

Is it Conceivable that Coordinates Will Ever Replace Monuments?

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A concept sacred to surveyors and landowners alike is that the undisturbed monument will always be honored as the “true” corner. Will that always be the case? Should we worry about the possibility that, in the future, finding or replacing a missing corner will not be needed because “we have the coordinates of the point”?

As many know, I have worked for the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC) on various projects for over 25 years. My most recent participation was focused on addressing the question of “Monuments versus Coordinates.” The SEWRPC published a report dated November 1, 2017 defending the sanctity of the undisturbed monument. Will that report answer the question now and for all time or are there reasons, maybe in addition to those identified in the report, for on-going discussion of the issue?

A copy of the SEWRPC Executive Director’s statement as printed in the report is included herein and a pdf file of the full report is available at:

<http://www.sewrpc.org/SEWRPCFiles/Publications/TechRep/tr-059-substitution-of-coordinates-for-monuments.pdf>

SOUTHEASTERN WISCONSIN REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

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STATEMENT OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As noted in the introductory section of this report, the Commission in 1961 introduced the use of the State Plane Coordinate System within the Region for the conduct of land and engineering surveys, and as the basis for the creation of a survey control system within the Region. That system requires the remonumentation of the U.S. Public Land Survey System (USPLSS) corners within the Region and the determination of State Plane Coordinates for these corners.

The recommended survey control system not only provides the basis for the conduct of land and engineering surveys, but also provides the basis for the preparation of large scale topographic and cadastral maps. It also provides one of the foundational elements for the land information and public works management systems being created within the Region at the county and municipal levels of government.

Through the cooperative efforts of the county and municipal governments in the Region, the Commission-recommended survey control system has been completed, and the coordinate positions of the remonumented corners of the USPLSS within the Region have been determined to a high level of accuracy. This availability of coordinate values for the remonumented USPLSS has raised a question among land surveyors, public works engineers, and land information system managers as to whether or not a need still exists for the maintenance of the monuments marking the corners of USPLSS within the Region, or whether coordinates can replace the use of monumentation to perpetuate the USPLSS. The answer to this question will affect not only the preservation of the USPLSS within the Region, but the continued utility of the existing survey control network, and the certainty and stability of real property boundary corners and lines within the Region. The question, therefore, deserves careful consideration not only of the professions directly concerned, but also by landowners, developers, and elected officials—particularly such officials at the county level. Eventually, the question will have to be addressed by the courts as those institutions continue to formulate the common law.

This report is intended to help all those concerned with answering that question. Based upon the legal, technical, and miscellaneous considerations presented in this report, it may be concluded that the Commission and its constituent counties should continue to maintain the monumentation marking the stations—USPLSS corners—of the regional survey control system.

Respectfully submitted,

Michael G. Hahn

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Executive Director