

Land Surveyor Vetting Guide

How to verify credentials and hire a qualified land surveyor

- ✓ PLS, RPLS, and state licensing requirements explained
- ✓ NCEES exams and what they prove
- ✓ 10 red flags that indicate an unqualified or careless surveyor
- ✓ Sample vetting questionnaire you can send to providers

Understanding Land Surveyor Licensing

Land surveying is one of the most strictly regulated professions in the United States. Every state requires a license to practice land surveying, and only a licensed Professional Land Surveyor (PLS) can legally sign and seal a survey plat. The licensing path involves a 4-year degree, two national exams, 2–4 years of supervised experience, and a state-specific exam. Understanding this credential hierarchy helps you distinguish between a licensed professional and someone with a GPS unit and a measuring tape.

Licensing Path

Stage	Credential	What It Proves
Education	Bachelor's degree in surveying, geomatics, or related field	4-year degree from ABET-accredited program (most states)
Entry Exam	FS (Fundamentals of Surveying) — NCEES	Passed the 6-hour national exam covering surveying fundamentals. Qualifies as Surveyor Intern (SI)
Experience	2–4 years supervised by licensed PLS	Practical field and office experience under mentorship
Practice Exam	PS (Principles and Practice of Surveying) — NCEES	Passed the 6-hour national exam covering advanced surveying practice and law
State Exam	State-specific jurisprudence or practice exam	Demonstrates knowledge of state-specific laws, procedures, and boundary principles
License	PLS / RPLS / LS (varies by state)	Full authority to perform and certify land surveys in the licensing state

State title variations

Title	States Using This Designation
PLS (Professional Land Surveyor)	Most states (CA, CO, FL, IL, MN, NC, WA, and 20+ others)
RPLS (Registered Professional Land Surveyor)	Texas
LS (Licensed Surveyor / Land Surveyor)	NY, MA, CT, and several others
RLS (Registered Land Surveyor)	Some states

Title	States Using This Designation
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PS (Professional Surveyor)

VA, WV, and others

Full Licensing Comparison

Attribute	Licensed PLS	Surveyor Intern (SI/SIT)	Unlicensed Survey Technician
Can legally sign and seal surveys	Yes	No	No
Can establish legal boundaries	Yes	No — must work under PLS supervision	No
NCEES exams passed	FS + PS	FS only	None
State license held	Yes	In training	No
Education	4-year degree (typically)	4-year degree (typically)	Varies
Experience	2–4 years supervised	In progress	Varies
Continuing education	Required (24 PDH per biennium typical)	N/A	N/A
Professional liability available	Yes — standard	Through employer	Rarely
Court testimony accepted	Yes — expert witness	Limited	No
Can you hire them for your survey?	Yes	No — not independently	No

Only a licensed PLS can perform a legal survey.

A boundary determination or property plat signed by an unlicensed person has no legal standing. It cannot be recorded with the county, used in court, or relied upon for building permits. There are no exceptions.

State Licensing Requirements

Every state (plus DC, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands) requires licensure for the practice of land surveying. Requirements vary but follow a common pattern: education + national exams + experience + state exam.

Representative state requirements

State	Title	Education	Experience	State Exam	CE (per biennium)	Verify At
California	PLS	4-year degree	2 years under PLS	CA-specific	24 hours	bpelsg.ca.gov
Texas	RPLS	4-year degree	4 years under RPLS	TX jurisprudence	15 hours (annual)	pels.texas.gov
New York	LS	4-year degree	4 years under LS	NY jurisprudence	36 hours (3 years)	op.nysed.gov
Florida	PLS	4-year degree	4 years under PLS	FL-specific	24 hours	myfloridalicense.com
North Carolina	PLS	4-year degree	4 years under PLS	NC jurisprudence	15 hours (annual)	ncbels.org
Pennsylvania	PLS	4-year degree	4 years under PLS	PA-specific	24 hours	pals.pa.gov
Colorado	PLS	4-year degree	4 years under PLS	CO jurisprudence	30 hours (2 years)	dora.colorado.gov
Washington	PLS	4-year degree	4 years under PLS	WA-specific	15 hours (annual)	brpels.wa.gov

Verify the license is ACTIVE and in the correct state.

A PLS license in Ohio does not authorize practice in Pennsylvania. Surveyors must be licensed in the state where the property is located. Some states offer reciprocity, but the surveyor must have applied and been approved.

How to Verify Credentials

Step-by-step verification process

Ask the surveyor for their PLS/RPLS/LS license number and the state it's issued in.

Verify through the state's licensing board website. Every state maintains a searchable database:

- Search "[State] + professional land surveyor license verification"
- Or check the state board of professional engineers and land surveyors (often combined)

Confirm the license is ACTIVE (not expired, suspended, or revoked). Check the expiration date.

Verify the surveyor is licensed in the state where YOUR property is located — not just their home state.

Ask about professional liability (E&O) insurance. Standard coverage is \$500,000–\$2,000,000. This protects you if a survey error causes a boundary dispute or construction problem.

Check for disciplinary history. Most state boards publish complaints and disciplinary actions. A clean record matters.

Every licensed PLS has a unique seal and signature.

The survey plat must bear the surveyor's seal, signature, and license number to be legally valid. If the plat you receive doesn't have these, it's not a legal survey.

10 Red Flags of an Unqualified Surveyor

1 Not licensed as a PLS in your state.

The single most important requirement. No license = no legal survey. Survey technicians, GIS specialists, and engineers are NOT surveyors (unless separately licensed).

2 Can't provide a license number for verification.

Every licensed surveyor has a verifiable number. Reluctance to share it is disqualifying.

3 Quotes without visiting or researching the property.

Accurate survey quotes require reviewing the deed, prior surveys, and property characteristics. A sight-unseen fixed quote is likely to result in change orders.

4 Won't set permanent monuments.

A boundary survey should include setting iron pins, pipes, or other permanent markers at property corners. If the surveyor only provides a map without physical monuments, the survey has limited practical value.

5 No professional liability insurance.

A survey error can cost you tens of thousands of dollars (building on the wrong side of a property line). E&O insurance is essential.

6 Delivers a plat without a seal and signature.

An unsigned, unsealed plat is not a legal document. It cannot be recorded or used in court.

7 Uses consumer-grade GPS for boundary work.

Professional surveying requires survey-grade equipment (RTK GPS, total stations, robotic instruments) with sub-centimeter accuracy. Consumer GPS is accurate to 3-10 feet — useless for boundary determination.

8 Won't provide a written legal description.

A complete boundary survey includes a written metes-and-bounds or lot-and-block legal description that can be used in deeds. A map alone may be insufficient.

9 **Ignores deed calls and monuments of record.**

Surveying isn't just measuring — it's interpreting legal documents, historical records, and physical evidence. A surveyor who only measures with GPS without reviewing the chain of title is doing half the job.

10 **Unusually fast turnaround with no field visit.**

A legitimate boundary survey requires field work (finding existing monuments, measuring, setting new pins). Desktop-only "surveys" based on aerial imagery or GIS data are not legal surveys.

When Survey Type Matters (Decision Matrix)

Two-column layout

HIRE A LICENSED PLS FOR

- Any property purchase (boundary or mortgage survey)
- Building near property lines (setback verification)
- Fence installation on or near the property line
- Boundary dispute with a neighbor
- Subdivision or lot split
- Commercial real estate transaction (ALTA required)
- New construction (staking)
- Flood zone determination (elevation certificate)
- Easement identification and mapping
- Any document that needs to be recorded with the county

A PLS MAY NOT BE NEEDED FOR

- Rough property size estimate (use county GIS/plat maps — free)
- Interior renovation with no setback issues
- Landscaping well inside property lines
- General curiosity about property boundaries (check county records first)

Cost comparison by situation

Situation	Recommended Survey	Typical Cost	Why
Buying a home (lender requires)	Mortgage/location survey	\$300-\$600	Shows building location on lot; satisfies lender
Buying a home (title company requires)	Boundary survey	\$500-\$1,200	Establishes legal boundaries; title insurance condition
Boundary dispute with neighbor	Boundary survey	\$800-\$2,500	Legal evidence of property line location

Situation	Recommended Survey	Typical Cost	Why
Building an addition or pool	Boundary + setback verification	\$500-\$1,200	Confirms building within setbacks; prevents encroachment
Commercial property purchase	ALTA/NSPS survey	\$2,500-\$10,000	Lender and title company requirement; most comprehensive
Developing raw land	Boundary + topographic + subdivision	\$5,000-\$25,000+	Full development package

Sample Vetting Questionnaire

Land Surveyor Vetting Questionnaire — Send This Before Hiring

Copy and send these questions to any land surveyor you're considering. Their answers will tell you everything you need to know.

1. Credentials & Licensing

- What is your PLS/RPLS/LS license number?
- Are you licensed in the state where my property is located?
- When does your current license expire?
- Do you have any disciplinary actions on record?

2. Experience & Capabilities

- How many years have you been practicing as a licensed surveyor?
- How many surveys of this type (boundary / ALTA / topographic) do you perform per year?
- Do you have experience surveying properties in this county/municipality?
- Are you familiar with the specific regulations and setbacks in this jurisdiction?

3. Scope & Deliverables

- What specifically will your survey include? (Field work, research, monuments, plat, legal description)
- Will you set permanent monuments at property corners?
- Will you provide a signed and sealed plat suitable for recording?
- Will the deliverable include a written legal description?
- For ALTA: which Table A optional items are included in your quote?

4. Equipment & Methods

- What equipment do you use in the field (total station, RTK GPS, robotic)?
- Do you perform records research (deeds, prior surveys, plats) before field work?
- What is your process if you find a discrepancy between the deed and field evidence?

5. Insurance & Business

- Do you carry professional liability (E&O) insurance? What are your limits?
- Do you provide itemized invoices?

- What is your expected turnaround time?
- What is your policy on change orders if the scope increases?

6. References

- Can you provide 2-3 recent client references?
- Can you share a sample survey plat (redacted)?

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