



# NEWS

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## **Northwest Arkansas in 3D on Google Earth**

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. – Anyone looking for a location for a new business, planning to build a house or wanting to take a virtual tour of northwest Arkansas can now log onto the free Google Earth Web site to view high-resolution, color images of Benton and Washington counties.

Google Earth's 3D technology provides an unparalleled way to see the area. Visitors to the Web site at [earth.google.com](http://earth.google.com) must first download the free 3D map viewer to their desktop computers, and then they can automatically connect to the Google servers and view satellite imagery or aerial photography anywhere in the world. The beta version of the viewer is only available for newer Windows-based computers.

The aerial photography for northwest Arkansas, some of the highest resolution data in Google Earth's database, was taken in 2004 as part of an innovative effort that brought together governments from around the region in a collaborative project to acquire the information at a low cost.

The Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission coordinated the aerial project in conjunction with the Arkansas Highway and Transportation Department, the University of Arkansas and virtually every government entity in Benton and Washington counties. Public utility companies and various federal agencies also cooperated.

“Without the technical expertise and advice from the Center for Advanced Spatial Technologies in Fulbright College, this project would not have achieved the level of success now enjoyed by so many users,” John McLarty of the Regional Planning Commission said.

Site visitors can enter an address in northwest Arkansas and the viewer will take them to that location, enabling them to roam about with the mouse as they “fly” over the area. Roads, businesses and other points of interest can also be added to the image.

McLarty and Elizabeth Bowen, Benton County’s coordinator of its geographic information systems, have presented the aerial project to groups across the state and even nationwide as an example of the benefits of regional cooperation.

“The level of cooperation between the two counties and the cities of northwest Arkansas is indeed trend setting,” said Bowen. “Due to cooperative efforts like this, northwest Arkansas is able to set an example for other areas of the nation and have the aerial data needed to help our counties and cities do their jobs more efficiently and effectively. With the growth that we are experiencing, we need to take advantage of every tool available, and this project has given us a powerful new tool to use.”

Each community received a copy of the data and all the digital photos are stored at the Center for Advanced Spatial Technologies, available for download.

“We realized that there was a need to make it easy to access the photography,” said CAST researcher Brian Culpepper, “so we created a small Web mapping site where the public could go and view the photography anywhere in the area.” The aerial photos can be found at [www.rgis.cast.uark.edu](http://www.rgis.cast.uark.edu).

Shortly after Culpepper and the CAST group created the Web site, Google contacted Jack Cothren of CAST. After seeing the data, the company wanted to add it to its international dataset.

“We coordinated with the northwest Arkansas group,” said Cothren, “who were delighted to make the data available to everyone. So we sent the data to Google.”

Cothren said that to see how the imagery works, enter “Bentonville AR,” any of the other cities in the region or a street address into the box in the upper left and Google Earth will fly to that location. The controls at the bottom allow users to adjust the angle, rotate, fly and otherwise move around the area.

“There’s a real ‘wow’ factor in using the system but it serves really practical purposes as well,” said Cristina Scarlat, a researcher at CAST who works with the photos. “The highly detailed aerial photography can be used by businesses considering locating in the area, by real estate agents interested in showing a prospective buyer different neighborhoods or by county officials planning a road project.”

McLarty noted that having northwest Arkansas in Google Earth literally provides a new level of visibility for the region, as well as illustrating the benefits of such collaborative efforts.

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