Finding holes in city property-managment system

By Brent D. Wistrom, The Wichita Eagle | 07.06.2009

IRE Uplink

TAGGED
database, Mapping it out, GIS, local government

Leave a comment

Every day, cities buy land to make way for parks, streets, sewer lines and flood plains. It's often more than they need. Sometimes they buy full lots in fairness to property owners who may not have use for the leftovers and sometimes they buy excess to prepare for future growth. In some cases, cities buy swaths of land for projects that may never happen. All these transactions can add up to hundreds of millions dollars worth of unused land, including worthless patches along highways and large plots of "conservation" land that developers covet. The Wichita Eagle found all these dynamics in a month-long investigation that exposed Wichita's lackluster property management system. The project involved Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, ESRI ArcView geographic information system (GIS) maps and Google Street View, which probably saved a hundred miles of driving and several days of reporting time. But the story could have easily slipped through. I started wondering about surplus property after seeing constant acquisitions and only infrequent sales on city council agendas. Officials never satisfied my questions as I prodded about property management. Then I found a story about how journalists at The San Diego Union-Tribune had obtained property records, analyzed them and exposed a mess in that city's land inventory. A later story outlined shortcomings in the city's property tracking system. Still, the idea had no obvious news hook, and it sat on a list of 'stuff I want to do' for nearly two years as the crush of more timely work tasked our shrinking staff. Then some pivotal

factors aligned. The economy tanked. The city's budget followed with a $7 million projected shortfall. City council members and other officials began looking for ways to cut costs and add income. Simultaneously, my editors wanted a data-heavy watchdog project to help meet our goal of giving readers more data they could search on their own on Kansas.com. A month of records requests, dead ends, data queries, mapping and feet-on-the-street reporting followed.

The Eagle's data guru, Hurst Laviana, and I hunted for a story that would explain how much land the city could likely sell and whether it even met the city's own property maintenance rules. We didn't get that story — though we may someday soon. Instead we found a roadblock that was a story in itself. We told readers the city's property management systems weren't sophisticated enough to answer the basic question of what could be sold. The story started like this: *"The city of Wichita owns more than 11,000 acres that include multimillion-dollar buildings such as City Hall, an overgrown wildlife preserve and small, oddly shaped plots worth as little as $10. But a disjointed records system leaves city officials and the public unable to quickly spot sellable land, say which department is responsible for upkeep or distinguish between parks, rights of way and corporate grounds the city holds title to as collateral for tax incentives, a weeks-long examination shows. The city also lacks a map of its properties, leaving some City Council members and the public with only a vague concept of what's out there."* Getting to that lede cost The Eagle $100 and a couple of weeks of reporting time. In a partnership with KWCH-Channel 12, the TV station requested the city's property database. Meanwhile, The Eagle worked with the Sedgwick County Appraisal Office to create a spreadsheet of all property owned by the City of Wichita and affiliated entities. That took about a week and cost $100. I scanned a dozen properties using Google Street View. The images are more than a year old, but they still provided an easy way to cancel out some assumptions at the outset. On the "vacant" land sat houses, parks, corporate headquarters and, occasionally, a vacant field. One plot of well-manicured ground literally sat in City Hall's backyard. We had hundreds of leads to follow. However, one big, undeveloped park in a low-income part of town stuck out.

It had been in the city's hands for decades. Promises to turn it into a youth driving range had disintegrated. A developer's lucrative offer got shot down after community outcry. The neighbors never forgot about the potential of the overgrown field. They said they had a community garden planned. The city had no idea. Its brand new

parks plan showed no major projects. We had our anecdote. We headed to City Hall. At first, the city's property management director tried to tell us everything worked as well as they needed it to. As we delved deeper, though, the defense weakened. In another interview, the new city manager acknowledged the problems. He had noticed them as well. He pledged to improve the system, and the city has since discussed off-loading some major properties – though the market remains down. Finally, we examined the value of all this land, and we talked to city officials about how it markets excess land. That opened another vein. There was little marketing, even of prime riverfront property, which is caught in a controversial deal with the local YMCA. We had all this, but it all seemed a bit abstruse for readers. We turned to Web tools and conversational writing. Our long-time crime and CAR reporter, Laviana had already taken the spreadsheets and poured them into ArcView. We fiddled with the layers, selecting different combinations of "vacant" and "park" land to find something that would demonstrate the vast city holdings without making it too dense to view in a PDF or online. Finally, we decided to only send "vacant" properties. We forwarded that to a graphic artist who created a map that popped the city-owned land out in bright colors. Next, I forwarded scores of Google Street View links to our photographers who fanned out to show readers key properties the city holds. Some looked almost identical to the Google snapshots, others had changed. A neglected office building in an industrial area had been torn down to make way for an elevated railroad, some well-kept lots had deteriorated and some locations had since become highway. The undeveloped park remained. Photographers built a slideshow out of several key sites. Laviana transferred the city property data to Caspio Bridge, an online service that allows us to quickly post searchable databases. We set it up to allow readers to search city-owned properties by street or by land use — golf course, parking lot, residential, etc. After finding a list of properties on a certain street, users can drill down on a single property to find its value, square footage and the name of any building that sits on it. With that, we had a package complete with a well-sourced story that included city officials acknowledging our findings. It included maps, a searchable database, photo slideshows, sidebars and Web links. Plus, we had video from our TV partners. It was enough to make editors happy, warrant a Sunday cover and draw dozens of comments, calls and e-mails from readers, city officials and real estate agents.