


Free and Open Public Geospatial Data


This fact sheet is modeled after findings on free and open data conducted by MetroGIS in 2013 to assist geospatial data users, policy makers, and elected officials understand the benefits of making non-sensitive, publicly-produced data freely available to the public. Today over 60% of Minnesota Counties provide open geospatial data access. The demonstrated benefits reported by data providers and users are listed below.

What are the benefits to a County Government in making its data open and freely available?


Transparency of government and improved public service

 *Making non-sensitive geospatial data publicly available helps demonstrate the transparency of government operations and a willingness to provide good public service; Geospatial data that is a byproduct of government business processes should be part of the public record;*


Better use of county staff time and resources

 *Publishing digital geospatial data in standardized forms for Internet download reduces County staff time required to process and manage numerous individual requests for data;*


Fostering entrepreneurship and open development

 *Private usage of public data is becoming integral to the development and advancement and growth of the of the 'digital economy'; better data availability enables businesses to make quicker decisions on investments and enhancements in the community;*


The authoritative data becomes the default 'norm'

 *Providing consistently available authoritative data ensures that all derivative products, maps, services, analyses and publications accurately reflect current conditions, including nationwide and commercial map vendors and direction services;*

Pro-actively meeting demand for data

 *The demand from the general public, private sector and other sectors of society for accurate and readily consumable data continues to increase along with availability of GIS tools and other analytical tools;*

Indirect Benefits and "Thinking Beyond The Horizon"

 *Making public data easily available in readily consumable format to a wide variety of audiences enables them to query and utilize the data in ways not in common practice, yielding new tools, applications, analyses and understanding.*

Q: Do county governments lose revenue?

Revenue from geospatial data is lower than might have been expected and continues to decrease. Costs incurred by business units to develop and maintain geospatial data to meet the needs of the larger organization and the public must be seen as strategic investments by the entire organization and treated as a long-term form of core infrastructure.

Organizations need to evaluate their associated costs from a broad perspective with the added understanding of the public benefits realized. Data fees limit the use of data to only those who can justify or afford the expense.

Q: Does making the data available open the county up to liability?

City and county governments in Minnesota are protected from liability for the geospatial data they produce under state statute (Chapter 466.03, Subd. 21) so long as they provide disclaimer language about what the data contains.

Q: Is this becoming a common practice in information technology?

Government agencies are increasingly freeing up their data for public use. Public data developed and funded to support internal business processes, subject to open public record laws, are increasingly forming the basis of core economic activities outside of government. Examples range from development of on-line map services, navigation systems, environmental work, planning and physical infrastructure management.

Key Themes

Transparency of Government Operations

Improved Public Service

Efficient Government

Ease of Data Access

Fostering Entrepreneurship

Staff Time Savings

The Authoritative Data Being Fully Available Becomes The 'Norm'

Sharing Local Authoritative Data with Nationwide and Commercial Map Vendors

Pro-Actively Meeting Public Demand and Expectations for Data

Improved Inter-Agency Work Relationships

Data is Infrastructure; Created to Serve the Greater Public Good

Faster Decision Making

Maximizing Public Investment