

EDITED BY JUDI HASSON



## High-Tech Help in the Race for Land

*Builders use software to spot available land before the competition gets there.*

In the not too distant past, big builders went looking for land the old-fashioned way—by driving around and asking the locals to point them to a vacant tract.

But the days of scouting land virtually on foot are over. Big builders are turning to a high-tech tool that combines geospatial mapping and data mining to navigate their way around the land sweepstakes and nail a sale before anyone else even knows a parcel is available.

The software is called LandVision, developed by California-based Digital Map Products. It uses aerial maps combined with proprietary information, such as tax records to help builders find the land, buy it, and develop it. "It is a new way of digging for gold," says James Skurzynski, founder and president of Digital Map Products. "Our

product is not about listed properties, it's about all properties."

More than 120 builders are using the software. That includes D.R. Horton in Texas and California as well as KB Home, Centex Corp., Pulte Homes, Richmond American Homes, Ryland Homes, SunCal Co., Beazer Homes USA, John Laing Homes in Los Angeles, and Taylor Woodrow's southwest division. The cost depends on how big a geographic area you are scouting, according to Skurzynski.

"If you are a builder who does infill in Orange County, you will pay less than D.R. Horton, less than the \$1,000 a month for the little guy," he says.

The big plus is that builders are able to find land opportunities before the competition does. They can make an offer even if the property is not on the market. LandVision,

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**HIGH-TECH MAPS:** Builders are using high-tech tools that combine geospatial mapping and data mining to locate available land for development.

for example, can help a builder search for 10 acres of land adjacent to an old shopping center or an aging bowling alley. Or it can identify post-World War II row that could be replaced with new townhouses.

Location intelligence is a growing business, and not just for builders. Digital Map's first client was the Los Angeles Unified School District that tapped into LandVision last year to help find sites for 200 new schools that will be built over the next 10 years. It is also a tool that cuts scouting time dramatically and makes it possible for a builder to overlay information, such as aerial photography, property boundaries, and owner information with a few clicks of a mouse.

Dean Maner, senior vice president of business development for Young Homes, a California company, knows how useful it is. The company builds about 700 homes a year priced from \$350,000 to \$650,000 in San Bernadino and Riverside counties. It specializes in using the Internet to find infill properties that are hidden.

The company uses LandVision to scope out land and research a property before it actually gets on the market. Maner is in charge of the Los Angeles-Orange County area for the company, but he is not just looking to buy vacant land parcels.

"I am looking to buy churches, bowling alleys, rail transit housing, and commuter train housing," Maner says.

He is not looking for large tracts of property but parcels that can be assembled together. In Fontana, Calif., the company has assembled 500 acres near the California raceway, and plans to develop it are underway. The properties were spotted by using LandVision. "We like to purchase, entitle, and build our own product, and to do so, we need to find things that others cannot find," Maner says. —Judi Hasson