

Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission Information Resource Exchange Group

Highlights from meeting of Wednesday, March 7, 2012

The 82nd meeting of the Information Resources Exchange Group (IREG) took place on Wednesday, March 7, 2012 at DVRPC. Twenty six people were in attendance. The counties of Bucks, Burlington, Delaware, Gloucester, Montgomery and Somerset participated, as well as representatives from DVARP, ESRI, PennDOT, PIDC, SEPTA, the Millbrook Group and the U.S. Census Bureau. Highlights from the December 7th meeting were available as a handout and on the internet.

Presentation

“Pennsylvania 511”

Jay Sengoz from the ITS Division, Traveler Information and Special Projects at PennDOT gave the group an overview of the statewide travel information system. In July 2000, the FCC reserved 511 as a nationwide telephone number for ITS traveler information. In August 2005, The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) was signed into law by President Bush. Subtitle B, Section 1201 of SAFETEA-LU mandates that every state establish a real real-time system management information program by September 2009, to provide the capability to monitor traffic and travel conditions of major highways. Pennsylvania's statewide 511 launched on September 1, 2009. In addition to PennDOT's Variable Message Boards and Highway Advisory Radios, PA 511 is another traveler information tool.

There are two components to 511. The phone component uses eight calling regions where callers are directed based on their location. This service is voice-activate, with no need for numbered options, making the service hands free. The same information is also accessible via the online component, by email subscription, and text message alerts (with selectable time frames). Real-time traffic flow data— where you can visually see road closures and traffic disruptions— is provided on an interactive color-coded 'speed' map using live cameras, current weather, and scheduled traffic generators (like sporting events and concerts). Users are encouraged to use the service beforehand, to have their passenger make the call, or to pull over and not use the service while driving.

PA 511 receives its data feeds from the PennDOT Road Condition Reporting System (RCRS) GIS software and tracking system, which is also used by their Traffic Management Centers, so all incidents are verified before entered into the system. Similar data comes from the PA Turnpike, and a subcontractor (INRIX) which provides real time traffic flow data, speeds, and travel times. Weather comes from National Weather Service data feeds. 511 has speed data for over 500 miles of roadway. During emergencies, PA FEMA activates Area Command, where in addition to PennDOT, information is shared with State Troopers, federal FEMA, and county emergency management agencies.

In addition to doing presentations like this, PennDOT is trying to raise public awareness of this free resource using brochures, road signs, online ads, and social media. A mobile website (www.511PA.mobi) is being tested, and apps for the iPhone and Android devices will be launched in June 2012.

Discussion

We decided to revisit the Web Mapping discussion, since it has been a while and many new developments have taken place with this technology. Chris Pollard from DVRPC led the discussion, and started off by reviewing a number of technologies being used by DVRPC, and the recently updated online mapping webpage. The ability to do analysis without a local GIS software is a high priority, especially as people become more familiar with services like Google Maps. DVRPC's latest strategy is to develop many, lightweight applications that help users get in and get the data they are looking for quickly. Additionally, DVRPC will be exploring creating a dashboard, that helps geographically tie all of the lightweight applications together.

Some agencies have expressed concerns since the goals of the data generators can be very different than that of the IT Department, which is responsible for deploying online mapping applications, and that many IT people lack the GIS expertise needed to properly deploy solutions. Much of this could be due to the fact that a graduate with a Computer Science degree generally has no knowledge of GIS. It was noted that with services like ArcGIS.com now, GIS people can easily put data into the cloud, and use their free web service to display your map, without much interaction with their IT people. There seemed to be a common theme where most counties are using online GIS but not to the full extent that they can, due to limited staffing resources or having too many competing responsibilities. Another challenge is for the early adopters who developed in Adobe Flex, which is a Flash-based technology that is not supported by Apple products, such as the iPhone and iPad. When applications no longer work on new phones, staff need to learn new skills and redevelop their applications in a more open-source environment that should support the majority of browsers and mobile devices. This takes time, which is limited, as the industry and technology is constantly evolving. Also, due to constant improvements in technology, the idea of "set it and forget it" doesn't work with online mapping applications. They need to be constantly revised, constantly improved, and that is not something most want to deal with in an already stretched resource environment.

In the future, DVRPC plans to continue to collect data for the 28-County Extended Data Service Area. Since we are already collecting data and building applications for ourselves, there is little effort to simply add additional datasets for planning in our communities on the edge of the DVRPC region. Tracking users using tools like Google Analytics is a great way to see if people are using the web applications you are building, and if it is worthwhile to continue to dedicate resources to maintaining it.

Member Updates

- Census Bureau : Geographic Support System (GSS) Initiative brochure was made available, and partnerships are being considered for targeted address canvassing to help with the 2020 Census.
- In 2012, DVRPC has switched to an online distribution of Board meeting materials, as a way to save costs and improve access to information.
- DVRPC 2010 Land Use is about 97% complete.
- The Region-Wide GIS project is planning meetings for FY 2013.
- Upcoming events announced include PhillyTechWeek (April 23-28), the PA GIS Conference (May 22-23), and the MAC URISA Conference (October 22-24).
- The next IREG meeting is scheduled for June 13 at DVRPC, with the following meeting taking place at SEPTA on September 9.