

Chapter 92

E-Planning through the Wisconsin Land Information Program: The Contexts of Power, Politics and Scale

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ABSTRACT

Through the lenses of Critical GIS and political economy, this paper examines the history of the Wisconsin Land Information Program (WLIP), which was created in 1989 and provides an early US example of the adoption of GIS at the local government level. Using a mixed methods approach and a case study design, the authors focus on the cooperation and conflicts among various actors and networks, at and between scales, during times of plentiful and lean resources. Catalyzed by the 1978 Larsen Report, the WLIP was unique in its inclusiveness of everyone involved in land records management. University academics brought together all the stakeholders to create a thematic and territorial network with political power and a unique funding mechanism. As land use planning and state budget deficits became prominent, the program became a target, leading to conflict and power struggles, particularly with the state Department of Administration (DOA). What began as an egalitarian, grass-roots, socially just, forward-thinking program has shape-shifted, and while the WLIP is still a viable and functioning program, its egalitarian goals have been subverted by economics.

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INTRODUCTION

Although GIS technology is used widely in many fields, it still finds its predominant use in public agencies (Gilfoyle & Thorpe, 2004). While many studies have examined the adoption of GIS within these agencies and their political, economic and social settings, (for examples see Nedovic-Budic, 1998), few have studied the programs that were originally developed to modernize land records, and which often resulted in the adoption of GIS at the local government level, an essential step in the e-planning process.

Most U.S. states now have some form of governmental body coordinating overall GIS goals and objectives, often organized as top-down, state-level administered programs, but few states had any formally recognized body for land records modernization in the 1980s. While Wisconsin was certainly not the first state to develop land records modernization, [in the late 1970s New York and Minnesota had state-level systems, organized around environmental needs], only one of its cities – Milwaukee - had a fully functioning program based on a broad spectrum of parcel (or Cadastres, which describe the rights, interests, and value of property) - based information, and the state's grass-roots approach is unique.

Wisconsin developed a statewide program in the 1980s, based at the county level, with buy-in from academics, surveyors, registers of deeds, property listers, real estate professionals, title company professionals and utility company employees, among others. The goals of the efforts in Wisconsin were to improve all land conveyance processes and procedures, to provide information for equitable taxation and to improve information for planning and resource management (NRC, 1980).

The Wisconsin Land Information Program (WLIP), created in 1989, provides an opportunity to examine the growth and development of land records modernization in Wisconsin, and to highlight the egalitarian beginnings of the program.

This paper, through the lenses of Critical GIS and political economy, will contribute to the body of knowledge within Critical GIS and e-planning by examining one of the United States' first successful forays into modernizing land records and the issues confronted by the many different constituent groups. The paper embraces the historiographic view, articulated by Harvey and Chrisman (2004), of an ecologically oriented, socially constructed relationship between technology and geography. This historic examination of how one state successfully built a program through years of cooperation and conflicts among powerful actors and networks, at and between scales, during times of plentiful and lean government resources will provide insights into issues that still plague cooperation between groups with different agendas today.

Specifically, we ask, first, where and how was the Wisconsin Land Information Program created who were the actors embedded in networks, and what were the power structures? Second, how did the program change over time in response to internal and external shocks and how was "place" important in the development of the WLIP? Third, what lessons can be learned from this history?

In order to understand the complex relations and processes of legal, social, political, and cultural contexts that this study embraces, a mixed methods approach and a case study design were employed (Yin, 2003). Wisconsin was selected for several reasons. First, Wisconsin has been at the forefront of efforts to modernize land records in the US for e-planning purposes and the state has largely been hailed as successful (Koch et al., 2001). Second, the program in Wisconsin began as an egalitarian, grass-roots based, bottom-up participatory network of academic, non-profit, utility, business and government agents, a system which has not been replicated in other states. Wisconsin was also the first state to develop a unique method of generating funds to support the continuation of the program. The overseeing of the distribution of those funds during the first fifteen years involved complex and messy social, economic and political

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