

# Judge rules Santa Clara County database should be available

## SAYS GEOGRAPHICAL DATABASE SHOULD BE MADE AVAILABLE

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A Santa Clara County Superior Court judge has ruled that Santa Clara County should make its geographical mapping database, which includes detailed parcel information, available to the public at a reasonable cost.

The decision is an outgrowth of a lawsuit filed in October against the county by the watchdog group California First Amendment Coalition. The group said county officials overcharge for the mapping information, making it prohibitive to many groups and companies that seek it for a variety of uses.

The cost to buy the entire database has been quoted by county officials at \$150,000. In the past, the county has charged that amount to private entities, such as telecommunications companies or utilities contractors. Last month, however, the county stopped making the database available to those companies, citing security concerns.

If that access is restored, county officials say the cost could be far less. Joyce Wing, the county's chief information officer, said the county has been looking into reducing that cost.

Government entities, such as cities and water districts, still have access to the database and pay far less, between about \$10,000 and \$20,000. Individuals seeking property information, which usually taps into a small portion of the database, also continue to have access. They usually pay about \$250 for the information.

The so-called base map is made of digital files that show property lines and parcel numbers for all the land in the county. Fault lines and flood zone information can be added to the information.

Wing said the county is considering appealing the court decision, partly because allowing anyone access to the database could go against a ruling by Homeland Security officials, who say there is a legitimate concern about security. County officials sought the counsel of Homeland Security after the lawsuit was filed.

Meanwhile, coalition officials hailed the ruling. Executive Director Peter Scheer said it "vindicates our view that government agencies may not claim exclusive control over records that are created with tax dollars. Affordable access to the base map means that the media and ordinary citizens will have a powerful tool for judging government performance in such areas as tax assessments, zoning variances and decisions on real estate development."

Wing said another reason county officials may appeal is "because the judge left an impression that he was concerned that this still might not be a wise decision."

Judge James P. Kleinberg said he had reservations about granting the Coalition's request, but in the end did not buy the county's argument that security would be compromised by giving out the data since it has already been disseminating it.

The county has until June 25 to file an appeal.

The Mercury News is a founding member of the coalition and has been one of its financial contributors.

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