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# Do I really need a land surveyor?

For **BELS**

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Why should I hire a land surveyor? According to **BELS Board Member** A. Frazier Christy (PLS/PE), the reasons are multifaceted and vast.

“When this question was asked of me I had to stop and think,” says Christy, “I have been practicing Land Surveying since 1976, now over 42 years, and currently sit on the Alabama Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers and Land Surveyors (BOL) as one of the two required Land Surveyors. There are so many reasons that a good, accurate survey by a qualified land surveyor is important. However, let’s first think about what is meant by a **‘qualified Land Surveyor.’**”

Christy explains that while an individual may be licensed by the BOL, he/she needs to *understand* the process.

## What it takes

It takes education, experience, and passing two nationally prepared tests and one state-specific test. Being licensed as a Professional Land Surveyor means that one has proven to be “minimally competent” to provide land surveying services. Not every Professional Land Surveyor has the training and expertise to perform every kind of survey. A good surveyor will shy away from a survey issue that he/she has not had experience with and recommend another surveyor to handle your problem.

Surveying is not just measuring angles and distances and preparing a map. According to Christy, it's history, research of adjoining lands, deeds, knowledge of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Flood Insurance Program, and many other issues that unknowingly crop up while doing a **proper survey**.

“Your real property is probably your most valuable asset. You need to be sure your home and all of the required information associated with your home and lands are accurately determined so you can protect your investment,” he says. “**Do not rely on a certification from the previous land owner**. They may be the most honest people on the face of the earth, but the neighbor, without the previous owner's knowledge, may very well have crossed the line with a fence, a deck or a driveway—maybe even part of an addition to their house.”

“Don't laugh,” the longtime land surveyor cautions. It happens.

Your survey needs may require special knowledge of issues such as adverse possession, riparian rights, senior title, or flood elevations. Even a simple survey in a recorded subdivision can have issues of all of the preceding complications. And rural land surveys of acreage will more often than not have one or more of these issues. The adjoining land owner may have built a fence over the property line as defined by your deed.

### **Accurately defining property lines**

You may have a parcel of land located on a river or lake and your deed calls for one of your property lines to be defined in such a way that the movement of the water tide line, mean high tide, mean low tide, or other tidal definition actually defines your boundary. Does your surveyor understand these very technical issues? Your deed may be recorded and a matter of record, but the previous deed or the tract from which your parcel was severed may not have been recorded and now there is a dispute as to the common property line with a neighbor.

Your home may be near a lake, stream, creek or river and subject to flooding. Do you need flood insurance? It can be costly and it may be required by your lender. They typically determine the requirement to obtain flood insurance by relying on a service that just looks at a map and says you are or are not in the floodplain. A surveyor can actually locate your home and determine if the requirement for insurance is valid. A surveyor can also tell you that, even though you are not in the floodplain, it might be a good idea to get the insurance anyway.

### **Understanding the location**

Another reason to hire a professional surveyor is to be able to determine the location of your new home or office building. There are a lot of sources of maps these days. Christy notes that most counties and cities have Graphical Information Systems (GIS) that show “property” lines, topographic information, floodplain data and other nice things to know. However, these maps are only as good as the base control and even at that are not really site specific. They are fantastic planning tools but when it comes to hard design and construction their value is minimal and can end up costing a lot in change orders.

“The only way to truly design a new site is to obtain an accurate, ground run survey, by a qualified licensed professional. You really do not want to have your new home or building located inside a zoning setback, built on property you do not own, or constructed at an elevation below the base flood elevation,” notes Christy.

### **So how do you find a qualified surveyor?**

A good place to start would be the Alabama Society of Professional Land Surveyors (spl.s.org). However, they should not recommend a single individual or firm. They should tell you several in your area. You can also look in the yellow pages, explains Christy.

Cost is a big concern to us all. The surveyor needs to make a little money to stay in business. No two surveys have the same problems and no two surveys cost the same. The surveyor should not be willing to just give you a price over the phone. The surveyor should ask for a copy of your deed or old survey. He/she should ask if there are any known disputes. **The Surveyor should even be willing to come to your property and determine any obvious problems before sticking his/her neck out on a price.**

Christy asserts, "You really do not want them to come back asking for more money after they finish the work. Remember — you will get what you pay for and there are no free lunches."

### Surveyor capabilities

A surveyor really cannot settle disputes over land boundaries. **They can locate and determine what you and a neighbor possess and what your deeds say you own.** Anything that is in dispute is a matter for our courts to resolve. The Surveyor can:

- Review your deed along with other evidence and render a professional opinion as to the locations and conflicts of the boundaries of your land.
- Set monuments at your property corners and mark them so they can be easily found and identified.
- Keep an accurate record of all services performed and measurements obtained.
- Identify and advise you of any apparent defect in your land description or evidence of conflict of ownership and/or use. Prepare a plat or map of your property indicating boundary measurements, the monuments found and placed, and the calculated area.
- Provide the client with copies of these maps bearing the Professional Land Surveyor's signature and seal.
- Create a property description for all new parcels or any existing parcels that may have a defect.
- Appear in court as an expert witness concerning real property ownership, location or use.
- Assist you in the planning and layout of the lots, blocks, streets, easements, etc. in a new subdivision.
- Determine if your home or building is above the base flood elevation and provide an "Elevation Certificate" for insurance purposes.

Putting in the legwork to secure the right person for the job is paramount to receiving the most bang for your buck. "You need to take the time to talk to several surveyors; get references, call them, and most of all be comfortable with your selection. Cost should not be your deciding factor. Remember your home is your most valuable asset. Like your open-heart surgery, do you want the surgeon to be the low bidder?" says Christy.

For more information about land surveyors, visit [bels.alabama.gov/](http://bels.alabama.gov/) today.

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