

STATEMENT OF INTEREST

TO: Organizing Committee
Digital Gazetteer Research and Practice Workshop

FROM: David J. Bodenhamer
Executive Director, The Polis Center at IUPUI, and Professor of History

RE: Workshop Application

DATE: September 26, 2006

Please accept this memo as a strong expression of interest in the December 7-9, 2006, workshop on digital gazetteers. The opportunity could not be more timely nor my need greater.

Over the past decade—and especially over the last five years—I have been involved in a variety of projects related to the digital humanities. Most of these activities have involved electronic cultural atlases and historical GIS, especially the development of Web-based projects (e.g., the North American Religion Atlas, www.religionatlas.org). This work, in turn, has led to what is currently a loosely federated effort with EU partners to create a conceptual framework for an initiative to link various national historical GIS efforts. It also has resulted in a parallel but related effort to use GIS to locate and link an array of UK digital historical resources in multiple data formats. This effort, which involves several colleagues from the UK, will rely heavily on the use of digital gazetteers, some extant and others that must be created. My compelling interest in this workshop is to ensure that we enter our work on both fronts fully aware of the advances made by groups such as the National Center for Geographic Information and Analysis.

As the director of a center that uses GIS as its technology of choice, I also have a strong desire to know about the potential value of digital gazetteer research for our larger agenda. The Polis Center at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, established in 1989, has developed a strong record for applying GIS effectively at local, state, and federal levels. A completely self-funded unit with 25 FTE staff, we have developed a comprehensive community information system for the Indianapolis MSA (www.savi.org), an internal Web-based mapping and evaluation center for the National Library of Medicine and its National Network of Libraries of Medicine, and, in a work-in-progress, a system of distributed and integrated Web services for mapping and spatial analysis for a variety of state agencies and counties in Indiana. We also work extensively with federal and state emergency management agencies on disaster planning, including significant involvement in training users nationally on HAZUS, a GIS software developed for pre-disaster mitigation efforts. Finally, over the past several years we have increasingly teamed with researchers in the IU School of Medicine, located on our campus, to incorporate spatial analysis in public health-related projects. In all of this work, it is becoming clear that digital gazetteers are important resources that we must learn to tap effectively.

The UK and EU projects represent the more innovative scholarly applications of spatial technologies and are the ones that most immediately require the creative use of digital gazetteers. In the UK effort, we are working with colleagues at The Queens University of Belfast, University of Lancaster, and University of Nottingham to use a digital prototype of the Survey of English Place Names, with x-y coordinates, to link of a variety of digital records (texts, databases, and images) available in the archives of the Arts and Humanities Data Service of Great Britain. Our initial aim is to use GIS as the means of searching, integrating, and visualizing these data. The challenges are complex, not the least of which is how to manage name changes across time and how to use these names and their variants to geoparse the other resources. We also wish to integrate the historical gazetteer with standard gazetteers, such as Getty or EDINA, and to define a solution to the lack of comprehensive time-period crosswalks. This workshop promises to help us avoid both conceptual and design errors.

The EU project is not as advanced as the other project, but it too will involve both historical and contemporary place-name gazetteers, although the issues will be even more complex because of language and classification differences. Numerous national historical GIS projects are in the works or completed, including Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, Netherlands, and Spain. Designing the spatio-temporal framework to handle continuously shifting boundaries is a daunting task in itself, and this matter is complicated by the problem of handling place-names in contested spaces, a phenomenon largely unknown in U.S. history. Again, attendance at this workshop would be useful in helping think through the options for addressing these conceptual and methodological issues.

As a totally project-funded center, Polis has no funds to support my attendance at this workshop, and I have committed my university-allocated travel funds to previous commitments. Therefore, I request a travel subsidy for my participation.

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