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# Land Surveying is the Foundation of a Good Foundation . . . and Future Updates

For **BELS**

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As long as land ownership has been a concept, so has the need for it to be surveyed and measured. The practice stretches back ages. Records show that when the Nile River delta, ancient Egypt's home to the area's most fruitful farming, flooded causing the property lines to be obscured there was a need to call in the experts to sort things out. Using ropes, plumb lines, and other tools, the first technically equipped land surveyors set off to re-establish those farming land boundaries.

Accuracy has improved over time but, on the most basic level, the practice of land surveying is about making measurements between agreed upon reference points (with regard for latitude, longitude, land and water features, and terrain) so that property can be analyzed for its uses, legally maintained and transferred without conflict.

From ropes, to chains and slide-rules, and now to digital total robotic measuring stations, drones and GPS, the tools of land surveying have made accurate measurements more efficient.

But these advances have not reduced the training and need for the licensing of professionals who utilize them.

In the State of Alabama, that's where the **Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers and Land Surveyors** (BELS, for short) enters into the picture. Land surveyors, in order to receive their professional license in Alabama, are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree (some have a master's) and meet standards requiring a combination of testing, education and experience.

On most construction sites, surveyors are the first people on any site, measuring and mapping the land. These primary measurements are then used by design engineers to understand and create the most unique structures that accurately and safely fit within the landscape. The same can be said for roadways, as surveyors are called in to determine the most accurate ways to improve the country's highways and by-ways.

For the public, property — commonly a house or land — is a primary asset, protected by accurate surveying.

**Land surveyors** and their crews spend hours working in the field, but they also spend equally important hours in courthouses and maprooms researching previous public documents, local legislation, maps and plats drawn in different decades. If the land is not surveyed accurately it may not fulfill its purpose or justify its expense. Further, surveying affects inheritance parcels, which if not surveyed, can leave a family short on speaking terms.

### **When Should I obtain a land survey?**

Frazier Christy, a licensed land surveyor and **BELS** past chair, described four common situations when it's in the consumer's best interest to obtain a professional survey:

1. Any transfer of real property (land, structures and usage rights)
2. Home additions or buildings
3. Fences
4. Pools or other landscape features

Christy added problems can emerge when relying on second-hand survey information and records neighbors. "First of all, not knowing property lines means that you risk building structures or making changes that will have to be ultimately torn down or reversed," he said. "Other expenses include potential court costs, costs of re-doing the changes, and bad blood with the neighbors."

A survey by a licensed land surveyor is admissible in court as evidence.

Another reason you will want land surveyed before adding a pool, terracing land, plowing a field or placing buildings is that features of the land change over time. **Land surveyors** can provide expertise in identifying features that affect your plans.

For instance, picture a new pool filling up with swamp water every time it rains or a tool shed that gets washed away when the flow of water around a raised garden is altered.

You can also run into code violations if your updates are not based on current surveys.

Christy said, "I recall a home that a contractor staked without hiring a surveyor. When the foundation was poured, he was required to provide a 'foundation survey' by a licensed surveyor. The foundation was several feet into the side lot setback. The town required the contractor to take out the foundation and relocate it in the correct place."

As both readers and consumers, the names of individuals who have experienced survey or property-related issues can flood the mind. That's why it's key for consumers to follow Christy's advice. They will end up saving money in the long run by avoiding the potential maladies that can occur as a result of attempting to cut corners.

### **So How Do I Choose A Surveyor?**

The **Alabama Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers and Land Surveyors** website ([www.bels.alabama.gov](http://www.bels.alabama.gov)) is a good place to start. The BELS page, which features a license search button, lists all licensed surveyors and notes whether or not there has been any Board action taken against them.

The next step is asking for the estimate.

Christy says the tell-tale sign of a competent surveyor is how they approach an estimate: “A good surveyor will refuse to give you a price until they know a lot about the project—granted, they never know everything that may come up, but a surveyor should be willing to do a little research.”

In other words, an immediate estimate is a red flag.

Ultimately, the difference in price is trivial compared to the assurance and peace of mind that a well-trained and licensed professional can provide.

It is BELS’s mission to protect the public’s health, welfare, property and safety and that’s done through the licensing of individuals. By educating the public as to what it takes to earn that designation, as well as the ability to showcase what to look for when hiring a professional, that mission is fulfilled.

You can find us on **Facebook (Alabama Board of Licensure for Professional Engineers and Land Surveyors)** and on Twitter (bels382).

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