

Why Survey Fees Vary

The Pennsylvania Society of Land Surveyors (PSLS) has been made aware of the “North Buffalo Resolves Part of Subdivision Quarrel” article a newspaper published on May 19th, 2016 in the Kittanning Paper and would like to take the opportunity to provide some clarification on why boundary survey costs vary and may sometimes vary greatly. Our goal is to provide helpful and educational information to both municipal officials and landowners so the reasons for variations of cost from one parcel of ground to another are more fully understood.

Many factors, some more apparent than others, can affect the cost of a land subdivision survey. Lot size and configuration, topography and terrain, intended use, ingress/egress requirements, are but a few of the obvious. Some subdivisions require wetlands delineation, location of overhead and underground utilities and staking of easements, others do not. There may be need to consult with attorneys in certain circumstances. Special certification may be required by a lending agency requiring additional investigation.

A common and highly variable factor affecting subdivision survey fees can be the resurveying of previously existing boundaries when necessary for completion of a subdivision, especially when original monuments from prior surveys are lost or disturbed.

Subdividing of land is the establishing of new boundaries within an existing parcel. Some municipalities require a complete survey of this parent tract before subdivision approval, others do not. Whether or not required by ordinance, it is often necessary at a minimum to survey those existing boundaries closest to or in common with newly established lines. The surveying of previously existing lines is referred to as boundary retracement.

Setting monuments defining physical limits of a subdivision on the ground, combined with accurate records such as maps and written descriptions is critically important. This is essentially creating and documenting the history of land ownership. Costs for retracing boundaries are directly affected by the quality of monuments set in the ground, accuracy of measurements, and clarity of documentation. Fees for today's retracing of previously established boundaries are dependent on quality of monuments, measurements, and documentation from the past and fees for future retracements are dependent on the quality of subdivisions performed today.

In simple terms, boundary retracement is the following of the footsteps of the original surveyor however long ago that may have been. Original documented monuments are considered best evidence of “footsteps of the original surveyor” therefore one can see that the retracing of a boundary first established 20 years ago can be quite different compared with 120 years ago. If original monuments can no longer be found, the surveyor then must consider other evidence of location.

Your deed is a source of evidence of boundary location, but not the only source. Quality of the boundary description included with deed for the parent tract affects surveying fees. Your deed, especially if your property was first created, or subdivided, many years ago may not accurately describe your existing boundaries. This is commonly misunderstood. For example, your deed may describe a

boundary as being 560 feet in length but actually be 580 feet or 650 feet. Or you may actually own 15 acres of land even though your deed states 14 acres.

Evidence may include documents found in Recorder of Deeds Office, Assessor's Office, Prothonotary Office, state archives, and elsewhere pertaining to both subject property and adjoining back in history to creation of the boundary. Evidence can also be discovered by interviewing local residents and searching for physical clues of the original survey in order to develop a professional opinion for the client concerning retracement boundary location. Disputed or difficult to resolve boundaries require extra research and analysis of legal principle and/or case law. At times Professional Land Surveyors may provide a report documenting research, field work, analysis, and final conclusions. Time spent by the surveyor in the field measuring is likely only a fraction of the total.

Landowners have the ability to influence survey costs. The position of an original undisturbed monument is considered the single most significant factor controlling boundary location. Don't disturb or remove a boundary monument unless under supervision of a land surveyor. Protect and preserve existing boundary monuments. Set a post beside that corner pin to make it more obvious. Repaint blazes on line trees. Share what you know with others in the neighborhood. Pass on to next generation or new owners your knowledge of existing boundary location.

Every boundary retracement survey is unique to some degree. Whether the boundaries of your property are two years old or 200 years old, each has its own history that must be researched and evaluated before a Professional Land Surveyor can offer an opinion of location.

County or municipal ordinances requiring a Professional Land Surveyor to perform subdivisions are well founded. The surveyor knowledgeable in boundary retracement understands the need for providing information, evidence, allowing future surveyors to follow in the footsteps he lays down today, thereby minimizing ambiguities, conflicts and disputes for generations to come.

The land and boundaries defining individual ownership, has been, is, and will continue with the passing of generations, decades, and centuries.

Land boundary surveying is one of many fields of specialized expertise within the surveying profession. If planning to engage the services of a Professional Land Surveyor, we recommend you seek one experienced in land boundaries and is familiar with your locale.

One can visit the Pennsylvania Society of Land Surveyors website at www.psls.org for additional information that may be of interest and benefit to landowners and developers.

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