users can order maps of specific areas of the county, with specific features identified.

For instance, when the GIS system is completely functional, a user could order a map of Holton Township, outlining land owned by the federal government, state government, township government and private citizens. Or a user could order a map of the locations of homes in a certain portion of Muskegon, showing which are owner-occupied or rented, and which are single-family or multiple family dwellings.

And the list of possibilities goes on.

County commissioners, after hearing an update on the GIS program last week, voted to allow the county's equalization department to apply for a \$50,000 grant to help pay for the continuing project, and hire a Traverse City firm to help the county develop the computer system.

So what's the value of having a countywide GIS?

It will greatly enhance the decision-making process for government officials, who will be able to view the areas where issues pop up, said Tom Van Bruggen, the GIS technician in the county equalization department.

It will also save government time and money, Van Bruggen said. For instance, a township may be preparing a change to a zoning ordinance, which requires mailed notices to people living within 300 feet of a certain area. That may require one person to figure out how many homes are within 300 feet, another person to find the names and addresses of those residents, and another to fill out envelopes and prepare a form letter.

With GIS, the computer would be able to instantly provide a map of the affected territory, along with the names of residents that must be notified and their addresses, Van Bruggen said.

County officials began planning the system about three years ago, after helping the city of Muskegon with development of its own GIS system. They've also been paying for aerial photographs of the entire county landscape to help develop the GIS system.

Now officials are in the process of converting the aerial photos, along with existing parcel tax maps, into the proper form for use in the GIS system. They will eventually be blended together to form the basis of the GIS maps.

Then a huge stream of data will be collected from various county departments and city and township governments to use with the maps.

For instance, the county health department may enter a list of addresses of county residents who have been given a flu shot. The county wastewater management system may enter the location of sewer lines. The city of Muskegon may enter the addresses of people who have been ticketed for not mowing their lawns.

Put all together, users will be able to order maps providing endless information about what's happening in the county and where it's happening, Van Bruggen said.

The system should be ready to go to some degree in 18 months, following the conversion of the aerial photos and parcel maps, Van Bruggen said. But it won't be fully functional until the two are integrated, probably in 2005 or 2006, he said.

Local governments who are joining the county in forming the Muskegon Area Geographical Information Consortium, will gain access to the system as they purchase the proper computer programs, according to Van Bruggen.

Part of the database will eventually be available over the Internet to the general public, although officials may decide not to post some of the information, Van Bruggen said.

The ability to keep some information out of the public eye will probably keep some commercial interests, including direct marketing businesses, from getting information that would probably benefit their efforts, he said.

While much information is available to the public through the state's Freedom of Information Act, there is no law that forces the count to put the information on a Web site for public consumption, Van Bruggen said. But it's far too early to tell how much information may or may not be offered for public examination, he said.