

Google touts maps amid reports of Apple setback

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Google's digital mapping service is preparing to introduce offline access on mobile devices and more three-dimensional images of major cities as it braces for a possible loss in traffic from Apple's iPhone and iPad.

Wednesday's preview of the upcoming features came ahead of an Apple developer conference next week. Published reports say Apple Inc. is planning to use that forum to announce that it is dropping Google's maps as a built-in option on its mobile platform and switching to its own, internally developed navigation service.

Google Inc. mapping executive Brian McClendon didn't directly address questions about the potential Apple setback. He said Google wants to make its maps available in as many places as possible.

The new options on Google's maps won't be available for at least a few more weeks.

Google had billed the updates as "the next dimension" for the world's most popular digital mapping service. Google is trying to give people more reasons to use its maps at the same time that it's facing a potential challenge from a bigger company in Apple.

Both The Wall Street Journal and a technology blog called 9to5 have reported that Apple next week will preview changes to its mobile operating system that will drop Google Maps as a featured application. Apple plans to replace Google's mapping service with an alternative that it has been secretly patching together from a series of recent acquisitions. The Journal's story, published Tuesday, cited unnamed people familiar with Apple's strategy.

If Apple ousts Google Maps as a built-in option on the iPhone and iPad, it would be the latest fissure between two former allies. Their relationship has been degenerating into a bitter rivalry since Google's 2008 release of its Android software to compete against Apple's iPhone. Since then, both companies have increasingly been encroaching on each other's turf.

Google's mapping service has been a featured app in Apple's mobile operating system since the iPhone's debut five years ago. Processing the mobile mapping requests from users of Apple's devices provided Google with valuable insights into people's whereabouts and preferences. That, in turn, helped Google sell more ads to local businesses.

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