IS YOUR APPLICATION
REALLY ENGAGING?

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Local governments are developing public portals that enable easy access to GIS information through Web and mobile platforms. However, it is important to ensure that these apps are easy to use and engaging to the average citizen

National, state and local governments each provide citizens with a distinct variety of services. Of the three, local services like roadways, water mains, parks and recreation probably have the greatest material impact on our quality of life. Therefore, the information behind these services (asset location, attributes etc.) can be important for us.

This GIS information is professionally managed by in-house geomatic departments and supports an internal audience for planning and taxing purposes. Until recently, public access to this data was typically limited to static PDFs hosted on a website. The consumer mapping revolution, with its geo-enabled smartphones, mobile location-aware apps and free-to-use mashups, has not gone unnoticed by some local governments, who have released Web and mobile apps that serve as public portals to their GIS information.

Some apps are "web-ified" variants of internal GIS systems, which are powerful but not intuitive to the average citizen. They may require you to use a specific browser, or require the installation of esoteric plug-ins. You might have to wade through complex terminology or endure long waits as the app loads or refreshes the view. They might require you to agree to terms of service that would scare even Microsoft away.

I've mentioned in previous columns that the public need only one excuse, to abandon a mashup and head back to Facebook. These apps give them many.

The monopoly that local governments enjoy in their delivery and management of services denies them the necessary grooming to compete with private media for public attention. Their apps might be chock full of GIS information, but as we know from TV news, the public values "the look" first, "the delivery" second and "the information" last.

What should local governments do?

Let's consider the relationship between a farmer and a baker. The farmer raises hens, milks cows and harvests grain. Just because he harvests the ingredients to make a cake doesn't mean that he should actually bake one. That's what bakeries are for.

Local governments have proven themselves adept at managing GIS information to support their mandates. Each can serve its constituents best by acting as the "farmer" who supplies GIS information to local media and geo-enthusiasts, who then bake the cake (GIS information must be converted from proprietary "northings & eastings" to "latitudes & longitudes" and include a documented schema). These "bakers" have been groomed to function in a competitive marketplace, and understand how to reach out to and captivate an audience, as well as amplify the message through social networks.

Some cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Canadian cities such as Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, and Ottawa host portals through which the public can freely search for and download raw vector data. New York also sponsored a contest a while back and rewarded the author of the best app with cash and a lunch with the mayor!

Government can participate in the development of the apps by attending or sponsoring local user groups to share ideas and influence what is done with their GIS information. Another benefit to third-party involvement is that these "bakers" can supplement the GIS information with social and cultural activities, retail promotions etc., which offer the public a broader picture of "what's going on around town." If a local government tried to do this directly, they would effectively be competing with private media and diminishing the local advertising revenue base.