

## After Supreme Court loss, O.C. puts map online

The Orange County Register (MCT)

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**Aug. 07**--If there was any question about how Orange County would comply with a unanimous state Supreme Court verdict, the county answered it with an exclamation point last week. After losing a six-year fight to charge high fees for its computerized map, OC Landbase, the county posted the map online for free Friday.

The county also went beyond the letter of the law by presenting the map in a format that is more widely used than the one the county itself uses. This is something the county did not legally have to do. "It's been a long time coming, but now that the Supreme Court has resolved this issue, Orange County is doing the right thing by making this database available as a public record," said Peter Scheer, executive director of the First Amendment Coalition. "They're going out of their way to make it available online, and they're to be commended."

The First Amendment Coalition filed a brief in favor of releasing Landbase. The Register was one of several news organizations that joined that brief.

Landbase is a geographically exact map of about 665,000 assessor's parcels. The county packages it with similarly exact digital maps of streets, city, school and supervisorial district boundaries. But the real value of Landbase is that one can layer a nearly infinite variety of other digital maps on top of it: demographics, land use, economic and environmental features.

That's the reason the Sierra Club asked for Landbase in June 2007. It sued under the California Public Records Act when the county asked for a \$375,000 licensing fee and pursued the case all the way to the state Supreme Court.

The club wanted to map land ownership near environmentally sensitive areas -- something it is already doing in Los Angeles County with a map it obtained from L.A. County for less than \$10. The Supreme Court ruled 7-0 on July 8 that the Public Records Act and the California Constitution required the county to release Landbase for "the direct cost of duplication" -- essentially the cost of copying it on a CD.

The Register filed a Public Records Act request for Landbase the next day and received it early last week in the format in which the county keeps it, [Oracle](#) Spatial. [Oracle](#) Spatial, however, is an unusual format for digital maps. While [Oracle](#) is one of the leading database companies, its Spatial product is rarely used in the mapping world.

The dominant player in the digital map world is Redlands-based ESRI. Its format, the shapefile, is the one you'll find if you download census maps. Shapefiles also are easily uploaded into [Google](#) Maps and open source QGIS.

Under the Public Records Act, however, the county was required only to make Landbase available in the format in which it kept the data. It decided to go further and to make the data available as a shapefile at a new public portal ([ocpublicworks.com/survey/services/lis](http://ocpublicworks.com/survey/services/lis)).

OC Landbase is the county government's geographic information system. After a six-year legal fight, the California Supreme Court ordered the county to release it on July 8. The county made it a downloadable file at [ocpublicworks.com/survey/services/lis](http://ocpublicworks.com/survey/services/lis)

What it contains: Every assessor's parcel (about 655,000) in the county, plus every street, city limits and school and supervisorial district boundaries.

What do I need to use it? Geographic Information System software such as ArcGIS or open-source QGIS.  
A warning: The learning curve for GIS software is steep.

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