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Philadelphia Builds 'All-In-One' Property Mapping Tool.

A new Web-based property data search tool in Philadelphia will bring zoning, assessment value, 311 reports and more under one application.

Open data is turning a corner in Philadelphia with the launch of a new city platform, Atlas.

The new Web-powered platform uses mapping to bring a property's deed information, value assessment, 311 call history, zoning and other data into one location, accessible by just a few mouse clicks.

"You might say that 90 percent of all the data that the city is managing has a location component," said Mark Wheeler, Philadelphia's chief geographic information officer and deputy CIO for Enterprise Data and Architecture, as he took reporters on a virtual tour this week. The new platform goes live on Nov. 14.

Atlas, described as an "all-in-one tool," was built largely in-house last year by the Office of Innovation and Technology. It's an address-based system, which means it will search by address, but also street intersections or a Department of Records registry number. You can also simply zoom into the map and click on a parcel. Atlas will then indicate the address, and offer four drop-down tabs labeled: assessments, deeds, permits and zoning. Click on, for example, deeds, and the tool will outline the property showing its borders and offer other information recorded on deeds, such as the property's square footage.

The power of Atlas, say its developers, is the way it takes disparate pieces of information related to the city's some 570,000 deeded lots, gathered over many years, and puts them in one place for easy searching by residents, city officials, real estate developers, economic development officials and others.

"Depending on the question you are asking related to what is happening at an address, you can use six apps, you could use up to a dozen apps," said Wheeler, recalling the tedious nature of sifting through property information.

"What the city and the public really need is an all-in-one tool," said Wheeler. "So, the team developed Atlas."

Atlas is designed for any type of user, using almost any type of device. City staff are currently working out the kinks for the app to operate on mobile devices, said Robert Martin, an application developer in OIT.

"The app will sort of rearrange itself so that the map will stay at the top of the screen on a phone … and then you can scroll through the rest of the information," he explained.

"I think the users are going to be anyone in community groups that want to know what's happening in their neighborhood," said Wheeler. "Anyone interested in what development, what projects, crime, 311. It will all be in one place."

How often will Atlas be updated?

"It depends on who generates the data within the city," Wheeler said. For example, data related to criminal activity or 311 is updated every 24 hours, he added.

"Other data, like zoning, happens when there's a new ordinance," Wheeler remarked.

Since Atlas is largely built around the searchability of addresses, these proved to be one of the biggest hurdles for the site's developers. The system has to be able to decipher various address formats.

"City departments, and their own individual systems over time, have developed name changes to addresses," said Wheeler.

"When you type in an address you're reaching back to all of those systems to get information across many, many departments," added Tom Swanson, chief enterprise architect for the project and a member of the city's IT department.

"You type an address into Atlas and AIS (address information system) breaks it apart into components that we can match up to similar standardized addresses in the system," Swanson explained.

Ultimately the concept of building an open data platform that could be replicated by other cities, remained a guiding concept throughout the platform's development, say its developers.

"The goal was really to build a framework that any city could use," said Swanson. "And we really tried to do that."

Open data Web-mapping portals related to property, city finances, city infrastructure and other information are can also be found in many other cities like Tacoma, Wash., Modesto Calif., and Greensboro, N.C.

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