

Testimony of Ashis Pal
President, PA-MAPPS
Before the Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs
House of Representatives
Commonwealth of Pennsylvania

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Ashis Pal. I am President of geographIT, a professional consulting and development company firm located in Lancaster, PA specializing in customized geospatial technology solutions for state and local governments, utilities, universities and the private sector. It is my honor to appear before you today as the President of PA-MAPPS, an association of private geospatial firms in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. PA-MAPPS is the state chapter of MAPPS, the only national association exclusively comprised of private firms in the spatial data and geographic information system field in the United States. Current MAPPS memberships spans the entire spectrum of the geospatial community, including Member Firms engaged in satellite and airborne remote sensing, surveying, photogrammetry, aerial photography, hydrography, aerial and satellite image processing, GPS, and GIS data collection and conversion services. MAPPS also includes Associate Members, which are companies that provide hardware, software, products and services to the geospatial profession in the United States and other firms from around the world.

PA-MAPPS strongly supports H.B. 1304. We believe the codification of the Pennsylvania Geospatial Coordinating Council, by statute, is a desirable action for the General Assembly.

H.B. 1304 would establish by statute the activities currently being carried out by Executive Order. We believe doing so would give permanency and clout to the Coordinating Council so that it can lead the Commonwealth's important geospatial activities.

The geospatial profession is an emerging activity that touches every aspect of government, as well as life in the Commonwealth. Geospatial data identifies the geographic location and characteristics of natural or constructed features and boundaries on the Earth. The Federal Government estimates that roughly 80 percent of all government information has a geographic component.

Every day, the landscape of America and the world changes. In a year with moderate economic activity, there are between 1.2 and 2.3 million new housing starts each year – that's 3,288 to 6,300 each day. Every day, 3,013 Americans buy a new home and another 18,500 buy an existing house from another citizen. Each year, some 25,000 miles of new roads are built in the United States – that's 68 miles every day. Today's satellite and airborne remote sensing technologies, computer mapping and geographic information systems (GIS) track these changes and give government decision makers, regulators, and other officials the information they need to do their job and deliver the services the American people have come to expect from Federal, state and local government.

Combining techniques from the geographic information system, global positioning system (GPS), digital mapping, mobile technology, database, and location-based services provides business and government with a robust suite of methods for tracking and amassing information. From dispatching and routing emergency vehicles to mapping and analyze crime patterns; from tracking and modeling the quality of ground and surface water to creating inventories to manage roads, utilities and other physical facilities; from optimizing the delivery of health and medical services to fighting forest fires; from assessing hurricane damage to advancing economic development through provision of detailed asset information and tracking and modeling the spread of pollutants or destructive biological agents; geospatial data can enhance the quality of life and improve the delivery of government services. There are thousands of government agencies carrying out the day-to-day tasks of reducing crime, enhancing public health and safety, containing costs, managing growth, improving accountability, and protecting the environment. Nearly all of them rely on geographic information systems (GIS) technology to make decisions that directly affect citizens and determine our quality of life.

The geospatial community has been identified as one of just 14 sectors to be included in President Bush's High Growth Job Training Initiative. These are sectors of the U.S. economy that are projected to add substantial numbers of new jobs to the economy or affect the growth of other industries; or there are existing or emerging businesses being transformed by technology and innovation requiring new skills sets for workers. One of the organizations that have been funded in this geospatial workforce development program is the Goodling Advanced Skills Center, which has received nearly \$1 million in Federal funds for a Geospatial Imagery Analysis Technicians training program.

In order to take advantage of the increasing demand for geospatial data that is fueling this job growth, particularly here in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and to assure the citizens of Pennsylvania that government at the Federal, state and local levels, as well as the academic community and private sector, are coordinating and using geospatial data in the most efficient way possible, we support a Pennsylvania Geospatial Coordinating Council.

The Federal Government is implementing a "Fifty States Initiative" designed to bring all public and private stakeholders together in statewide GIS coordination bodies that help to form effective partnerships and lasting relationships.

There is a critical need to coordinate GIS activities on a statewide basis to eliminate waste and improve efficiency in government. Agencies at all levels of government need to coordinate with other stakeholders to keep from duplicating geographic data and systems at taxpayers' expense. Those stakeholders include non-profit organizations, academia, business, and utilities. The "right" solutions will vary state-by-state and they are created through the development of effective strategic and business plans.

H.B. 1304 is consistent with the goals of the Fifty States Initiative. It will help keep Pennsylvania in the forefront of GIS activity in the United States.

This Pennsylvania Geospatial Coordinating Council will take a leadership role in development of policy, creation of coordination mechanisms, establishment of standards, and facilitation of cost-

sharing partnerships. We support those roles and believe they are the proper function of a government entity. However, we have a few concerns about H.B. 1304 which we would like to raise in hopes of working with the General Assembly to resolve as the bill moves through the legislative process.

First and foremost, we recommend that beginning on page 4, line 30, through page 5, line 3, “Pennsylvania Association of Private Geospatial Organizations” be struck and that “PA-MAPPS” be inserted in lieu thereof. As I indicated in my introduction, PA-MAPPS is an association of private geospatial firms in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. PA-MAPPS is the state chapter of MAPPS, the only national association exclusively comprised of private firms in the spatial data and geographic information system field in the United States. PA-MAPPS represents the leading geospatial firms in Pennsylvania. It was established in part because of the introduction of H.B. 2871, the predecessor of H.B. 1304, and is now a functioning association in the Commonwealth.

Second, we believe the bill should be revised to make clear that the Pennsylvania Geospatial Coordinating Council will be a policy organization, **NOT** an operational entity. Pennsylvania needs a council for those roles I mentioned earlier -- in development of policy, creation of coordination mechanisms, establishment of standards, and facilitation of cost-sharing partnerships. We do **NOT** need an entity that duplicates the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, or any other agency that is currently carrying out geospatial activities in the Commonwealth. A proliferation of new entities would make coordination more difficult, not easier, and we believe would be contrary to the fundamental intent of the bill. Therefore, we believe the provision on page 8, lines 10-13, regarding contracting authority of the Council, should (a) specify that contracting should be with the private sector, so that there is no government, non-profit or university competition by the Council, and (b) that such contracting be for administrative activities, not operational geospatial activities.

Finally, the Pennsylvania Mapping and Geospatial Technologies Fund, established by section 6409 (page 11, beginning on line 7) should again be limited to administrative, not operational activities. While that is spelled out with the term “administrative” on line 16, we are also concerned that the term “general and discretionary powers” on lines 17 and 18 might be misinterpreted.

With these clarifications and modifications, PA-MAPPS can enthusiastically and unequivocally support H.B. 1304. We commend the sponsors for introducing this bill, and are grateful to you Mr. Chairman, and the Committee, for holding this hearing. We look forward to working with you to enact H.B. 1304 into law.