



Accurately mapping and filing city boundaries, particularly when annexations are involved, is essential for economic development, 2020 Census data collection, public safety, and more.

PHOTO BY JENNIFER WHEELER.

Maps and land use: an economic development issue

By Amy Whitehead

An accurate map of a city’s boundaries, understanding the appetite for planning and zoning, and the upcoming 2020 Census are issues that can and will impact economic development for Arkansas municipalities. Unfortunately, many rural cities and towns struggle to address these issues.

A city should ensure it has an accurate map of its boundaries. The map used by the city should match the map with the Secretary of State’s Office and the Arkansas Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Office. According to Arkansas Geographic Information Officer Shelby Johnson, a city can check its boundaries at gis.arkansas.gov/checkmycity.

“At a minimum, a city should file an updated map with the Secretary of State and GIS Office, which normally comes through filing with the county clerk,” Johnson said. “They may also wish to notify their local public utilities such as gas, electric, and cable. Others who need to know of changes include every fire department that touches the city and law enforcement.”

Maps not filed appropriately can be a common problem in smaller cities. Planning and development districts are a good resource to correct this issue in many cases.

“We have worked with many cities in our district to get them connected with the Arkansas GIS Office to correct problems to their maps,” said Sasha Grist, executive director of the Western Arkansas Planning and Development District. “Corrections are completed by filing the appropriate documents related to annexations.”

According to Grist and her GIS staff, “Many of the inconsistencies between what the city has on file and what the state shows as the official map have to do with annexations not being filed correctly, the description of the annexation not being accurately reflected on the map, or the legal description being inaccurate. In some cases, a city will need to correct the legal description and go back through the annexation process.”

An inaccurate map can impact emergency services, tax collections, and official Census numbers. All of these things are important to local economic development efforts. A city can contact the Arkansas Municipal League,

GIS office, or local planning district to receive guidance on the proper filing procedures.

Additionally, a city considering annexing land and people into its city limits should remember that the 2020 Census is looming. Population count and Census data will impact grant eligibility, state turnback money, and other economic development initiatives. GIS Information Officer Johnson recommends that annexations be complete before the end of 2018.

“If a city waits until 2019 they risk running out of time for all the legal waiting periods and filings to make their way through the official recording process,” Johnson said.

Once a city has an accurate map, the city may also want to engage in land use planning and zoning. In areas without an existing planning commission or significant land use restrictions, it is important to engage citizens in conversations to understand if there is an appetite for planning and zoning.

“The benefits of planning and zoning include an ability to control what types of development happen in various parts of your community, and what laws will govern the appearance of property,” said Marsha Guffey of MG Consulting. “This is the difference between controlled and uncontrolled growth and development.”

Jasper Mayor Jan Larson looked at the possibility of forming a planning commission, but decided instead to form a community development committee that will advise the city council on matters of land use and zoning and review existing ordinances to ensure they are appropriate and enforceable. This approach fits the manpower and resource level of the city.

Working with the University of Central Arkansas and MG Consulting, Larson is also navigating land use, zoning, annexation, and permitting issues through collaboration with the GIS office, local planning district, and a neighboring community. With citizen input and outside guidance, “Jasper is committed to community and economic development so that we can capitalize on the natural resources and appeal of the area,” Larson said. “Thinking strategically about development, land use, and planning will only support those efforts.”



Amy Whitehead is the Director of the Center for Community and Economic Development at the University of Central Arkansas.



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