

MAPZEN

OPEN SOURCE MAPPING PLATFORM MAPZEN SHUTS DOWN

On 2 January, Mapzen – the mapping platform company lauded among developers and civic hackers for its open source approach – declared it would be shutting down at the end of the month. And on 1 February, Mapzen-hosted APIs were duly switched off.

Mapzen was founded in 2013 and was an open source mapping platform company focused on the core components of geo platforms. The company increased the viability of attractive open mapping through its provision of tools covering every component of web map creation, including searching, routing, graphics, cartography and data. Mapzen's components – hosted on GitHub and written in Java, JavaScript, Ruby and Python – were used by OpenStreetMap, CARTO and Remix, among countless others. In the succinct words of Michael Schnuerle, chief data officer of Louisville Metropolitan Government and avid Mapzen fan, “they took stuff that was complicated and made it easy to do.”

Mapzen CEO Randy Meech has thus far declined to explain why Mapzen shut down and theories on the start-up's demise abound. The most popular, of course, pertains to the company's profitability or lack thereof. As Mapzen senior software engineer Dan Phiffer recently explained in an exit interview with Civic Hall, a New York civic tech news outlet, Mapzen's money was made via its metered API, through one-off deals with organisations such as Tesla, World Bank and Portland's Tri-Met and through the reselling of Mapzen services via CARTO. But was Mapzen making enough

money? The company was owned by a Samsung subsidiary focused on research and funded by the South Korean company's incubator Samsung Next. Mapping companies are not cheap to run and it is possible Samsung simply decided Mapzen was not worth its price tag.



Mapzen

So is Mapzen the cartographic canary? Likely not. Despite the fall of Mapzen, our industry has good cause for optimism. Time for a few examples: in 2015, a consortium of German carmakers purchased Nokia's mapping company HERE for \$2.7 billion; Uber has recently invested \$500 million in mapping technology in an attempt to break free from Google services; and Mapbox has recently received \$164 million from a Softbank-led funding round. The reassuring truth is individuals, companies and governments will always need locational data and ways of organising it. Despite the fall of Mapzen, our industry continues its merry growth.

Fortunately, all is open and all Mapzen code and data was always designed to outlive the company. Seemingly adopting a position of strategic pessimism, many of the company's developers and hierarchy acknowledged from the outset that open geo work tends to be more durable than open geo start-ups. So aside from the code that ran Mapzen's metered API system, each Mapzen service has been designed to run effectively without Mapzen.

[An open source repository for Mapzen's API, applications and documentation will remain](#)



on GitHub (<https://github.com/mapzen>). And Mapzen has produced a comprehensive migration guide (<https://mapzen.com/blog/migration>) which, in addition to explaining how users can run their servers with the open source projects that powered Mapzen services, admirably lists alternative hosted APIs offering similar functionality. For cartography and vector tiles, the guide suggests Mapbox, MAPCAT, Nextzen, Thunderforest and OpenMapTiles. For routing and navigation, it suggests GraphHopper, Project OSRM and Mapbox Directions API. And for searching and geocoding it suggests Nominatim, OSMNames, geocode.earth, OpenCage Data and Mapbox Search API.

Mapzen's places database project Who's on First (<https://whosonfirst.org>) and its transit schedule data project Transitland (<https://transit.land>) will continue to operate as spin-offs, and, the Mapzen team that created the celebrated Valhalla routing engine will join Mapbox to work on further routing challenges.

Mapzen was truly trailblazing. It rendered many inspiring ways to visualise

location data, amalgamating aesthetics, effectiveness and historical continuity. Well done Mapzen, RIP Mapzen and thank you for being so open and so awesome.

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