

3-D mapping service adds Montgomery and other state sites

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On the web---- Microsoft Virtual Earth 3-D: Log on to <http://maps.live.Com/> and then click on maps. The service and the 3-D download are free.

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By Rick Harmon / rharmon@gannett.com / Montgomery Advertiser

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Three-dimensional models of Montgomery, Birmingham, Huntsville and Mobile went up on Microsoft's Virtual Earth 3D mapping service in July, ahead of much larger cities such as New Orleans.

Microsoft hadn't planned to get mid-sized and smaller cities online until it mapped the world's most populated cities, said spokesman Jerry Skaw. Models of America's 15 largest cities went online in November.

Officials with the computer giant changed the schedule after they were lobbied by Maury Mitchell, director of the Alabama Criminal Justice Information Center.

Mitchell's agency and Microsoft have been working with other groups on 3-D models of the state's high-security areas for law enforcement and other first responders.

"Alabama is a leader in the use of this type of technology," Mitchell said. "There may not be that many areas in which you can say we are one of the top states in the country, but this is definitely one of them."

Mitchell persuaded Microsoft to map key cities as well.

"I don't know how long it would have taken otherwise," he said. "But my guess is, it would have been years before you would have seen anything in Alabama in 3-D, if at all."

The project excites Mitchell: "It's a neat thing for Alabama."

Alabama's tourism director, Lee Sentell, wholeheartedly agrees. He thinks the 3-D site will bring more visitors to the state.

"People enjoy previewing their trips on the Internet," Sentell said. "Being able to see these sights in 3-D will only enhance that, and that will only help Alabama tourism."

The program uses images shot from the air -- the planes fly at about 5,500 feet -- with large-format digital cameras.

"If we wanted to, we could count the number of bricks in a building," Mitchell said of the imagery used in the maps of high-security areas.

Skaw said Microsoft is in the process of taking pictures on the ground and developing street-level 3-D maps for cities.

"It's only going to get better," Mitchell said. "They (Microsoft) have asked me what I thought, and I've already told them it's not as good as I'd like it to be. They did some buildings, but not others, and I told them I thought they needed more detail."

Mitchell is one of the driving forces behind the street-level pictures.

"We are taking more photos for them to use," he said. "I am going to do all the state buildings in the Capitol complex. We are going to make the state Capitol a showcase."

Skaw and Mitchell see an infinite number of mapping possibilities.

Both predict that police will one day have the ability to check out a building as they drive to an emergency using pictures, floor plans and construction information taken from a computer in their cruiser.

Not all the applications, of course, will be serious ones.

"In a couple of years, you may be able to turn on your computer and watch dinosaurs walking through a 3-D Montgomery," he said.