

NYS GIS Association Supports Open Data

The NYS GIS Association takes public positions on issues of direct importance to the State's geospatial community. We believe Open Data policy is of the highest importance.

The Open Data movement, especially as it relates to geospatial data, has as its essence the idea that making as much high quality geo-enabled information available to the public in open standards-based formats is of great benefit to individual communities and jurisdictions, all sectors of the economy, and to society as a whole.

Information is at the heart of government and business decision making, and drives most, if not all, operations that deliver goods and services to the public. Additionally, every individual has the potential to benefit from easy to use information required for day-to-day activities and planning purposes. Open and accessible data also makes it possible for individuals to correct errors and contribute content. As geospatial professionals, we understand that the unique powers of geospatial systems to assemble data on a common digital map, integrate and analyze that data, and produce information products for distribution; are a big part of information services.

Arguments have been made in the past, particularly by some in government, that providing open access to data could compromise security and is an inappropriate giveaway of a "good" created by taxpayer dollars. In fact, federal security experts concluded more than ten years ago that only a limited amount of sensitive data needs to be shielded from public distribution. Analysts have also determined that the money to be made by charging for data use does not come remotely close to paying the cost of data production and maintenance, and impedes data use by limiting access to only those who can afford it. Stifling the free flow of information sharply diminishes opportunities for government and business to derive value from widespread and uninhibited data sharing. In particular, business operations have many uses for quality data that cannot all be fully anticipated in advance and which should be left to "the market" to determine.

Geospatial technologies, and IT in general, are in the midst of a wave of innovation that encompasses smart phones and wireless communications, new generations of airborne and miniaturized sensors, cloud computing, mobile applications, data integration and communications, and predictive modeling, to name a few. At the same time, an increasing amount of geo-enabled data in compatible formats are being produced. Business and government leaders and entrepreneurs are increasingly creating new information services and spawning new businesses that take advantage of this combination of data and technology to satisfy the demand from a growing number of technology literate consumers and citizens. States, counties and municipalities that lock down their data are at an enormous disadvantage in this environment. In our opinion the benefits of a thriving information sector developing new products, creating jobs and generating taxable revenue streams significantly outweighs the money collected from selling data burdened with restrictions and administrative overhead. The NYS GIS Association wants to see New York State and all its counties and municipalities derive the greatest possible benefit from this new world.

In his recent webinar on Open Data (<http://www.nysgis.net/featured/professional-development-resources/>), State GIO Bill Johnson made a compelling case for Open Data and we are very pleased that New York State has taken such a progressive stance on this issue. Bill cited the case of Hennepin County, Minnesota (which is part of the metro area also including Minneapolis and St. Paul) where Randy Johnson, for decades a staunch supporter of charging fees for data, reversed his position and came out in support of Open Data. Randy said he recognized the benefits to government and business of making government data as widely available as possible. The Minnesota study that changed his mind can be found at <http://metrogis.org/archives/publications.aspx>.

The NYSGIS Association agrees with Randy Johnson and with Bill Johnson. The more data we can make accessible and freely available, the more value we will derive from it for the benefit of our communities and ourselves. Looking to squeeze nickels and dimes for data while limiting its ability to be shared is an archaic principle that needs to be retired. In the coming months, we hope to encourage elected officials still supporting fees for data to rethink their positions. We will also join with our colleagues in advancing the Open Data concept in any way we can.

This position paper was authorized and developed by the NYS GIS Association Board of Directors:

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