



Encounter has become the Napier City Council's portal to all property related information.

How to reduce GIS capital and operational costs

This software program answers a multitude of mapping needs and slashes accessing time.

When Napier City Council decided to upgrade its Geographical Information System (GIS) in 2000 it turned to the Encounter product marketed in New Zealand by Critchlow Associates.

Three years later, the Council has upgraded to the latest version, and remains enthusiastic about the software's ability to help staff, key customers and the public access quality information.

So what makes the Council such a satisfied customer? Simon Nitz, GIS Administrator in the Council's Planning Department explains. "Back in 2000 we had our own basic mapping software, which we'd developed in-house, but we needed external help to expand the system. So when we found out about the Encounter product, which is available off-the-shelf, but with plenty of opportunities for customisation, it was an easy decision".

Andrew Lee, Business Development Manager at Critchlow Associates, explains that Encounter was developed by the Australian branch of MapInfo, a United States-based company. MapInfo specialises in software which enables maps and information to be integrated for viewing and decision-making. It is used extensively by

all levels of government, and by a diverse range of customers in retail, tourism and finance.

Napier City Council was the first local authority worldwide to install and use the software.

Encounter helps Council staff to view a range of maps and other data on a single screen for queries at the front counter with a customer, or behind the scenes for analysis and planning.

The key to overall success is the integration of the user-friendly mapping software with back-end data, such as rates details, resource and building consents, water billing, dog licences and historic place information.

In fact, Encounter has rapidly become Council's portal to all property related information and this is providing even greater paybacks by reducing the time spent accessing information and documents from disparate data sources.

When asked how easy the product is to install, customise and explain to staff, Simon Nitz says, "Fantastically easy. It's easy to customise and link to NCS (Council's corporate system), and the tools are definitely user-friendly and interactive

for the end-user, whether that is a staff member or an external user".

Some of the detailed back-end data, particularly that which relates to a single property, is only accessible to staff, while maps and general data are available externally via a web browser and dedicated website (www.napierplanning.govt.nz).

Ease of use is a big factor in making the system attractive to planners, surveyors and real estate agents who are the major external users of Council land information.

"Now they're coming to the counter with a lot of the groundwork done already, which saves them and us time. It's efficient option in delivering customer service," says Mr Nitz.

Specific improvements achieved by the current third version are "toolbars, data, images and maps all appear on the single-screen, without the need to open additional screens as in earlier versions," he explains.

"Two hours training is sufficient to get most Council staff up-to-speed both in handling existing information and in generating new maps. Simple 'wizard' templates based on graphical user interfaces enable maps to be made without the operator needing to understand any of the programming which sits behind the map".

Other improvements include more rapid pull-down of back-end data through XML, instead of HTML. Encounter can also read other applications more easily, with minimal data translation.

Map information can also be quickly copied and pasted into a range of Microsoft and other software applications, including Outlook emails, Word and Powerpoint. This enables maps to be emailed to a wide range of customers, who only need a simple image viewer. Council staff can also drop maps into Word and Powerpoint documents.

Is Encounter just a solution for larger councils? Not so, says Andrew Lee. "MapInfo Corporation offers a Site Licence deal of MapInfo products including Encounter with the Site Licence priced on the number of rateable properties in a council's area.

"The benefits of this programme include no initial capital outlay with the software purchase, and a fixed annual fee for the three-year term. It is ideal for those wanting to reduce GIS operational and capital costs."

For more information on Encounter and the Local Government Site licence deal, you can contact Andrew at Critchlow Associates (www.critchlow.co.nz), Wellington.