A Brief History of the Evolution of the Wisconsin Land Information Association

Al Miller in collaboration with Myron Bacon and Ben Niemann

Seeds of computer-based information systems that could manage geographic information were germinated in the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University in the 1960s. As Harvard learned how to handle geographic data, it taught its students and its students spread the seeds. One seed blew from Cambridge to Madison with the help of Ben Niemann, a recently graduated MA student and new Assistant Professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Niemann probed the technology with his classes until 1969 when he and Professor Phil Lewis convinced Governor Pat Lucy and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to apply the emerging technology to locating an Interstate highway corridor from Milwaukee to Green Bay. To manage the project, Lewis and Niemann hired a new graduate student, Al Miller. The seed was planted.

A digital database constructed from one kilometer cells was manually built to cover the area from the western side of Lake Winnebago to Lake Michigan and from Milwaukee to Green Bay. Models were developed to represent the views of various stake holders. Using these stake-holder's values, a path was generated seeking a three kilometer wide path between the two cities that best represented the values. A new major asset of the digital database was that transportation planners were able to measure probable impacts of any corridor by tabulating the quantity of any resource affected, i.e. acres of farmland. Ultimately, the study aided in locating the new Interstate (I43) close to Lake Michigan communities and away from the environmentally magnificent Kettle Moraine. Other applications were made later in siting power transmission lines and in city planning.

Paralleling the university's work, the Wisconsin Legislature passed the Land-use Planning Grant Program In the 1971-1973 budget to be administered by the Department of Administration (DOA). Grant allocations were to be directed towards, one, land resources information, two, development of land resources planning capabilities, three, state land resource planning, and four, implementation of land resource plans. DOA, through its State Planning Office, initiated an analysis of a statewide geographically based land information system with the Chicago-base planning firm of Barton-Aschman Associates, Inc. It also hired a geographic information specialist (Al Miller) from the University to guide the development of a statewide geographic information system (GIS). The stimulation for Wisconsin's interest, and other states as well, was discussion of national legislation directed at state management of land resources. One part of the legislation addressed computer-based land information systems. While planners were excited about the legislation, others were not. The words "land use" made many people apprehensive and the idea died in 1973.

The idea of GIS in Wisconsin was kept alive with a grant in 1977 from the Department of Interior (negotiated by Ben Niemann), to assist in funding the analysis of who paid for land records. The state Office of Program and Management Analysis, DOA, in

conjunction with the Institute of Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison initiated the study to determine the cost to citizens to maintain land information. This excellent report, *"Land Records: the cost to the citizen to maintain the present land information base"* compiled by Barbara Larsen created significant state and national interest. Larsen demonstrated that the majority of the cost (52%) is born by local governments and that most collected data is incompatible and cannot be integrated. She also noted that a large number of local officials need land information, including but not limited to register of deeds, county surveyor, real property lister, planning and zoning director, soil and water conservationist, and others. Wisconsin citizens collectively spent almost $79,000,000 in 1976 on land records! The report grabbed the attention of state administrators and legislators. Now they understood the issue!

When the Land Records Committee (LRC) was formed in 1985 by Governor Tony Earl, the mix of land information users became the bases for membership. Along with the core Committee of thirty-two members, seventy-one other land information professionals contributed through twelve subcommittees. Subcommittee reports covered the breadth of land information issues, including statutory data requirements, data responsibility, maintenance and security, property records, classification and standards, and cooperative arrangements, to highlight a few. The importance of the LRC was; one, the diversity of its membership drawing on the wide-ranging land information community, two, the extent of the committee's analysis, three, the focus on counties as the institutions having the greatest responsibility for land information, and four, the identification of a central board of land information professionals to provide oversight of progress and a grants-in-aid program.

Governor Earl received the report, thanked the members for their hard work recognizing the excellent recommendations contained in the reports, however stated that there was no money in the budget to implement any of the recommendations. Undeterred, Chair Jim Clapp sent a memo to all 100 participants of the LRC asking "what can we do without government?"   Using the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (ASSHTO), as a model, as well as the American Medical Association (AMA) and other professions that guide their own activities, it was suggested that a professional GIS organization be established to guide future development of land records modernization in Wisconsin. The suggestion received favorable support from the Committee and the final report was modified to include the establishment of a professional land information organization.

With that inclusion, the idea of WLIA was born. Going from an idea to reality was different story. The new organization had no officers, no bylaws, no staff and no money! In 1987, a group of LRC members and others met to address these issues and began by asking Al Miller to serve as President. Four former LRC members were asked to write bylaws. The new state Cartographer, Art Ziegler, volunteered staff support, seeing an opportunity for Wisconsin to take a major step in modernizing its mapping services. Funding was obtained with the support of the Urban and Regional Information Systems Association, better known as URISA. The new group became the Wisconsin Chapter of URISA and during the first year while bylaws were written and WLIA was

getting organized, meetings were held for each separate organization one after the other. (Miller served as President of both) By 1988, WLIA was fully functional, elections were held, committees were organized and WLIA was operating on its own.

The story doesn't quite end there. Ben Niemann became WLIA's second President in 1989 and focussed his energies on establishing the Land information Program (WLIP). With the aid of a legislative staff member, a bill was drafted, sponsors were found and the bill became law. In 1990, John Laub (Wisconsin Power and Light) became WLIA President number three and through the efforts of Jane Licht (Dane County Register of Deeds) found an acceptable funding source (an increase in recordation fees) to begin implementation of the WLIP.

WLIA is in its twenty-sixth year. Looking back at the developing years early advocates seemed to be like a *herd of turtles,* making determined progress with their necks sticking out! WLIA was built on the energy and initiative of a large number of people in a variety of fields working cooperatively to address a common goal. One of WLIA's most significant accomplishments has been the tremendous increase in communications among those who work with land records. At an early meeting one register of deeds confessed that she had been employed in the county for five years and had never met the County Surveyor until that day!

Today we face the need for statewide information compiled from seventy-two counties. A group of WLIA members stepped forward and said: "Just Do it!" -- and they did. In a very short time they proved that merging county parcel data is technically possible. Currently 62 counties have been merged and five more counties are expected to join. They also discovered that while the technical aspects are doable there are many policy questions that need to be answered. We also need to continue funding for the Wisconsin Land Information Program so that all counties can gather the basic information that will enable a statewide query. As reported in October 2012, an organized effort is now underway to again educate legislators and state administrators. Behold the new "*herd of turtles*"!