February 12, 2009

The Honorable Martin O’Malley
Governor of Maryland
100 State Circle
Annapolis, Maryland 21401

Re: university competition with private geospatial firms in Maryland

Dear Governor O’Malley:

As you struggle with the state budget, declining tax revenues and efforts to stem the tide of job loss, particularly among small business, I would like to bring to your attention a serious problem in the State of Maryland and seek your assistance in working with our members to remedy this situation.

This is a belated but sincere congratulation for an outstanding address at the ESRI conference in San Diego this past August. Your recap of the use of geospatial data and geographic information systems to improve the quality of life and to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of government services in Maryland was impressive.

In your speech, you stated, “In leading the State of Maryland, our stated goals are: 1. To strengthen and grow the ranks of our middle class, our family owned businesses and family farms. 2. To improve public safety and public education in every region of our State. 3. To expand opportunity – the opportunity to learn and earn, the opportunity to enjoy the health of the people we love and the environment we love to more people rather than fewer.”

While these are laudable and exemplary goals, they are unfortunately not being met with regard to geospatial data and geographic information systems in the State of Maryland. On behalf of our member firms in Maryland, I am writing to alert you to practices within the Maryland State government that actually conflict with your stated goals by facilitating and condoning unfair competition with small business GIS firms by universities.

John M. Palatiello, Executive Director
1760 Reston Parkway, Suite 515, Reston, Virginia 20190
P (703) 787-6996  F (703) 787-7550  E info@mapps.org  www.mapps.org
This is a situation that has plagued Maryland for some time and which, in light of the current economic situation, has been the subject of renewed and heightened angst among our member firms. It is our hope that we can work cooperatively with your administration to bring a just and equitable solution to this issue.

MAPPS (www.mapps.org) is a national association of more than 150 private firms in the geospatial data and geographic information systems (GIS) field. We have more than a dozen member firms in Maryland, employing several hundred people.

Our members are deeply concerned that universities in Maryland, including Towson and Salisbury as well as Washington College, perform commercially available geospatial and GIS services and that the State of Maryland contracts with universities for commercial activities in the geospatial and GIS field. These universities are using students, state tax dollars and state facilities to perform work that should be performed by private sector firms. These institutions are engaged in activities that go far beyond any reasonable education and research mission. They market their services, exhibit at trade shows, submit competitive proposals on procurements and receive grants and contracts, often on a sole source basis. Attached is a series of web links to examples of university activities that duplicate and compete with the private sector, and thus take work opportunities away from the private sector.

Our members hire graduates of colleges and universities with degrees in engineering, surveying, geography, computer science, information technology and other degree programs. While classroom education and laboratory and field experience are important components in preparing students for careers in the geospatial field, it is inappropriate for universities to compete with the very firms that will be hiring those students. There is a distinct difference between laboratory and field work and training on one hand, and commercially available production work on the other. We believe that line is being crossed by universities in Maryland on a regular basis and results in an inappropriate and unethical practice for a university.

We support education programs to attract and prepare students for professional careers. We support laboratory work to expose students to practical application of theory and classroom instruction. We support work-study programs and internships. And we support legitimate research by universities. However, when a university engages in offering and performing services that are commercially available from private, for-profit firms, the university has crossed the line of unfair competition with the private sector.

We respectfully urge your immediate investigation of the practices of Maryland state universities and Maryland state agencies so that our member firms can work with your office on the adoption of policies and procedures that will prevent such unfair university competition with the private sector in the future. We would be pleased to work with you to define the appropriate roles and responsibilities of universities in the geospatial field, so that faculty, staff and students, and our members and state officials, have a clear understanding of what are and are not legitimate activities of the university, and what is in the province of the private sector.
At a time when middle class employees of private geospatial firms, and small and family owned businesses in Maryland are struggling, when unemployment is rising, the economy is declining, and Congress is enacting a more than $1 trillion dollar stimulus package to jump-start the economy and create private sector jobs, it is counter-productive to a sound economy, reasonable public policy, and your stated goals for Maryland for universities to engage in unfair competition with the private sector. Our member firms are facing cut-backs and are being forced to down-size their workforce due to the declining economy. This situation is exacerbated by the loss of business opportunities to universities.

Utilizing the private sector to meet Maryland’s commercial geospatial needs can help save and create private sector jobs, support the middle class, and contribute to the success of small and family owned businesses, while ensuring quality education for the next generation of geospatial technicians and professionals. We look forward to working with you and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your Administration to achieve these goals.

Respectfully,

[Signature]

John M. Palatiello
MAPPS Executive Director
Examples of University Competition in Maryland with Private Geospatial Firms

http://goccp.washcoll.edu/cmap.php - link to their website boasting their $100,000 award to provide GIS services for Crime Mapping

http://gis.washcoll.edu/labservices.php - “Services” page

http://gis.washcoll.edu/pdf/pdf_gis.pdf - Brochure

http://gis.washcoll.edu/ - Home Page

http://www.towson.edu/outreach/cgis/ - overview

http://www.towson.edu/outreach/cgis/productsandservices/ - services

http://www.esrgc.org/ overview

http://www.esrgc.org/resources.htm - services