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Gazetteers: Whose Responsibility?

Within the United Kingdom recently, gazetteers have come to the fore as important requirements for a myriad of GIS applications. Many land and property systems must be able to relate spatial position, in the form of grid references, to more commonly used indexing systems, particularly street and feature names, postcodes and ownership records.

While many organisations, including some local authorities and utilities, have established their own gazetteers, the publications typically only meet the needs of particular applications for which they were designed. There are no commonly adopted standards for their format and no generally accepted method of collecting and maintaining such data to facilitate data exchange.

A Common Cause

The need for both a national street gazetteer and a land and property gazetteer requires coordination amongst all the agencies that would support and benefit from such comprehensive data sets. The question is who is responsible for facilitating such developments? Clearly, there is a case for central government support, both practical and financial. But in the present climate, much of the direction and control has been left to various interest groups, each with its own particular requirements, to address current needs.

The demand for a national street gazetteer has been growing rapidly. The creation of a gazetteer is implicit in recent government legislation, such as the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991, which requires the establishment of a Computerised Street Works Register. The proposed national Pavement Management System is another inventory system that will require a comprehensive street gazetteer to function properly in a GIS environment.

Progress toward a gazetteer has been led by the Local Authorities Association's National Street Gazetteer Working Party. The group is striving to define a specification that will uniquely identify the complexity of objects contained in the street and highway network across the country, at a level which will be understandable and usable by all interested parties.

Although the initiative has been supported on the whole, there are serious concerns. The specification must avoid ambiguity in the definitions used and in the methods adopted for creating the gazetteer. Questions have been raised over how to ensure that the 400 or so local authorities implement and maintain a gazetteer. Also, which group acts as the coordinating body with responsibility for quality, accuracy and currency? Legislation has been suggested as the only mechanism to answer these questions and guarantee a fully functional national gazetteer, but legislation needs support, particularly financial, if it is to be effective.

More worrisome is the view that any gazetteer should be self-financing. This approach is not without pitfalls. A national street gazetteer could fall foul of the same problems confronted by the Ordnance Survey as it strives to provide a comprehensive, but affordable, digital large-scale base map of the country. The concerns must be of a limited specification based on immediate needs at a cost that precludes widespread usage. Initially, some form of central funding could be used to create what would become a self-financing national resource. The alternative is that the finance, and thus the control, will come from those with the ability to pay the set-up costs.

A working party also has been set up to consider the specification for a national land and property gazetteer. The party is supported by the Geographic Information Advisory Group (GIAG) established by the local au-

thority associations with the support of the Local Government Management Board (LGMB). The party's membership is drawn from local and central government and organisations with a key interest in GIS development. The group's first steps are to assess the approaches currently adopted for existing gazetteers and to consider the national requirements.

Clearly, there are commonalities of approach between the different gazetteers and related registers. It is to be applauded that the proposed specification for the national street gazetteer will be submitted to the Association for Geographic Information (AGI) for adoption as a national standard and to be hoped that the land and property gazetteer will follow suit.

Of course, there is the issue of European standards and the question of what progress is being made across the English Channel. Are there any European Community proposals for such gazetteers? Shouldn't gazetteers follow the route taken by digital map data and pursue an international standard for all users? What, if any, are the commonalities between military and civilian gazetteers, and where do we stand on multilingual systems?

The funding issue always will be foremost in the minds of those working for a national, or even an international, standard. Central government must provide more support, either directly or through an umbrella organisation such as AGI, whose current limited resources can't hope to adequately support the growing number of national GIS issues coming to the fore.

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