



editorial

Building America

During a downturn in the early 1990s, I had to lay off an excellent career instrument man. He was one of many who were shown the door in that dark time. But what made it even worse for this particular individual was the fact that it was the second time the company had laid him off. The first was after another earlier downturn. He told me, "That's it. I'm getting out of surveying. I can't depend on it." Knowing that surveying was in his blood, I've often wondered if he kept that promise.

In talking to surveyors across the country, I'm hearing that companies are having a hard time finding qualified people, and can't help but wonder how the last 8-10 years of 1% GDP growth has permanently forced many qualified surveyors out of the industry. As I have written before, what we need is enough growth (many think 3% is the right number) to cause things to be built so a need for surveyors will be created. Some are saying that our country will end the fourth quarter of 2017 with 4% growth. Already, construction backlog is climbing. If this translates to the 2018 construction economy many think it will, the shortage of qualified surveyors will become acute.

But we will need to be careful. In our zeal to take on all available work, we must ensure that the work is being done properly. In the DC area in the 1980s, there was so much building going on that practically anybody breathing could find work in surveying. I was always amazed that a company could absorb numerous back charges for staking errors and still thrive. But when a company was running 20 crews, there was so much money coming in, back charges were almost considered part of the cost of doing business.

Technology certainly helped. In the 1980s, plane table and alidades were still in common use in the DC area for topography surveys. But an instrument that had an accuracy of $\pm 3\%$ was bound to cause errors. Don't get me wrong, I have great respect for the plane table artists of the day. These guys would bring in a finished map, and having stood on the ground being surveyed, were careful to note drainage and other features important to land development. But when designed improvements were staked for construction and the storm drain line didn't reach the pre-installed inlet, the party chiefs had to be able refigure grades.

Now, with everything being digital the map accuracy has improved, and today's surveyors are less likely to need to do any "field-engineering," but that's where the qualified part comes in. We all agree that button-pushing is not a good solution. It pleases me greatly that economic conditions have improved enough that it's growing difficult to find help. And I'm sure the various surveying education programs around the country will rise to meet the challenge.

According to Anirban Basu, the chief economist of the Associated Builders and Contractors, "A recent reading of the Conference Board's Index of Leading Economic Indicators suggests that the U.S. economy will enter 2018 with substantial momentum. Corporate earnings remain healthy. Global growth is accelerating. Consumers are upbeat. Tax cuts could fuel faster business spending. All of this suggests that the construction recovery that began in earnest in 2011 may have a few more birthdays ahead."

Here's hoping that 2018 will be a great year for you and that you will be able to find all the ingredients to be very successful. ■



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PUBLISHER Allen E. Cheves
allen.cheves@chevesmedia.com

EDITOR Marc S. Cheves, PS
marc.cheves@chevesmedia.com

ASSOCIATE EDITOR Joel Leininger, PS
ASSISTANT EDITOR Jacalyn Cheves

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

- | | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| C. Barton Crattie, PS | Lee Lovell, PS |
| James J. Demma, PS, Esq. | Wendy Lathrop, PS |
| Dr. Richard L. Elgin, PS, PE | John Matonich, PS |
| Chad Erickson, PS | Michael J. Pallamary, PS |
| Linda Erickson | Jerry Penry, PS |
| Jason E. Foose, PS | Walt Robillard, Esq., PS |
| Gary Kent, PS | Fred Roeder, PS |

The staff and contributing writers may be reached via the online Message Center at amerisurv.com

GRAPHIC DESIGN LTD Creative, LLC
WEBMASTER Joel Cheves

OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR Becky Sadler
AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT Edward Duff
ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE Richard Bremer

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