

# Going mobile cuts the paper trail

Swamped with data, a council has torn up the past and clicked into the future, writes **Chris Jenkins**

AS one of Australia's holiday meccas, Noosa has to present its best face not just to locals but to hordes of summer tourists.

For the Noosa Shire Council, part of that job is maintaining more than 30,000 publicly owned assets, from bins, park swings and barbecues to beach access areas.

Noosa Shire asset-planning team leader Chris Campbell says every job to inspect or fix a council asset used to involve at least one sheet of A4 paper. The paperwork then came back to the office, was photocopied and scanned into a data-management system, all of which added to the processing time.

"There was a lot of time and labour involved in that," Campbell says.

Three years ago, the council embarked on a project to "locate" all its assets using GPS data.

The collection of that data opened an opportunity to replace the pen-and-paper reporting system, he says.

"We thought that we have all this data, so we'd better utilise it."

About 18 months ago, the Council developed an asset-management system that used Pocket PCs to collect data. The handheld units were linked via Bluetooth to small GPS units. The GBM Mobile package, developed by Brisbane's Exa-Min Technologies and distributed by MapInfo, was chosen as the mapping application.

Campbell says the GBM Mobile application allowed the Council to develop XML forms to suit its own needs, making the system inexpensive to develop.

"We've probably saved our money tenfold over the past 18 months," he says.

At first, about 30 work trucks were equipped with GPS and handhelds.

The idea took some selling to maintenance crews, who were scepti-



**In the field:** Planning officer Dallas Bickley takes to the Noosa roads with Noosa Shire Council's newly adopted mobile GPS system

Picture: David Sproule

cal when the project kicked off, Campbell says. "But within a couple of months, they were the biggest supporters of it. It's probably cut our paper trail by 75 per cent," he says.

The drop in time used to process paperwork has freed council staff for other tasks, an effect felt equally in the field.

"It's allowed us to undertake more inspections and decrease the time between inspections as well," Campbell says.

One example of the improved efficiency has been in inspecting the all-important beach accesses.

Whereas it used to take an officer a day and a half to inspect all beach accesses for defects, it can now be done in half a day, Campbell says.

Overall inspection times have been cut by 25 per cent.

The council is also receiving fewer request from residents to undertake work, because the work crews can now be more pro-active about maintenance.

The Pocket PC system has also found a role in managing insurance claims against the council.

By recording when and where an inspection was made and having the

data readily available, "we can prove we met our commitments on routine maintenance", Campbell says.

The system is also expanding beyond asset management to other areas of the council.

New applications planned include pool-fencing inspections and litter-bin monitoring, Campbell says.

"Everyone is coming up with new applications all the time," he says.

The GPS system is now also being used to monitor the waterways within the shire and for parking enforcement. At Christmas, with a carbon-paper infringement system,

the council could be up to a week behind in processing parking fines, Campbell says.

But the biggest planned development is to synchronise the data recorded by the Pocket PCs live via mobile, rather than by physical connection to the computer on return to base.

"Eventually, we'd like to get it out in the field through mobile phones," Campbell says.

With live data, work crews could be updated on the spot and plan more effectively, while parking fines could be processed before the officer finished their shift.

## THE PROBLEM

Paper-based work scheduling and reporting was wasting time in and out of the office.

## THE PROCESS

Council issued work crews with GPS-equipped Pocket PCs used in conjunction with a GBM Mobile mapping application.

## THE RESULT

Inspection time cut by 25 per cent and 75 per cent less paperwork.