METRO

Technology letting cities put more info online for residents

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Last September, Don Durance sat in front of a computer and completed a project in 15 minutes that normally would have taken him hours.

There had been sporadic power outages in his Novi subdivision, and DTE Energy wanted to take down a few trees. In order for the trees to be cut down, Durance, a board member for the subdivision's homeowners association, needed to know who owned the property and any easements on the land where the offending trees stood.

Rather than pore through property records and match them to a location on a map, Durance used the city's interactive mapping system — made public for its residents in May 2010 — to figure it out with the click of a mouse.

"It's just excellent information," he said. "I would have had to guess on the easements."

In recent years, more communities in metro Detroit have given their residents access to scores of information about city services and assets using geographic information systems (GIS). The technology is often used by municipalities, universities and other types of institutions to visualize information using maps.

Communities such as Southfield, Novi, Shelby Township and Sterling Heights have used the system internally for years to have quick access to information such as the location of water mains. The visual representation — dots or lines on a map that, when clicked, give information — helps everyone from public health officials mapping outbreaks to residents such as Durance learning about their homes.

Rather than calling or visiting city offices to have an employee look up information, people can take a platform of a basic map and look through layers of data, such as their house, or where parks or schools are located. Then, they can work within the map to find, for example, how much they owe in taxes, where their property lines are, what park nearest them has tennis courts, or for house-hunting, whether a house is in the neighborhood of a desirable elementary school.

Although residents seeking tax information seem to be the most popular users of the system, residents aren't the only target users, said Sally Price, GIS coordinator for the City of Southfield. If someone is looking to move a business into town, he or she can easily see things such as zoning information, and who owns a certain parcel and use that information in approaching the city about doing business as opposed to coming to the city first to get that information.

"I sort of call it 'bringing the city to you'," Price said.

As the cost of operating the GIS system has decreased, and the ability to store information online rather than on hard drives has prevented large infrastructure costs, municipalities have decided to put their information out there, but they aren't the only ones.

Loveland Technologies created a GIS-based map at whydontweownthis.com in time for the Wayne County Foreclosure Auction last fall, outlining available parcels of publicly owned land in Detroit, and with a click of the mouse, giving information to bidders.

Now at the website, visitors can zoom in on a Detroit ZIP code, and within seconds, see a web of city, state and county-owned properties with images. Click on the property dot, and an application to buy it appears.

Loveland Technologies Creative Director Jerry Paffendorf said one of the company's goals is to take the idea of 45,000 vacant properties, and demonstrate it visually so that everyone, from city officials to neighborhood groups to entrepreneurs, can tackle Detroit's land-use issues in workable chunks.

"We're generally trying to make the city understandable and investable," he said. "I don't know how Detroit is going to attract residents and investors without becoming a lot more transparent."

Michael Healander, a GIS manager who has helped local governments set up the system, was at a recent Shelby Township board of trustees meeting in which public works officials were trying to use the system to track water mains, with the idea that other departments, perhaps parks and recreation or elections, can use the platform for things the public wants to see.

The $30,000 price tag to make the system more user-friendly and update it was a little much to some of the trustees, especially township clerk Stanley Grot, who said the township couldn't really spare the money.

But in the end, the trustees agreed to the purchase, and Healander got their signed contract this week.

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> **SALLY PRICE**, graphic information systems coordinator for the City of Southfield on the information now available online