

# The Comments Page

## RE: The Evolution of a National Voice

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To this writer's knowledge, surveyors within the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping (ACSM) have sought to gain recognition in proportion to their relatively large membership for over 40 years. Some believe that if they could only drop the shackles of the ACSM umbrella hanging over them, they would finally get the full professional recognition from all across the country which they believe has been denied them ever since ACSM's founding in 1941.

When the National Society of Professional Surveyors (NSPS) was founded in 1981 and incorporated in 1991, many had hoped that this would settle the issue of recognition once and for all. Almost thirty years later, the NSPS Board of Governors at its 2010 meeting in Phoenix, Arizona, voted 35 to 12 to initiate the process of (complete) separation from ACSM. The NSPS Board of Directors supported the initiative by a vote of 11 to 5. In other words, about two thirds of our surveyor members are eager to leave ACSM.

A letter to membership entitled "The Evolution of a National Voice: The Future of the National Society of Professional Surveyors" by Messrs. Harrison, Matonich, and Sumner following the Phoenix meeting was published in the *ACSM Bulletin* no. 244 of April 2010 (p.43). Among the "primary challenges" cited in the letter are: "Perception of ACSM as outdated and behind the times, the negative stereotype of the term "surveyor", and competition from state affiliates."

An NSPS ad-hoc committee was established to look into the options and opportunities for establishing a "single industry-wide membership organization." I believe this was the goal of the 163 dedicated professionals who founded ACSM sixty-nine years ago. They, of course, did not call it an "industry" then.

According to *Recollections of the American Congress, 1941-1991* by Walter S. Dix, ACSM's membership of 163 in 1941 climbed to 4500 in 1958, increased to 6000 in mere two years, and peaked in 1981 at 11,000. The 1982 ACSM convention reported 5,621 registrants—an all-time high! For various reasons, ACSM membership gradually declined from about 10,000 in 1991 to about 5,000 in 2004, the year of ACSM's restructure into a "revitalized congress of independent member organizations."

The perceived negative stereotype of the surveyor has always been of concern to former ACSM leaders. At a time, when many, if not most, land surveyors had come up through the old-fashioned apprentice system, lack of formal education was the challenge and another reason for the "stereotype."

There was a time, when the perceived low public opinion of surveyors was demonstrated in its most grotesque form.

Some of us may still remember the scandalous kickback case involving a former politician who had taken differentiated bribes from state highway consultants in Baltimore County—5 percent for engineering (design) contracts and 2.5 percent for surveying contracts!

And if you think times have changed, you should know that even professional registration or licensing fees are still differentiated in some states. Massachusetts, for instance, charges \$96 for registration as a professional engineer and \$82 for registration as a professional land surveyor. Talking about "stereotypes"!

We know, of course, that land surveying *per se* will always be somewhat "local" and has to be regulated by each state of the Union. Our State Affiliates have done a marvelous job providing information with local relevance. Belonging to a prestigious national organization such as ACSM, however, gives every surveyor access to knowledge beyond the narrow lens of local peculiarity.

Surveyor members of ACSM usually have a broader perspective of their profession than do their local colleagues. They are able to see the proverbial forest as well as the trees. The problem is there is not enough of those surveyors with a broad world view. As an example, a GIS conference in Kentucky, a few years ago, was attended by many "GIS experts" but only by two practicing surveyors (*ACSM Bulletin* no. 200, Nov/Dec. 2000).

Given the fractious times we find ourselves in, it may be worthwhile to consider what some of the ACSM wise men have urged us to consider years ago. I'm thinking of Prof. Brother B. Austin Barry of New York who told us in the 1970s to stop that "dastardly sniper fry" and the silly bickering.

Prof. Ralph Berry of Michigan deplored the apprentice system which without proper formal education, he said, "serves admirably for the training of plumbers" (*Proceedings, ASCE* vol. 90, SU 2, July 1964).

Ira Alexander of California deplored the absence of geodetic standards and the basic ignorance of their existence, where they do exist. He warned of "purveyors of smoke-oil cures" when one only learns how to push the right button on the magic black box (*ACSM Bulletin* no. 136, March/April 1992). And there were others—Walter Dix, Earl Fennel, Jesse Fant, Red Wagner, Ken Curtis, and Paul Wolf among others—who had regularly added their exhortations to which we appear to have paid scant attention.

At the 20<sup>th</sup> Surveying and Mapping Educator's Conference held in Texas in 2005, several participants expressed their concern (*SALIS* Vol.65, No.3, 2005). Prof. Robert Burch of Michigan warned us of "providing education of the

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masses," devoid of theoretical underpinnings and producing "nuts-and-bolts surveyors." Prof. N.W.T.Hazelton of Ohio saw a "collective paranoia" and predicted "ossification" and "balkanization" of our profession. Prof. Earl Burkholder of New Mexico wanted to help his students to "learn how to learn" and to "teach them how to think."

In his most recent article "Surveying: Beyond Mere Existence" (ACSM Bulletin no. 244, April 2010), Prof. Hazelton, formerly of Ohio, now University of Alaska, has once again analyzed our dilemma. I was pleasantly surprised to note that he has traded his verbal sledgehammer for a finely calibrated tuning-fork! His brief but excellent analysis points to the "unfortunate consequences of segregating the profession into silos." He wisely quotes Alvin Toffler and urges us to rethink and to relearn before we act divisively instead of decisively. I would strongly recommend that every ACSM member and especially the promoters of surveyor separation take the time to re-read his article, as well as some of the older published papers mentioned above.

Our new "toys" (technology) have simplified measurement and data collection to a point that these activities have become ubiquitous and less important as a science. We have encouraged "specialization" at the expense of "general understanding," Hazelton surmised. It is a dead-end street that will only push us further down to the level of "nuts-and-bolts surveyors," equal to other licensed disciplines, such as well trained mechanics, electricians, and plumbers. Just what Prof. Berry had warned us about in 1964! Imagine, 46 years ago!!

I'd have some important questions of those who believe that separating NSPS from ACSM will be a panacea for our shrinking surveyor membership. Do you really think that the tens of thousands of licensed land surveyors in our fifty states will finally see the light and flock to a (to them) remote national organization?

However small their membership, do you think that our well educated members of AAGS and CAGIS will simply subordinate themselves to a larger NSPS organization? Their important disciplines will neither fade away nor can surveyors nationwide function without their expertise. Perhaps, we should go back to our roots: a national member organization with various semi-autonomous specialty divisions or sections within.

We may want to take a look at other successful national organizations such as ABA (American Bar Association) and AMA (American Medical Association). Even ASPRS, a national scientific and professional aerial photogrammetric and remote sensing organization of individual members could be a model to learn from. For over a decade now, they have cordial, even cooperative relations with MAPPS, a photogrammetry business-oriented organization of over 120 aerial photogrammetry firms. Every three years, they

hold a joint national conference, as ASPRS Executive Director James R. Plasker has explained to me. Only better knowledge and greater wisdom can overcome what may be a misguided ego, possibly disguising a suspected but uncalled for inferiority complex.

To fight over the measurement part of a "rapidly shrinking pie" of the spatial information cycle is an exercise in futility, Prof. Hazelton warns us. My own perspective of technological professionalism and progress can be summed up as: What was science yesterday, is engineering today, and will be plumbing tomorrow.

It is important to recognize that beyond measurement comes "knowledge and wisdom." We must prepare for it and act accordingly. Technical "silos" are not the answer! Through our action we must convince the hesitant local surveyor that belonging to ACSM offers much more than a stagnant existence.

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