

## Ask The Expert

### Browsing the Best Selection Software

**Integrating geographic information system tools into your site selection process is now a basic step in streamlining the investigation of complex location inquiries.**

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**Is there software available that will enhance the site selection process, and how do I research the product?**

**The Expert Says:** The process of selecting a new or existing site can be a daunting task. Experts are available to guide you through the many steps necessary to locate an ideal location, but even these experts need tools to help maneuver through large amounts of data.

One tool that can be used to decrease the upfront time needed for a site selection screening process is a geographic information system (GIS). GIS is a database linked to geographic features used to perform complex location inquiries that enables the user to display the results in a comprehensible map format.

A GIS consists of spatially distributed features (places on a map) with an accompanying record that contains pertinent information for an individual point (ex., existing competitor), line (ex., interstate), or polygon (ex., parcel). The data used in a GIS can come from various sources (i.e., local, state, and federal government; GIS data vendors; proprietary, etc.). While GIS has developed an important role in site selection, it is used by companies and governments for a wide variety of resource mapping, policy analysis, etc. Natural resource firms were early adopters, and now most companies with widespread assets (e.g., utilities) have important in-house GIS functions.

There are numerous GIS companies available to help you decide on the product that is right for you [Editor's Note: Business Facilities' Online Site Seekers' Guide is now powered by ZoomProspector]. If you are interested in the world of GIS, one good source of information is the ESRI International Conference held every year in San Diego, California, during mid-July. Other smaller conferences are available throughout the year. The ESRI conference is a great avenue in which people share information and communicate with experts, users, businesses, etc., to explore latest technologies and accomplishments.

Industry experts are available to help you understand face to face how GIS can be used in your organization to solve and/or answer questions that might arise in your future or daily operations. Numerous data vendors along with industry experts are available to show you ways you can manipulate the vast variety of data pertinent to your line of business. Some vendors have even created GIS compatible programs that help you query a data product that might suit your particular needs.

Once you have committed to use of GIS technology, the biggest challenge is data gathering and data maintenance. Many data set vendors are in the marketplace, but the applicability of their data should be assessed. Many "comprehensive" data sources are merely extrapolations from limited sets of publically available information. Data management challenges can be even greater, as most data sources change and update their data on a regular basis. While dramatic changes from one reporting period to another are not common, they do occur, and you may find yourself working with data that is out of date and possibly lead you to erroneous conclusions.

If you are approaching a site selection decision, GIS can be an important tool in making that decision process both more efficient and more effective. However, in order to realize these benefits, the use of GIS needs to be a part of a sound overall decision process and you need to have in-house expertise to best utilize the programs and manage the data that are available.

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