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Area start-up gleans vital data from aerial views

INSIDE TECHNOLOGY BY JON VAN

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A small start-up based in Crystal Lake is creating satellite-image maps of the entire 4,000-square-mile Chicago region, hoping to sell information to municipal planners and other local government agencies.

The images gathered by *RFP Mapping LLC* come from the same source as images accessed on the Internet from Google Earth, said *William Peel*, a partner in RFP. But while the Internet images may be 3 years old, RFP's were acquired this summer, he said.

The main advantage to RFP's product, Peel said, is software to automatically convert image data into useful information. RFP images can tell users which parcels of land absorb water and which do not, Peel said, and information on tree canopies can be converted to predictions about storm-water runoff and air quality.

"No one else can duplicate our process," said Peel, whose firm uses proprietary software created by its partner, *NCDC Imaging*, based in Colorado Springs.

The Colorado firm has worked with several municipalities, including San Francisco and Denver, to provide specific information related to flood control and runoff management. One small Colorado town has used the information to determine which residents should be billed extra for using excessive amounts of water on their lawns.

Such jobs have been handled on an individual basis, with contracts made before information is gathered. Peel is trying something new by gathering information on the entire Chicago area and making it available to clients off the shelf. This is intended to lower costs and encourage local governments to coordinate their planning with each other.

City planners always have sought to gather information about their communities' physical makeup, but such efforts were often labor intensive and time-consuming, Peel said.

"It could take three years to do an inventory, using people working on the ground," he said. "By the time you finished your inventory, some of the information would be out of date."

Satellite-mapping-information costs vary according to the size of the area covered and amount of detail required, but prices are around \$50,000 for typical projects, said *Dan Swick*, RFP's chief technology officer. When they learn of RFP's product, most municipal officials are interested in getting the information but have concerns about paying for it, he said.

Next month, Peel said, his company plans to hold seminars to help area officials tap into funds from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other federal groups to help local governments acquire land-use information.

If Peel finds his off-the-shelf satellite-data business gains traction with Chicago-area municipalities, he hopes to expand and provide similar services to other major urban areas.

Satellite-image information could help communities make wiser decisions about where new developments should be sited and the extent of development that the environment can handle, said *Emily Berendt*, a board member of the Alliance for Land, Agriculture and Water in McHenry County.

"We need to develop smartly and not destroy the resources we need to live well," said Berendt, who is also a member of the planning commission in Bull Valley, a small but fast-growing village in McHenry County.

Berendt said Bull Valley is seriously considering the use of RFP imaging data as a planning tool.

"Some areas of our county face problems of flooding, while others suffer water shortages," Berendt said. "We need to anticipate and avoid such problems."

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