

Collaboration Process

Formal Collaboration

In order to ensure collaboration from the largest and most diverse number of participants, the Coordinating Body designed multi-agency work groups with leaders who encouraged the participants to recognize their own self-interest was served by investing in the "greater good." The Standards and Data Coordination Working Group, for example, comprises about 30 core members of which 60% are from the state, 25% from local government and 15% from the private sector. The members work on ways to make data development easier and more collaborative by reducing data duplication and waste, and on developing or adopting data standards. The specific issues to which the group devotes its attention are usually assigned to it by the Coordinating Body (about 80% of the group's work) and a few are self-generated. The spontaneously generated work tends to be "low hanging fruit" that can be done quickly with a good payoff. The Coordinating Body assignments are more significant and difficult but very crucial. The working group usually divides in subgroups that have particular interest for specific issues. The group meets monthly and tries to draw participation from a large number of agencies by using video-conferencing. Meeting notes are also distributed to over 75 people from different levels of government, universities and the private sector that have an interest in the work group undertakings.

In addition to these working groups, the Coordinating Body also created three advisory committees representing local government, state government and the private sector. The Local Government Advisory Committee, for example, functions as advisor to the Coordinating Body from a local perspective. Standards, financial assistance, and technical assistance were early themes for this group. Today, the Local Advisory Committee seeks to set goals and develop programs to assist local government in integrating GIS in decision making, and develops and comments on policies of the Coordinating Body. The Local Advisory Committee also comments on the work of other work groups, especially the data standards and coordination group. Given the very wide diversity of local jurisdictions, no one member of the advisory group is willing to speak broadly on behalf of local government. However, each person does speak with a local government voice and the chairman uses formal facilitation techniques to try to reach consensus and incorporate all opinions. These techniques provide opportunity for input, prevent a few from dominating the conversation, and do not allow discomfort with large groups or lack of certain expertise to prevent people from speaking. Meetings have a participation section and a presentation section so there is always a chance to discuss ideas and then something to learn. At first there were 12-15 members, then 20, now about 50-60 people participate at meetings.

The most formal collaborative mechanism created by the program is the Data Sharing Cooperative. The Data Coordination Working Group developed an overall Data Sharing Policy for GIS which was issued as Technology Policy 97-6. This policy directs that a NYS GIS Data Sharing Cooperative be established in order to provide an organized mechanism to share GIS data easily. It further directs that all NYS agencies join the Cooperative by signing the **NYS GIS Cooperative Data Sharing Agreement**, created by the Legal Working Group. Through the Cooperative, member organizations gain access to GIS data of all other members at virtually no cost. Agencies do not need to have GIS data of their own to join the Cooperative; however, as Cooperative members, they are obligated to contribute corrections and enhancements that they make to any data set obtained through the Cooperative. State agencies signed the Data Sharing Agreement beginning October 1997. A comparable data sharing agreement for local governments and not-for-profit organizations was released in February 1998 and all local governments were invited to join. Agreements with federal government agencies have also been signed. Data sharing agreements between public agencies and consultants are currently under development.

The Data Sharing Agreement defines two levels of custodianship. A Primary Custodian is a member that developed or "owns" a data set made available for sharing. A Secondary Custodian is a member of the Cooperative in possession of data acquired from a Primary Custodian. Each data set has only one Primary Custodian designated by the Coordinating Body. The designated agencies are responsible for the maintenance of these data sets as well as their distribution to other agencies needing to use them. The intent is to eliminate duplication of GIS data sets across agencies.

Informal Collaboration

While work groups and advisory committees provide an official framework where agreement among the different stakeholders involved in the program can be reached, the development of interpersonal relationships and the recognition of a "need to succeed" provided much of the incentive that led to successful collaboration. As experts met regularly, personal relationships were forged and trust developed. It became clear to the community of practice that none of their goals would materialize unless they cooperated in both formal and informal ways to make significant progress. As they developed trust and respect as individuals, collaboration became easier. The

ability of the participants to put aside individual goals or predisposition for the good of the whole effort has been a major characteristic of the work groups. The difference of interests related to levels of government or sectors of activity are not an obstacle to collaboration because participants have recognized they share the common goal of achieving a program that can provide benefits to all. For example, the Local Government Advisory Committee rapidly discovered that collaboration between state and local government and among local jurisdictions would help draw state dollars to GIS needs, something the State could not achieve alone, and that local governments also needed.

Some of the most effective instruments of the Coordination Program were developed very informally due to the synergy in the work groups. For example, the Legal Working Group was one of the first to be established to look at recommendations of the Temporary Council. About 10 people participated from the public and nonprofit sectors. Its first focus was on the idea of data licensing agreements. One member drafted three different agreements: a state-state license, a state-local license, and a state-private license. After discussing these, it seemed to the group that many one-to-one custom agreements would be needed. Another member suggested the possibility of one standard agreement for "people who want to be inside the circle." It was an insightful moment and led the group quickly to develop the basic outlines of the Data Sharing Cooperative. Once the concept and language for the Data Sharing Agreement was developed, OFT issued them as an official NYS Technology Policy, requiring all state agencies to join and encouraging local governments to do the same.

The leadership style of the OFT Director and Coordinating Body Chair accounts for a large part of the success of the collaboration. Instead of trying to impose an agenda, he consistently tried to find consensus. For example, in the Coordinating Body, there is no formal process for decision making. The Coordinating Body uses an ad hoc and informal approach. When faced with difficult decisions, the chair usually polls the group to determine who is in favor or opposed and why. When the group is divided, no immediate action is taken. Instead, the issue is referred to a working group to do research and bring the issue back for discussion. Unanimity is not required but there is always an effort to get as close as possible to full agreement, while every concern is heard and respected. Moreover, the program has had a single leaders since the beginning, representing not only the top level commitment of State government, but also continuity and persistence, as a champion for the entire effort.

Creation of the Center for GIS at OFT: Formalization of the GIS Program

In 2000, after several years of advocacy by the GIS coordination community, a major State budget appropriation was made to institutionalize the program and to create a formal, professional GIS Center within OFT. Today, it is building a sizable professional staff, and launching several statewide data development programs such as digital orthophotography that will benefit all users. It has also taken on full operation of the Clearinghouse and the Data Sharing Cooperative. The staff was built by transferring the experts who built the Clearinghouse at the State Library, others who led GIS efforts at the Department of Transportation, as well as new hires. The Coordinating Body and working groups remain as advisors to the staff. Most participants view this as a very positive development, although they acknowledge that it will change the relationships that have brought the program to its present status and adjustments will need to be made to shift from an all-volunteer effort to one that is more formal. Some work groups view the Center as very beneficial to them because the Center will be able to dedicate resources that were difficult to find before. Therefore, they expect to see their recommendations implemented sooner. Others perceive it as a possible threat and feel their role will be diminished. They fear the representative Coordinating Body may no longer set the agenda, but only approve what the GIS Center wants to achieve.
