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A Seat at the Table

By Bob Samborski, GITA Executive Director

Recently, I received an invitation to attend a “Future Directions Forum” of the Federal Geographic Data Committee (FGDC) in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the forum was to solicit perspectives regarding the vision of the National Spatial Data Infrastructure (NSDI) and to “begin to work together as a geospatial community to identify goals for the NSDI.”

It was an interesting session. Representatives from the Mapping Science Committee of the National Academy of Science and leaders from various associations, together with FGDC staffers, offered comments and opinions on a gamut of issues surrounding the NSDI. Some excerpts:



Samborski

“What is it? It doesn’t brand well...”
“We need to step back and out, because so many of us have been in this so long...”
“Who is going to build it? Who is going to use it?”
“It does exist—stop building it and start using it!”

Get the idea? After how long—10 years?—people who have been directly involved with the NSDI are still struggling with the concept, the vision, the purpose, and ultimately, the deliverable that is, or should be, the NSDI. If it’s fair to say that there is some criticism out there for the lack of sufficient progress in completing the NSDI, it must also be said that this is one complex, hairy, mammoth project. And, progress has indeed been made, although not every “community” in the vast universe of communities identified by FGDC would agree.

FROM THE INSIDE

I think most of the criticism of the NSDI to date is related to frustration with the length of time and lack of meaningful, tangible, useful results from dealing with massive, immovable objects. It reminded me of the discussion the Road Information Administration Center (ROADIC) Task Force had with several of our colleagues in Japan—the “top-down versus bottom-up” approach. While we marveled at some of the infrastructure and data integration that was present in the ROADIC system, we also noticed obvious omissions. At the expense of having a less-than-complete system, the Japanese have something that works and provides benefits daily. It could absolutely be better, more inclusive and more effective, but it does work well: the “bottom-up” approach. The NSDI is a “top-down” effort that, when completed, will theoretically be very inclusive and complete, but how long is it going to take, and what happens in the meantime? The Japanese expressed admiration for this method and acknowledged its advantages. The ROADIC Task Force looked at Japan’s very practical, albeit limited, method and definitely appreciated its advantages. Why can’t we do both—“top-down” and “bottom-up” at the same time—and meet in the middle?

A Major Role to Play

I was impressed with the fact that the FGDC leadership is open to stakeholder feedback (that’s why we were all there) and that they admitted that not all the stakeholders were at the table. There are many serious challenges and issues in the road ahead, but there is an acknowledgement that these can be overcome with more good ideas. “The FGDC can’t put together the broad-based political support on its own,” one participant said. “We need leadership from industry.” Recall that, according to the National Response Plan commissioned by the Department of Homeland Security, 85 percent of the nation’s infrastructure is “owned, operated, and maintained” by the “private sector”—and that includes utilities—and you get the feeling that GITA and its constituents have a major role to play. Indeed, we are being asked to help.

So, in the spirit of a sincere discussion about everyone talking to each other, and having a forum for regular interaction and information exchange, I raised an old ghost: GIS/LIS. Say what you will about that conference, it was—and unfortunately remains—the only real forum in which utility representatives and engineers could cross paths with academicians and surveyors, or where assessors and public works practitioners could interface with telecommunications professionals. In addition, the five

associations that sponsored the GIS/LIS conference series kept in close touch through regular meetings of their executive directors. As a result, many other ideas besides the conference were discussed. That doesn't happen any more.

In the FGDC meeting, I mentioned that we may have given up on GIS/LIS too early, and there was general agreement from several in attendance. Here we are, all trying harder than ever to bring the geospatial community "together," six years after the demise of GIS/LIS. I wondered what the impact of having such a homogenizing issue of "homeland security" would have had upon GIS/LIS had it survived beyond September 2001.

On the other hand, we also concluded, now is probably not the best time to introduce—or reintroduce—another GIS/LIS-like conference, given the lingering general economic malaise and corresponding declining conference attendance across the board. However, maybe it doesn't need to be a conference per se that gets us back together; maybe a forum in the style of the Geospatial Leadership Coalition (GLC) would suffice. GITA would certainly be willing to expand the GLC's scope and mission to include any such FGDC initiative. The

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I would like to unfurl the following idea: GITA should create FLAG—the Federal Liaison Advisory Group. FLAG would be GITA's interface to the FGDC, the Department of Homeland Security, the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency—and any other federal entity for which communicating and working together with electric, gas, water and wastewater, pipelines, public works organizations, and telecommunications companies is important and desirable. In that context, FLAG's most important initiative would be the furthering of the association's National Geospatial Initiative for Critical Infrastructure Protection (NGI-4-CIP). This initiative, evolving as a by-product of our GLC experience and given impetus, focus, and direction through the ROADIC Study

Mission to Japan, is shaping up to be how GITA contributes to our collective national homeland security challenges, protecting our vital infrastructure assets and preventing as much accidental damage to our underground facilities as possible. We should also add

to that ambitious list assisting the federal government in building the National Spatial Data Infrastructure, the NSDI.

The day following the Future Directions Forum, I attended a meeting of the FGDC Coordination Group, and gave a presentation on our ROADIC Study Mission last November. Past GITA President Dave DiSera, who has been serving as the team leader for the NGI-4-CIP also briefed the group on other GITA efforts in this area. Al Stevens, FGDC and GSDI international program coordinator, who was chairing the meeting on behalf of Ivan DeLoatch, staff director, urged that GITA become more involved and a regular participant at FGDC Coordination Group meetings, an invitation that we intend to accept most gladly.

We now have a seat at the table. Let's make sure we are all well served.