

Mapping a Difference

OpenStreetMap volunteers map post-earthquake Haiti, and Free Linux Box finds happy homes for donated Linux machines. *By Rikki Kite*



RIKKI KITE

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What does your project do to attract marketing, documentation, translators, and other non-developer contributors to its community? Do you have stories about how your open source project is contributing to Haiti relief efforts or helping other communities? If you have community news or stories to share, send them to me at rkite@linuxpromagazine.com.

January 12 marked one year since the 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit Haiti. "Like many who saw the images of the destruction caused by the earthquake in Haiti, OpenStreetMap contributors wanted to help," says Richard Weait, FLOSS advocate and OpenStreetMap (OSM) contributor [1]. Weait says that after the earthquake, good maps of Haiti weren't available. "Within hours of the earthquake, mappers from as far away as England and Japan were tracing major roads from old, low-resolution aerial imagery to provide the basic skeleton of a map for Port au Prince," he says.

International aide projects, rescue and relief groups, international militia, and companies helped with the volunteer mapping effort. "These companies were able to provide aerial imagery that was higher resolution and more up to date," Weait says. "These post-earthquake aerial images were used by OpenStreetMap contributors to place all of the roads and a good portion of the back alleys on the map [2]. They enabled us to indicate which bridges and buildings appeared to have fallen during the earthquake and which roads appeared to be blocked by rubble," he says.

More than a week after the earthquake, new aerial imagery donated almost daily showed groups of tarpaulins and tents on soccer fields. "The people of Port au Prince displaced from damaged buildings were making ad hoc camps," says Weait.

Although it is interesting to make a better map of Haiti, Weait says it's another thing to make it useful. "An OpenStreetMap contributor in Germany converted that OpenStreetMap data into a format useful on hand-held GPS devices and updated those files every hour." He adds that OpenStreetMap became the reliable mapping source to relief groups arriving in Haiti and was even used as the main map in the UN headquarters.

"OpenStreetMap contributors know that the best maps of a place are made by people who live in that place," Weait says. "Several trips to Haiti were funded by the World Bank to train Haitians in

how to update OpenStreetMap data and to donate equipment so that they could continue to update their map" [3].

To volunteer or donate to the OpenStreetMap project, visit the OpenStreetMap website [1].

Free Linux Box

"Free Linux Box is a website that tries to connect individuals who want to give away fully functional computers running open source software to individuals who need a computer, free of cost," says Linc Fessenden, host of The LinuxLink TechShow [4]. "Several times in the course of talking with people on and off line while doing the LinuxLink TechShow, people have mentioned this great idea. They said it would be great to have a sort of hardware exchange website where people with extra, old or unused Linux machines could donate them to people who need one," Fessenden says. "After hearing of the idea one last time in early March 2009 from Beth Lynn Eicher (of Ohio Linux Fest), I caved in, registered the domain, wrote up some custom code, and up the website went," he says.

Since launching the website, Fessenden says he's seen between 30 and 40 computer donations, most of which were quickly accepted. Once a machine has been donated successfully, it can be removed from site, and "the process is ready to start again!"

Fessenden adds, "Everyone is happy and it's recycling at its absolute best – with that special Linux twist!" To find out more about the site or to donate a working Linux machine, visit the FreeLinuxBox.org website [5]. ■■■

LIKEABLE LINKS

- [1] OpenStreetMap: <http://www.openstreetmap.org/>
- [2] Post-earthquake time-lapsed OpenStreetMap edits: <http://vimeo.com/9182869>
- [3] Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team: <http://hot.openstreetmap.org/weblog/>
- [4] TLLTS: <http://tllts.org/>
- [5] Free Linux Box: <http://freelinuxbox.org/>