

The Research Debate – A Common Sense Alternative

By Crystal Cranch, O.L.S. *Inspired through conversations with Gord Wallace*

It seems that the cadastral industry has been discussing pretty much forever the need to properly research projects. A debate has been taking over at the offices of Ivan B. Wallace Ltd., and it is time to take this discussion to the people. As Ontario Land Surveyors, we often have to rely upon the work of others as we prepare ourselves to sign a plan. It may have been that the CAD operator, who took in the project and prepared the file for searching, missed some really important items. Maybe the search was completed without ever leaving the office, taking advantage of the wonders of online searching, and the plans attached to deeds are not in the file. Someone may have looked on LSRI or Land Survey Records to accumulate a pile of previous surveys, but missed the plan not available on these databases. The field crew may have even scraped a previously “unknown origin” bar to get a number, but no one was smart enough to contact that surveyor for their records. The one calculating the project may not have looked at the 50 year old survey that was so hard to track down, because there is a brand new reference plan next door. It makes the job of the OLS very difficult indeed.

At our office, Gord Wallace takes the stand that we, the Ontario Land Surveyors, need to be more vigilant. We need to make sure we have that 50 year old survey. We need to find numbers on bars. We need to make every possible effort to ensure that the re-establishment of a boundary is in exactly the same spot as when originally set. In Gord’s frustrations, he has sarcastically suggested that we need a different Surveyor’s Certificate that simply says:

“Based on the information in front of me, I hereby certify this plan correct”.

Hmm. Well, from sarcasm comes inspiration.

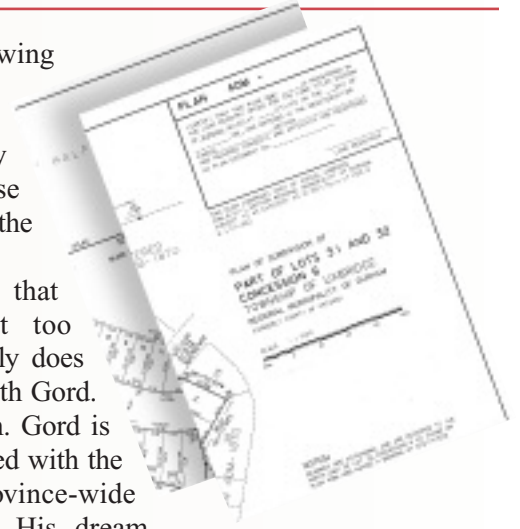
If Gord were to have his way, we would all do a better job of researching our projects. Research is often difficult. Sometimes you will have no way of knowing if another surveyor was in the area until the field notes show a number on the found survey bar. Sometimes a surveyor from Thunder Bay did his sister a favour by surveying her property in Oshawa, and there is no logical way of knowing that this survey exists on the property next to your survey. Sometimes the 50 year old plan of the subject property sits in the musty basement of a recently retired OLS, who has no way of digging it up. Sometimes the required records were lost or misfiled. All too often the recent reference plan next door was prepared without the benefit of proper research, and

by now following Gord’s path of proper research, your new survey will again cause great calamity in the neighbourhood.

The argument that research is just too onerous and costly does not hold water with Gord. He has a solution. Gord is becoming obsessed with the idea of a province-wide digital database. His dream would be to have all of us enter every survey record in our offices into a digital database that is accessible to every cadastral surveyor in the province. He envisions a day when he can sit at his computer, and punch in a geographic description, and be rewarded with access to every survey ever done on the property, or within reasonable vicinity. Can you imagine? In his world, all of us could within seconds, and with just a few keystrokes, complete a full historical search on any property in the province. We would no longer have excuses. We would save an immense amount of time (in business time means money), and we would actually have the ability to do far superior survey retracements.

Well, I suppose there is some truth to that. But who of sane mind would actually believe such a ludicrous dream could ever come to fruition. Imagine every survey in the province available in one location. I can already hear the Doom and Gloomers yelling about the impossibility of it all. They will tell us that it is too much work, rather than foreseeing the ease it will create. They will complain about the upfront costs, rather than understand the long term savings. Gord’s dream will never be discussed for its merits. It will be viewed as the lunatic ranting of an idiot. Can’t argue with that.

And so, I have an alternative. I say we embrace Gord’s sarcastic certificate, and embed it into our practices. We could all save an immense amount of time by taking away the requirement to do all this crazy research. Let’s embrace the concept of general boundaries that is common place in our founding nation, the United Kingdom. Hell, if it’s good enough for the Brits, it’s good enough for us. Why should we waste all that time and money completing all that historical research just to get the boundary exactly perfectly right. Let’s adopt the slogan “Close Enough.” Perfection is overrated.



Now I know that this goes against everything the AOLS has ever advocated. So maybe we need to go one step further. Maybe we need two classes of surveyors. One group would stay under the umbrella of the AOLS, and maintain the same high standards and requirements. The second group would adopt a more lax attitude and set boundaries in more general terms. "Close enough" is good enough for many of the surveys we do. This new group could go national, and offer an alternative to the public. I was thinking of branding the name as the "National Alternative Society of Surveyors". But, then I figure in this age of intermobility and consistency, the "National" part might be redundant. So I suggest we form the Alternative Society of Surveyors. Those of us who wish to shun the high standards of the AOLS could find a new home with the A.S.S. We would adopt Gord's suggested Surveyor's Certificate and hold the exclusive right to call ourselves ASS's. Perfect. All the ASS's could assemble annually to discuss other successful cost savings shortcuts. We could hold ASS seminars on the benefits of reduced service and certainty. We could promote the advantages of dealing with ASS's to the public. We could brand ourselves as the best ASS's in the whole world. Now that's what I am talking about.

While Gord and friends struggle with the promotion of a province wide database (PWDB), we ASS's could offer dirt cheap prices for our proudly inferior product. While Gord and friends struggle with the impossible task of promoting a system that would revolutionize research and result in better surveys and cost savings, we ASS's can become the great promoters of the theoretic lot line. While Gord and friends begin the impossible task of moving an immovable group of OLS's, we can work on making perfect ASS's of ourselves.

Stepping back to reality, I do recognize that many progressive firms have already scanned their plans and have either joined an already established database, or made their own internal database. I know that at my firm, we now have access to all of our plans all of the time, irrespective of where we happen to be. I can access any of our plans with a laptop in Kathmandu or Timbuktu. It did cost us a lot of money to get to this point, but now every day we save a lot of money by having instant access to our plans. I will never again have to pull a plan from those horrible GABS cabinets. In fact, we happily traded our last GABS for 2 bottles of Highland Park whisky and one bottle of Crown Royal Cask No. 16. It was cause for a celebration and we toasted ourselves for moving into the 21st Century. We also reorganized the space where we once stored all of those plans, into an office area for another CAD operator. Nice. Now that floor space that used to cost us money is being used to make us money. Who'd of think it?

I wondered why not everyone was running to join us in this new found freedom where we easily access plans. But, I wonder even more why we are not all using some similar system to offer all of our plans for sale to other surveyors, at a reasonable price of course. Never let it be said that surveyors are not reasonable. Yup, we could make research easy; we could offer reasonable prices; we could disburse

these costs to the public who will ultimately benefit from this research; we could recoup our costs to scan and upload the plans, and we could earn the respect of the public while actually following a business plan that would increase profit.

Who'd of think it? Well, truthfully, Lorraine Petzold thought of it, and that was 20 years ago. If you read and reread the old Quarterlies, you may also recall an article written by Lorraine way back when. She was suggesting the same concept that we are suggesting today. We failed to follow good advice 20 years ago, but I have sensed a shift in the mentality of surveyors recently, and maybe now the time is right. And if not, then in 2030, some astute surveyor will be rereading the Quarterlies, and wonder at the sheer genius of that Crystal gal, and take the torch anew. I'll have retired rich and happy, and will no longer care about fighting to improve the industry.

I did want to briefly address those companies who have created their own individual databases. I hold an inexplicable respect for these firms, because they have trodden upon a territory that, quite frankly, intimidates me. But, I also cannot help thinking they missed the boat. Sitting alone and independent seems almost selfish and short sighted. Sure, it makes it easier for that company to access their records, but it does nothing to promote easier research for our industry. The solution for industry-wide improved research will not occur if we all have to search 50 independent databases. The perfect solution would involve one fully populated, up to date, easily accessible, and all encompassing database.

So, let's talk about it. Do we need to truly take on this task of improving our research, resulting in more consistency between surveyors and a better quality of surveys? Should we be taking advantage of technology to ultimately make our businesses more profitable while supplying a superior product? Should we be using the strengths of our expanded profession to help take the lowly cadastral surveyor into the 21st Century? Or should we just keep on the current path that will eventually make ASS's of all of us?

Opportunity seems to be knocking on our doorstep right now. At the 2011 Annual General Meeting, there was a very positive and progressive discussion on the advantages of creating a province-wide digital database. I am all for that. But, I think we would be missing an incredible opportunity if this province-wide database did not incorporate a compulsory inclusion of our historical records as well. If we are just going to create a new database of poorly researched surveys then that would be akin to building a mansion to hold our garbage. Let's build a mansion and fill it with nothing but price-less surveys – all completed with the research material found in that very mansion. Sweet!



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