

## 2019 UW-Madison Community-University Partnership Award Nomination

### Public Land Survey System Work Group (“PLSS Work Group”)

- State Cartographer’s Office, UW-Madison Geography Department: Howard Veregin, State Cartographer; Brenda Hemstead, Data Services Specialist
- Wisconsin County Surveyors Association: Bryan Meyer, WCSA President & La Crosse County Surveyor
- Wisconsin Society of Land Surveyors: Jeff DeMuth, Professional Land Surveyor; Steve Geiger, Polk County Surveyor
- Wisconsin Land Information Association: Jeremiah Erickson, Land Information Officer – Monroe County
- Land Information Officers Network: Jason Poser, Land Information Officer – Buffalo County
- Wisconsin Register of Deeds Association: Jodi Helgeson, Adams County Register of Deeds
- Wisconsin Real Property Listers Association: Brannick Beatse, Monroe County Real Property Lister
- Wisconsin Department of Transportation: Mitch Moline, Enterprise GIS Architect
- Additional Member: Chris Colney, Land Information Officer – Grant County

“Uncovering and discovering geographical meaning in Wisconsin’s rural landscapes: Outreach and educational programming by the State Cartographer’s Office and Public Land Survey System Work Group”

Land has played a key role in the history of the University of Wisconsin and its research and teaching missions. Founded in 1848, UW was designated a land-grant institution in 1866 following passage of the Morrill Act. The Act provided the state with 240,000 acres of federal land, the sale of which supported the university. UW’s land-grant designation helped shape its tradition of public engagement and civic involvement. The university’s extension division, created during Charles Van Hise’s tenure as UW President, focused attention on the land and the economic activities linked to it. The Wisconsin Idea, attributed to Van Hise, also has strong geographic connotations. Its central tenet, that the boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state, signals the intent to reach every county, city, town and unincorporated community.

Despite these traditions, some observers believe the connections between the university and state have become eroded. Kathy Cramer argues that many rural Wisconsinites feel that the university is uninterested in the lives of ordinary people, a reflection of how service to the state’s citizens “goes against the grain of much of the contemporary culture of academia.”[1] She calls for a resurgence of public engagement by the university with a particular focus on rural communities and issues that rural residents care about.

As shown in Heasley's study of the Kickapoo Valley, land is the locus of meaning and identity in rural areas.[2] Land links individuals to their family history and the history of human activity in the region. Land makes up real property, which defines the boundaries of government jurisdictions like village councils, school boards and election wards. But how did the landscape come to exist in this form? Who decided where to draw the boundaries? How was land allocated for schools, roads and public utilities?

Underlying the answer to these questions is the geographical framework of land subdivision known as the Public Land Survey System (PLSS). Conceived by Thomas Jefferson and formalized by the Land Ordinance of 1785, PLSS etched a grid of townships and sections over the western territories of the US. PLSS controlled the partitioning and conveyance of land to private citizens, and its grid structure imposed the checkerboard landscape pattern still evident today in much of the country.

Starting in the 1830s PLSS surveyors covered every square mile of Wisconsin, marking the locations of tens of thousands of section corners with wooden posts. While the imprint of PLSS is clearly evident on modern maps, PLSS is at the same time invisible and mysterious, a historic system whose physical evidence is sometimes decaying (wooden markers) and often inscrutable (surveyors' notes). Hence the system is not well understood by either citizens or policy-makers.

The State Cartographer's Office (SCO) is a long-standing special program within UW-Madison with a legislative mandate to facilitate the creation and exchange of geospatial data and services ([www.sco.wisc.edu](http://www.sco.wisc.edu)). In 2015, the SCO conducted its first PLSS Forum with a \$500 Statewide Outreach Incentive Grant from the UW-Madison Office of University Relations. The goal of the forum was to initiate a dialog to better align property mapping activities with efforts to update PLSS. At that time, the legislature had just implemented a statutory directive for the Department of Administration to develop the state's first online statewide digital property map.

The 2015 Forum drew over 100 attendees from government, the private sector and the university. Representatives from over 50 counties participated. The discussion showed widespread agreement about the need for the statewide property map to be based on an accurate PLSS foundation. Also evident was concern over a lack of resources to maintain and modernize PLSS. Without an accurate PLSS network there is increased risk of property disputes, inequitable taxation, disagreements about resource rights and easement locations, and unnecessary expenditures by private citizens and local governments. Despite this, not all communities in the state have been able to marshal the resources to maintain PLSS adequately.

A second Forum, also facilitated by a Statewide Outreach Incentive Grant, was held in 2016. A major outcome of this forum was the creation of the PLSS Work Group, a partnership of individuals and organizations whose goal is to educate the public and policy-makers about

PLSS and encourage investment in the system. Membership of the Work Group includes numerous organizations in the state concerned with land information issues ([sco.wisc.edu/community/plss-work-group](http://sco.wisc.edu/community/plss-work-group)). Combined, these organizations have members numbering in the thousands.

The Work Group has organized 3 additional annual PLSS Forums in various parts of the state, with the most recent in April 2019 in Lafayette county ([training.sco.wisc.edu/plss-survey-forum](http://training.sco.wisc.edu/plss-survey-forum)). All forums have been free of charge and open to the public. As word of the forums has spread, the audience has diversified to include county board members and chairs, county administrators, surveyors, emergency management directors, highway commissioners, attorneys, realtors, insurance agents, bank presidents, architects, farmers and farm managers, land owners, septic pumpers, students and the general public. Requests have begun to arrive requesting specific locations for future forums. The forums have also attracted interest out-of-state; in early 2019 the Minnesota county surveyors convened a similar event at their annual meeting.

The following are the impacts of the partnership as they pertain to this award:

*Embody the original spirit of the Wisconsin Idea...* The partnership helps citizens understand the significance of PLSS through educational programming, interactive discussion and hands-on experience. These activities help uncover the ways PLSS has molded the landscape and how it affects property boundaries, taxation, land transfers, and land use decisions.

*Demonstrate a relationship characterized by respect...* The SCO's relationship within the PLSS Work Group is peer-to-peer. Each of the member organizations carries equal weight, with all members participating in educational programming. The group is democratic, with no elected chair or hierarchy in place.

*Build the capacity of both community and university partners...* The partnership melds the educational mission of the university with an important issue that has practical implications for citizens in all corners of the state. The partnership achieves more than the member organizations could on their own by bridging the gap between the university and the state to solve problems of concern to local citizens, especially those in rural areas.

*Result in measurable community change...* The annual forums have reached hundreds of individuals in many walks of life and different parts of the state. Interest in the forums continues to grow. There is growing appreciation for the importance of investing in PLSS, with many counties now devoting resources to modernizing the network.

The partnership exemplifies best practices in educational and outreach programming. This unique and important initiative merits consideration for this award.

## Notes

[1] K. Cramer. 2016. The turn away from government and the need to revive the civic purpose of higher education. *Perspectives on Politics*.

[2] L. Heasley. 2003. Shifting boundaries on a Wisconsin landscape. *Human Ecology*.