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Cattaraugus County, New York, Uses GIS to Make Accessible Its Real Property Information
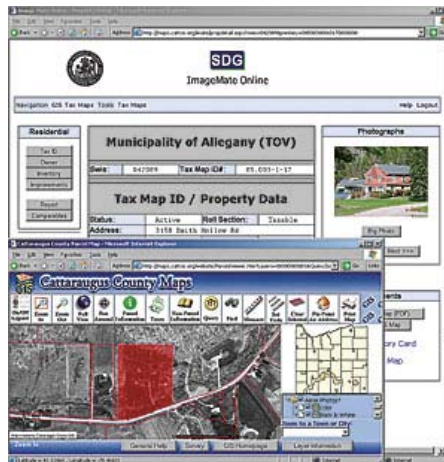
Cattaraugus County is a small rural county nestled in the foothills of western New York State (NYS), with roughly 50,000 parcels and a population of 80,000. Thirty-two towns, two cities, and thirteen villages make up the municipalities within the county. Tourists are drawn to the area because of the available skiing, parks and recreation, and casino gaming. Until 2002, the Office of Real Property (ORP) had little involvement with GIS. In fact, with the exception of only four departments, the county as a whole was not using GIS. Of those four departments that were utilizing it, only one had any real knowledge as to what GIS was capable of and was trying to help the other three.

This image shows the ability to go from one application to another. The highlighted parcel is the one whose information is showing. This is achieved by clicking on the Show GIS Map button within the Parcel Information site.

It was in that year that Nancy Barney, director of ORP, decided that a change was needed, and she created the position of GIS coordinator, then recruited Daniel T. Martonis to fill that slot. However, having no room in the ORP budget for GIS, Martonis sought a grant from the New York State Archives and Records grant program, which provided a perfect avenue to accomplish his task. In his $56,000 grant application, he explained that parcel records would be easier to obtain by the general public if they were online.

Good News

Cattaraugus County's ORP was awarded the grant, which provided the funds to obtain a license for ArcIMS; hire the services of Systems Development Group Inc. (SDG), an Esri Business Partner located in Utica, New York (www.sdgnys.com), scan paper surveys; and purchase SDG's ImageMate Online (IMO) application, as well as a server for hosting and a scanner for future survey scanning. SDG was selected after discussions of the possibility of merging the two online applications, ArcIMS and IMO. This was deemed possible, and it was exactly what Cattaraugus County was looking for and tied in well with the NYS assessors' Version 4 program, used by most NYS assessors to maintain their property information data. Together, ArcIMS and IMO became the basis for the county's Parcel Viewer Web site (www.cattco.org).
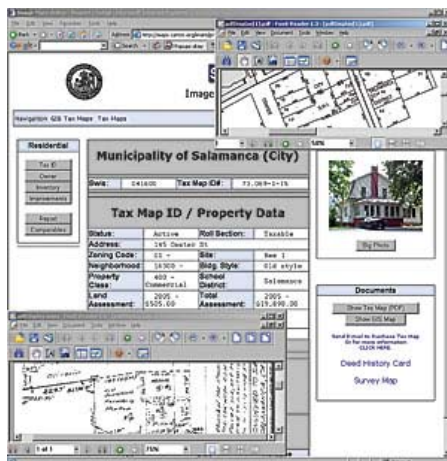
ArcIMS was used to create and host the interactive maps, while IMO was used to show almost all of the ORP data. ArcIMS was chosen because Esri products were the sole GIS products used throughout the county, so ease of implementation and interoperability were important. Also, the software had previously been used by Martonis at a former position, so his knowledge of the software was also considered. Another large factor for choosing ArcIMS was the ease of customization, as represented by custom buttons, colors, layer list, etc.

The ArcIMS mapping portion of the site shows parcel boundary lines, historic parcel lines back to 2000, recent and past sales, school and agricultural districts, aerial photos, 20-foot contours, oil and gas wells, wetlands, and more.

Currently, the IMO side of the site shows the old property record cards, owner information, assessments, surveys, PDF tax maps, photos of the property, and inventory. The information is pulled from the assessors' data on a weekly basis. This can happen because Cattaraugus County is in a Citrix environment. Citrix is an application that allows users to utilize most pieces of software over the Internet. Assessors sign into the Citrix application via the Web to maintain their data. Once they hit save, their data is available to be extracted and updated on the Parcel Viewer Web site.

This image shows a property's Real Property data along with a recorded survey and the tax map image.

Two special buttons were created for this site. One button allows the user to click on a parcel and see the current taxes that would be due by the owner of the parcel before any exemptions or special taxes are added on. Its function is to show the base taxes for a property. The other ties into the IMO application. When a user has that button activated and clicks on a parcel, it opens a new window showing all the real property information stated above. It is also important to note that the opposite is also true—a user can be in the IMO part of the Web site, click on the GIS button, and be taken to the ArcIMS Web site already zoomed in to that specific parcel with the parcel boundary lines turned on.

The Parcel Viewer Today

The site has been up and operational since April 2005. Since then, it has been visited by more than 46 different countries and has seen an average of 250 visitors per day. The ArcIMS portion undergoes an update on an average of once per month. New layers are added, old layers are updated, or changes are made according to public response. That response is obtained through an optional survey on the Web site.

The response from the public and private sectors has been overwhelming. The viewer has helped numerous citizens of Cattaraugus County along with many private businesses that previously would call ORP on a daily basis. Bankers, Realtors, insurance companies, rental agencies, etc., have all complimented the county on its forward thinking. Private citizens have stated that they use the viewer for anything from seeing if their inventory is correct on their property to making a topology map with aerials for their hunting land.

The call volume and the walk-ins to ORP have drastically decreased since the viewer went live. It's estimated that ORP has freed up an average of two hours per day by not having to handle those phone calls and walk-ins. This time is now used on other ORP tasks.

Other County Mapping Web Sites

By obtaining the ArcIMS software and hiring a GIS coordinator, the county now has the ability to greatly expand its online GIS presence. So far, two more viewers have been created and two more are currently in the beta stages of development.

The voting/polling location viewer allows users to input their address, pinpoint their location, then see where they should vote and what district they are in. Ease of use by the general public was a priority for a viewer such as this; that's why it was developed as a simple HTML viewer.

The other new online viewer is used to locate areas for mosquito spraying. This viewer was developed so citizens can see exactly where the county is spraying that year. If a resident's location is within the spraying area, then the individual can request that the spraying area be moved. This viewer implements aerial photography for ease of viewing and was also developed as a simple HTML viewer.

Two more viewers are currently in their beta stages. The tourism viewer is being built from the ground up as a frameless HTML viewer focused on tourism GIS data. This is possible through the hiring of a full-time Web and coding specialist. The school viewer will be built for prospective residents who wish to see information about a school before moving into the county. Pictures, data, locations, and other information will be available through this site.

Through the use of GIS, multiple departments are communicating with one another more and are taking advantage of the county's online capabilities.

For more information, contact Daniel T. Martonis, GIS coordinator, Cattaraugus County (tel.: 716-938-9111, ext. 2324; e-mail: dtmartonis@cattco.org), or visit www.cattco.org/real_property/gis.