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TO REACH US: (905) 881-3333

GIS systems put company on map

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It started three years ago with five friends and \$100.

Today it's grown to 28 employees with revenues of \$5 million.

Richmond Hill's Orion Technology Inc. has experienced tremendous growth as a provider of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for cities and municipalities worldwide.

Locally, the company has set up web-based systems for Markham, Richmond Hill and the Regional Municipality of York.

Meanwhile, the Town of Newmarket is considering whether it should add the feature to its website.

"We're in the business of Geographic Information Systems," vice president Shafik Jiwani said. "It's a set of computer tools that allow you to deal with geographic data. Our approach is to provide GIS to the masses."

The five partners in the business, Shafik Jiwani, his brother, Zul, Satinath Sarkar, Mohamed Nishath and Nathan Thiya discovered a gold-mine in making GIS applications for municipalities.

For years, local governments have been collecting data that could be represented on maps.

"We saw a niche and we capitalized on it," Jiwani said. "The municipalities have all the ingredients."

It takes five days for Orion to set-up a GIS application at a cost of \$35,000 to \$40,000.

Jiwani said a GIS system

saves municipalities money in the long run.

Rather than have clerks tied up on the phone dealing with inquires, clients can access the information themselves anytime on the web.

Markham's director of strategic planning and quality Stephen Chait agrees. The city wanted to use its website as a promotional tool for investors.

"In promoting ourselves we found it frustrating we were (limited) 9 to 5," he said. "Now we have the service 24 hours-a-day and 365 days-a-year. It's been a real hit with customers."

The Markham website allows the user to cross-reference large amounts of geographic data. For example, if a person wants to find out the location of the top 100 employers in Markham they can call it up on the site.

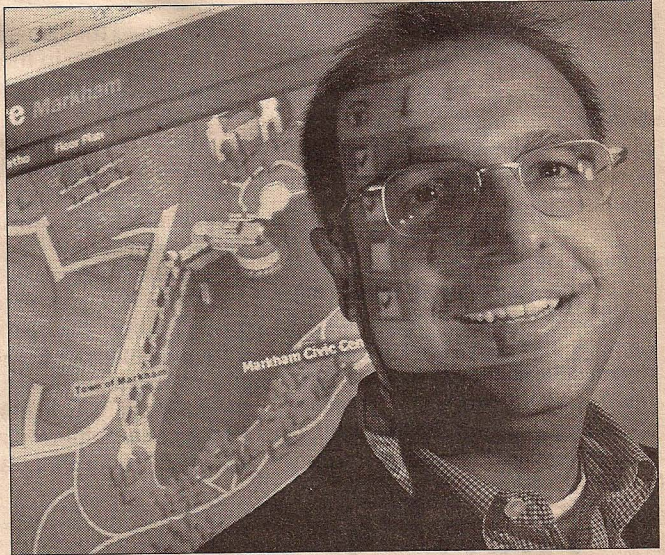
Should the user want to cross-reference the information with the business parks in the city they can click on a dialogue box and add the information to the map.

Using different layers on the map a person can add or remove information, customizing the map as they please. The city also offers similar features for residents and tourists.

In addition to the GIS system, the Markham site also has a 3-D map of the town, a technology Orion pioneered.

In order to create the 3-D map Orion has a helicopter fly over the town and capture it on video.

Using the pictures, Orion



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Shafik Jawani is vice-president of Orion Technology, a richmond Hill company that provides 3-D geographic images for websites.

employees recreate the city in three dimension. The map is detail oriented and even shows plant life in the city.

"It's a fairly tedious task," Jiwani said. "We make it as realistic as (possible)."

The service costs from \$3,000 to \$5,000 a month. The map is updated once a year. Markham is the only city that has a 3-D map on their website.

Chait said Markham chose Orion to make their website because they were the best in the field.

Rob Prentice, the Town of Newmarket's director of corporate services, said the municipality has begun collecting data for the mapping system for in-house use. Prentice said that information may be adapted to the town's website.

"It's a very useful tool," he said. "It's an effective way to present information."

Orion's reputation as one of the leaders in the field extends beyond York Region.

"They are really focused in on the local government (applications)," Nigel

Roberts, chapter leader, of the Urban Information Systems Association of Ontario said. "They are one of the early developers of the technology. They have a mature product."

But the application isn't limited to use by local governments. The technology can be used by businesses as well.

Richard Talbot president of Unionville's Talbot Consultants International Inc. said GIS is a great tool for retailers.

"It's very useful for the retail side of demographics and sales," he said. "It can be used for a store's direct marketing."

Orion has already built a GIS application for John Deere and other companies.

Jiwani doesn't know what the future holds for his company.

"The growth is gradual. We will bring on additional staff," he said adding they plan to hire 20 more staff next year. "We're not businessmen. Our weakness is our business mind."

Tai Chi

Road to Health