

10/2/2012

Maps plus IT equal GIS

When people ask Joe Merritt about his livelihood, to keep it simple and get the conversation going he tells them he does computer mapping.

Merritt gave a presentation in September at an industry conference in Columbus. In his talk, he reviewed how rural Clinton County has amassed a large number of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) data sets, and how the county's **GIS** data library is made available to the public at large.

Merritt is the only **GIS** manager Clinton County has had, a position he's held for more than 13 years. Prior to that, he was a consultant in the field, beginning in the late 1980s.

"Many people use our data and have no idea where it came from, which frankly I think is good," he said in a recent interview at his first-floor courthouse office. The people he referred to include all those who own a GPS navigation system and have traveled to Clinton County.

Usually that local GPS data came from the Clinton County **GIS** office, he said.

His clients, however, go far beyond motorists. They include every department within Clinton County government, in particular the engineer's office, the auditor's office and the tax map office, said Merritt.

He works for the departments in a support role, he said, "exactly where I need to be."

The consumers of his Information Revolution product also include local residents in search of family genealogy material.

At a budget planning meeting last week involving the three county commissioners and Clinton County Engineer Jeff Linkous, the engineer said companies looking at the county as a prospective place to locate or expand also use the Clinton County **GIS** website.



News Journal photo/Gary Huffenberger Clinton County Geographic Information Systems Manager Joe Merritt looks at a digital terrain model of a leg of the Lytle Creek Greenway in Wilmington.



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“It helps when someone is looking at Clinton County and they see the data we have, it helps them decide, it helps them plan, which hopefully helps them want to relocate here,” said Linkous, who was discussing with commissioners the 2013 funding requests from the local tax map and **GIS** offices.

“We like getting that information out there, whether it’s the air park, the northwest part of the county, southern part of the county, we’ve got data and information on all of it,” he said.

Linkous’ comments were in response to a question from first-year Commissioner Kerry R. Steed, who asked whether the need for a county **GIS** office — and thus a **GIS** budget — is ongoing.

The county engineer added that his office and the county auditor’s office are made more efficient by having a county **GIS** staffer, saying he couldn’t think of one county governmental department that does not benefit from **GIS** services.

Clinton County Administrator Mark Brooker, who is facilitating the preliminary budget meetings, volunteered that “a lot of realtors” utilize **GIS** services, too.

It was pointed out the county’s **GIS** office is funded from a user fee on local property transfers and not from General Fund dollars. The fee is \$2 per \$1,000 of a transaction.

Some of the geographic details available on the **GIS** website is, well, “very cool,” said Merritt.

“A person can look at a tax map from 1876,” he said as an example.

An everyday way to describe Clinton County **GIS** is to say it’s collected and stored “a ton of data,” said Merritt. A more formal and technical way to characterize the accomplishment is to state the county has amassed a large number of **GIS** data sets, and that stored in the current **GIS** data library is more than 900 data layers, he said.

“Through the clever use of publicly consumed web pages, an in-house data access web page, and a simple Microsoft Access database, anyone can sift and sort all of our data to drill down to just the layer they are interested in,” said Merritt.

If somebody does have a question how to specifically find what he or she is looking for, Merritt said to email him and he will be happy to help: merrittjoe@hotmail.com.