Geographic Names as an MSDI Layer

Introduction: The federal Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) and the Montana Names database are feature-based geographic databases containing information about physical and cultural geographic features. Geographic Names contain three primary attributes: the official feature name, a unique feature ID, and the official geographic point location of that feature. Geographic Names are important because without a database of geographic names, a map is limited as to its usefulness. If geographically referenced names are not part of a map or mapping application you would not be able to search, query, or identify a feature by its name.

The Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) is the Federal and national standard for geographic nomenclature. The U.S. Geological Survey developed the GNIS in support of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names as the official repository of domestic geographic names data, the official vehicle for geographic names use by all departments of the Federal Government, and the source for applying geographic names to Federal electronic and printed products.

The Montana Names Database is a replication of the federal GNIS populated within an expanded data model and with data and attribute enhancements specific to Montana.

Are Names Really Considered GIS? Geographic Names are perhaps the most commonly and widely used form of geospatial information, consisting of official and common use names of administrative, cultural and physical features. With growing community demands, and sophisticated advances in technology, place names are now required to meet many levels of service expectations. Without geographic names many of the applications and services we rely on would not be possible. Geographic Names are a primary attribute used in geospatial search engines. Imagine trying to locate a street name, mountain ridge or small town using Google Map, Microsoft Virtual Earth, MapQuest, Expedia, or the Montana GIS Portal without named geographic features. Numerous applications and business services rely on a maintained set of accurate geographic names. Local, state and federal applications use geographic names to support E911, emergency response and preparedness as well as homeland defense and security. In fact, it is difficult to imagine any place-based application that does not require the utilization of geographic names.

Why should Geographic Names be an MSDI Layer? We already rely heavily on this theme for existing GIS and mapping applications and Geographic Names have been integrated into many of the existing MSDI layers including transportation and addressing, structures, hydrologic units, and hydrology as well as the National Spatial Data Infrastructure. However, many questions remain unanswered when you ask yourself, are the Geographic Names in Montana being represented within the larger national GNIS? And, who has oversight for the facilitation and maintenance of Geographic Names in Montana to assure that this data is standardized across all layers, maintained and accessible? By accepting Geographic Names as a framework theme we could begin the process necessary to advance Geographic Names in a manner that best serves the Montana GIS Community and the needs of Montanans.

Request to Council: We request a recommendation by the MLIAC to the GIO to formally move the Geographic Names data theme through the established Theme Stewardship and Governance Process.