

2014 Washington GIS Conference – Panel Session

Title

They'll Stone You When You're Trying to Build Your GIS: The Multidimensional Role of the GIS Coordinator

Presenters

David Howes, Jason Eklund, Chris Owen, Jennifer Radcliff, Matt Stull, David Wallis

Abstract

Maybe your boss quit. Maybe you applied for the job. Or, maybe the workload just grew to the point where the position was necessary. One way or another, you became a GIS coordinator in a public agency. So what's your story? What are the characteristics that helped you be successful? If you could start again, what advice do you wish you'd been given? What difference does it make if your GIS operation is a separate entity as opposed to being part of, say, an IT department?

There are many questions one could ask of a GIS coordinator and in this panel session you'll have an opportunity to ask and answer some yourself. To get you started, five GIS coordinators from different types of agencies and different parts of Washington State will share their experiences and the nature of their roles, especially as they relate to communication. For example, they often have to sell the benefits of GIS to other departments. They have to apply the appropriate technology to represent and express the state of spatial phenomenon. In addition, they have to help ensure that participants in their projects keep each other informed in such a way that they can, collectively, be as successful as possible. Please join us for what will certainly be an engaging and informative conversation.

Proceedings Entry

The idea behind the GIS coordinators panel session was to bring together a diverse group of coordinators from around the state and provide a forum through which they could discuss their professional experiences and provide helpful suggestions to their audience. The following topics were selected for the session:

- GIS department structure and location;
- Why good documentation and procedures are important;
- Marketing GIS to your agency;
- Maturation process of a GIS program/department.

After the coordinators had introduced themselves, each topic was addressed in turn. Audience members were then given an opportunity to contribute to the conversation and the session concluded with closing comments. The corresponding slides are quite self-explanatory so there is little need to repeat what they say. It may be helpful, however, to give consideration here to some of the general themes that emerged from the session as well as to some background details.

The role of the GIS coordinator is truly a multidimensional one, hence the session title, and in addition to the core technical aspects, the administrative requirements of the position are significant, with a heavy emphasis on project management and professional relationship building, both of which are, of course, strong communication mechanisms. The coordinators supported their comments on these and various other aspects of their roles with many pieces of positive advice, including references to helpful resources such as the *GIS Management Handbook* by Peter Crosswell. The importance of thorough and

effective planning was strongly recognized and when done well tends to yield many positive benefits. For example, the process of creating a strategic plan helps the author of the plan think through what is required for their organization, what is feasible given the available resources and who would benefit from the plan through their involvement in the planning process, their role in implementing the plan and/or their position as a general beneficiary. Collective involvement encourages collective ownership of GIS data and operations and, thus, enhances the likelihood of positive outcomes, both materially and fiscally and Chris Owen's achievement in setting up the City of Walla Walla GIS and demonstrating an annual ROI of \$92,000 per year is particularly compelling in this regard. Once developed, a strategic plan becomes a valuable marketing tool, as Jason Eklund found at Kittitas County. In a similar vein, Matt Stull's GIS Newsletter and GIS Day activities along with David Wallis' advice to "be visible" are central to promoting the value of GIS and thereby helping increase the overall effectiveness and success of a GIS operation as well as the entire organization.

We have Jennifer Radcliff to thank for suggesting the section on documentation, another key communication mechanism which is, sadly, sometimes overlooked within organizations. Yet, its importance cannot be understated for many reasons. For example, developing good documentation enhances efficiency, it provides insurance against the loss of institutional knowledge and it provides protection in the event of enquiries of any nature.

By way of background, the inclusion of GIS department structure and location as a core topic in the session partially evolved from a discussion about the influence of where the GIS coordinator is or was located within an organization as they began to fulfil their role. The basis for the discussion was a set of comments by Leonard Mlodinow in his book "Subliminal," related to group dynamics and the subconscious tendencies of individuals to support groups of which they are a part more strongly than they may realize and, occasionally, not necessarily in their best interests. In the local authority GIS realm, therefore, one could ask whether it's more difficult to be successful as the GIS coordinator for the organization if you start out in, say, the public works department, as opposed to, say, the IT department or the appraiser's office. Clearly, there are many variables that govern the success of a person, role or operation, but questions such as this one are definitely worth thinking about. Indeed, they provide a strong motivator for the shift away from the purely technical subject matter typical of a GIS conference towards other topics that are of considerable importance within the GIS profession and can, often have far greater bearing on the success of a GIS operation than the technical aspects ever could. On that note, the question of group dynamics ties into another conversation that emerged at the conference on "turf wars," perhaps most commonly involving GIS and IT staff or departments. Regardless of how explicitly they were able to account for their accomplishments, all of the coordinators participating in this session were able to report admirable success in overcoming such barriers to progress through their application of good communication skills and primary focus on relationship building. On a lighter note, David Wallis has the unusual position of being director of both a GIS department and a separate IT department and can certainly teach us a lot about the value of having positive conversations with yourself.

For all of us involved in this session, it was a particularly positive experience and the audience response appeared to be similarly favorable. We will, therefore, do our part to facilitate and encourage similar activities at future conferences and help others in our profession as best we can.

Presenter Details

David Howes

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Job Title: Geospatial Information Scientist

Agency and/or Department: David Howes, LLC

Biography: David specializes in the development of GIS tools, processes and supporting infrastructure for a variety of clients from small operations to multinational corporations (www.dhowes.com). With 23 years of academic and private sector experience in the UK and US, including an M.Sc. in GIS from the University of Edinburgh and a Ph.D. in Geomorphology from SUNY Buffalo, David's background is well-suited to developing innovative solutions to spatial problems. He is the founder of the Lone GIS Professional Initiative, helping GIS professionals working on their own or in small groups to help each other, and is a Washington URISA Board member.

Jason Eklund

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Job Title: GIS Coordinator

Agency: Kittitas County

Biography: Jason Eklund, has a B.S. in Natural Resource Management with a minor in Spatial Information Systems Management from Colorado State University. He worked for the Oregon Water Resources Department for 8 years in GIS application development and database design and has been Kittitas County's GIS Coordinator for the past 7 years. Jason has recently become a foster parent and likes to spend his summers in his canoe or RV with his wife of 16 years and 8 year old son.

Chris Owen

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Job Title: GIS Supervisor

Agency and/or Department: City of Walla Walla, Technology Services/GIS

Biography: Chris Owen, GISP has a B.A. in Geography from the University of Washington and an M.S in Information Technology Management from Colorado Technical University. Chris started working in the GIS private sector in 1996, and began working in the public sector in 2000. Chris began working for the City of Walla Walla in 2002. Chris and staff support all of the GIS activities for the City of Walla Walla, including database design, application development, mobile GIS and system integrations. Chris has 3 kids, bikes to work, coaches, and loves to travel.

Jennifer Radcliff

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Job Title: GIS Coordinator

Agency: Port of Tacoma

Biography: Jennifer Radcliff, GISP, has a B.S. in Geography with a secondary major in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences (NRES), and an M.A. in Geography, both from Kansas State University. She has been getting paid to use GIS since 1996, working mostly for local governments in Kansas, Colorado and Washington. Jen enjoys variety, and has worked on everything from database design and data creation for assessor's offices, to analysis for Emergency Management, to application development for

Planning. She has also worked on multiple enterprise solutions. Jen is currently the GIS Coordinator for the Port of Tacoma.

Matt Stull

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Job Title: GIS Coordinator

Agency: City of Tumwater

Biography: Matt Stull, GISP, has a B.S. in Cartography and a B.S. in Geography, from the University of Idaho. He also holds a Master's certificate (MSc) in GIS from Simon Fraser University. He started his GIS career in 1997 with a startup software company in Oakland, CA. Later, he moved to the Puget Sound area where he has worked for: Genwest Systems, ESM Consulting Engineers, Mason County and the City of Tumwater. He has extensive experience working with GIS in City and County Government, especially in the areas of public works and 911. Matt is a native of Astoria, Oregon.

David Wallis

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Job Title: IT/GIS Director

Agency and/or Department: Cowlitz County

Biography: David Wallis, GISP, graduated Magna Cum Laude with Honors from Western Washington University with a B.A. in Technical Writing. He began his GIS career in 1994 with Cowlitz County and holds the IAAO CMS (Certified Mapping Specialist) designation. He is a certified National Instructor for IAAO, teaching mapping and GIS courses around the U.S. and legal description courses for the WA State DOR. David has been married for 27 years and has the 4 best kids on the planet. He enjoys producing music in his recording studio, collecting Disney items, reading classic literature and spending time with his family.