Transportation & Logistics: A Guide to Geographic Information Systems

From Certus

August 14, 2026

Press Release

Before a package reaches a doorstep, it may pass through a warehouse, a highway interchange, a rail yard or a port. Along the way, every stop, delay and change in direction creates a trail of location data. Geographic information systems help transportation and logistics teams turn that trail into a clear picture of where goods are moving and where problems may be developing.

GIS may sound highly technical at first, but the basic idea is simple: connect information to places, then view it on a map. This can reveal patterns that are easy to miss when the same information appears only in rows and columns.

What Is GIS?

A geographic information system, usually called GIS, combines digital maps with databases. Users can search, compare and analyze the information stored with each mapped feature.

A basic road map shows streets and landmarks. A GIS map can contain many separate layers of information, such as:

- Highways and local roads
- Bridges and tunnels
- Rail lines and ports
- Warehouses and distribution centers
- Delivery areas
- Traffic volumes
- Weather conditions
- Construction zones
- Crash locations
- Elevation and flood risk

Users can turn layers on and off depending on the question they are trying to answer. A delivery planner might compare warehouses, customer addresses, traffic and road restrictions. A transportation agency might examine bridges, pavement conditions, crash records and planned repairs.

Why Use GIS in Transportation and Logistics?

Transportation is based on movement between places, so location affects almost every decision. A spreadsheet may list addresses, travel times or vehicle records, but it does not immediately show how those pieces of information are connected across an area.

GIS adds geographic context. It can help teams identify where delays happen, which customers are close together, where equipment needs maintenance or which roads may be unsafe for a certain vehicle.

GIS may also help teams:

- See how routes, facilities and transportation assets relate to one another
- Spot patterns in delays, crashes and maintenance needs
- Compare possible locations for warehouses or terminals
- Plan for closures, severe weather and other disruptions
- Share updated geographic information across departments

The software does not make every decision automatically. People still need reliable data and clear goals. GIS gives them a way to organize the available information and compare possible choices.

How GIS Organizes Spatial Data

Spatial or geospatial data includes both a location and details about what exists or happens there.

Most GIS projects use two main types of spatial data: vector and raster data.

Vector Data

Vector data represents separate features using points, lines and polygons.

- Points can represent bus stops, traffic signals, warehouses, customers or crash locations.
- Lines can represent streets, railways, pipelines or planned delivery routes.

- Polygons can represent city boundaries, school districts, service areas, airport property or warehouse sites.

Each feature can also contain additional information. A highway line may include its name, speed limit, number of lanes, surface condition and vehicle restrictions.

Raster Data

Raster data represents an area as a grid made of small cells or pixels. Each cell holds information about the small area it represents.

Aerial photographs and satellite images are common raster files. Raster data can also represent rainfall, temperature, land cover, traffic density or elevation.

Transportation planners can place road lines over an aerial image to compare the map with current conditions. They can also add elevation and flood information to find routes that severe weather could affect.

GIS Software

GIS software is used to display, edit and analyze spatial data. Some programs are installed on desktop computers, while others work through a web browser or mobile device.

A GIS program may allow a user to:

- Add points, lines and boundaries to a map
- Import data from a spreadsheet
- Measure distance and area
- Find features within a chosen area
- Compare several map layers
- Create delivery or service zones
- Calculate routes along a road network
- Study changes between two dates
- Build maps for reports or presentations

Some tools are designed for trained GIS analysts. Others provide simpler mapping features for drivers, field workers, students and managers. The right option depends on the size of the project and the type of analysis required.

Hardware and Data Collection

GIS data can come from many devices and sources. Transportation organizations may collect new information in the field or use existing public datasets.

Common data-collection tools and sources include:

- GPS receivers
- Smartphones and tablets
- Vehicle tracking devices
- Traffic counters
- Cameras
- Drones
- Satellites
- Surveying equipment
- Standard laptops and desktop computers

A smartphone can record the location of a damaged sign or blocked road. A vehicle tracking system can record the route a truck traveled. A drone may capture overlapping images that can later be combined into an aerial map.

Images and field records need location information before they can appear in the correct place on a GIS map. GPS may add this information automatically. Otherwise, users may need georeferencing, which matches an image or map with known locations.

The People Behind GIS

GIS requires more than software and equipment. People decide what data to collect, how to organize it and what questions to ask.

A transportation GIS project may involve:

- GIS analysts
- Engineers
- Drivers
- Dispatchers
- Surveyors
- Emergency planners

- Warehouse managers
- Maintenance crews
- Data scientists
- Local or state officials

Drivers and field workers may collect information, while analysts check the data and create maps. Engineers may use those maps to plan repairs, while government transportation agencies may use them to coordinate inspections, public services or emergency response. Managers may review the results when deciding where to send vehicles or invest in new facilities.

A map can still be misleading if its data is incomplete, outdated or unsuitable for the level of detail required.

Coordinate Systems and Map Projections

Every GIS dataset needs a system for describing location. A coordinate system provides a consistent way to record positions on Earth.

Latitude and longitude are familiar examples. They use numbers to show how far north, south, east or west a location is.

A map projection converts that curved surface into a flat map. Since the Earth is round, every flat map changes shape, distance, direction or area in some way. The best projection depends on the purpose of the project.

Common systems include:

- WGS 84, which is widely used with global positioning and navigation data
- UTM, which divides the world into zones for more accurate regional measurements
- State Plane Coordinate Systems, which are used for detailed mapping in different parts of the United States

Map layers must use coordinate systems that work together. Otherwise, roads, buildings and other features may appear in the wrong place.

Beginners do not need to memorize every coordinate system. They should learn how to check which system a dataset uses and avoid combining layers without confirming that they align.

Common Transportation and Logistics Uses

GIS supports transportation work at many scales, from planning a single delivery route to studying national freight movement.

Route Planning

Route planning often involves more than distance. Delivery planners may also consider travel time, vehicle height and weight limits, tolls, construction, fuel use, delivery windows and customer priorities.

Route analysis allows planners to consider these conditions across a road network. It can also help planners prepare backup routes when a highway closes or severe weather affects an area.

Fleet and Vehicle Management

Location data from vehicles can be displayed on a GIS map. Dispatchers may use it to see which drivers are nearby, review completed trips or study repeated delays.

Historical data can show where vehicles spend too much time waiting or where drivers regularly leave a planned route. The results can support scheduling and training, but they should be reviewed carefully because GPS signals and tracking records are not always perfect.

Warehouse and Facility Planning

Manufacturing and distribution operations often depend on warehouses that are close to customers, suppliers, employees and major transportation routes. Other factors may include land cost, zoning, flood risk, available space, and access to railways, ports or airports.

GIS lets planners compare these factors on the same map. They can remove unsuitable areas and examine the remaining locations more closely.

Road and Infrastructure Maintenance

Transportation agencies manage many physical assets, including roads, bridges, guardrails, signs, traffic signals, drainage systems and pavement markings.

A GIS database can store the location, age, condition and inspection history of each asset. Maintenance and field service teams can then plan field visits, identify groups of nearby repairs and update records after the work is finished.

Traffic and Safety Analysis

Crash reports, traffic counts, intersections, road design, speed limits and weather can all be mapped. When several crashes occur in the same area, analysts can study whether road conditions or traffic patterns may be involved.

A group of crashes in the same area does not prove what caused them. It shows planners where a closer investigation may be useful.

Emergency and Disruption Planning

Floods, wildfires, snowstorms, earthquakes and major accidents can interrupt transportation networks. During a disruption, a map can show which roads, bridges, railways and facilities lie within the affected area.

Emergency planners may use this information to identify detours, find nearby shelters, protect important facilities or decide where supplies should be delivered first.

Public Transit and Intermodal Transportation

Public transportation systems use GIS to map routes, stations, stops, service areas and ridership patterns. Planners can study which neighborhoods have limited access or where a new stop may be useful.

GIS also supports intermodal transportation, which involves moving people or goods between different types of transportation. A freight map may connect highways, rail yards, airports, ports and distribution centers.

Getting Started With GIS

Beginners can learn GIS through a small project that answers one clear question.

1. Choose a simple goal. You might map delivery locations, bus stops, traffic crashes or nearby warehouses.
2. Find a reliable dataset. Government agencies and universities often provide downloadable geographic data.
3. Check the data. Review its date, source, coordinate system and level of detail.
4. Add the data to GIS software. Start with one or two layers rather than building a complicated map immediately.
5. Explore the map. Zoom in, select features, measure distances and compare the available information.
6. Use the map to answer a simple question. You might find which customers are within five miles of a warehouse or which crashes occurred near an intersection.

7. Review the result. Ask whether the data supports the conclusion and whether any important information is missing.
8. Share the map clearly. Include a title, legend, scale and source information so another person can understand it.

As their skills improve, learners can explore route analysis, mobile data collection, satellite imagery, 3D maps and more advanced transportation planning.

Data Quality and GIS Limitations

A GIS map can look precise even when the data behind it is incomplete. Users should check when the information was collected, who created it and whether it covers the full study area.

Location accuracy also varies. A line showing the general path of a road may be accurate enough for regional planning but not for detailed engineering work. GPS locations may be slightly inaccurate when buildings, trees or tunnels block or reflect the signal.

Maps also leave out information. A route that appears efficient may pass through a neighborhood with frequent school traffic or include a road that is difficult for large trucks. Local knowledge and field checks remain useful parts of transportation planning.

Fun Facts

- Geocoding turns a street address into coordinates that can be placed on a map.
- GPS records where something is, while GIS combines that location with other information.
- One GIS project can use data collected by satellites, vehicles, smartphones and field crews.
- Individual map layers can be updated without rebuilding the entire map.
- GIS can study movement by road, rail, air, water, bicycle or foot.
- Different map projections can make the same place look wider, narrower, larger or smaller on a flat map.
- A transportation map may cover an entire country or focus on a single intersection.

Additional Resources

- What Is a Geographic Information System?
- Geographic Information System Tutorial

- The Nature of Geographic Information
- Harvard Center for Geographic Analysis
- TIGER Data Products Guide
- Transportation Maps and Geospatial Data
- Freight Analysis Framework
- Geographic Information Systems for Flood Mapping
- GIS Resources from NASA Earthdata
- NOAA Digital Coast GIS Training

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