

Surveying Success:

How setbacks can set back your project

BY BRANDI SMITH

At the ripe young age of 14, Robert Kness had already started taking steps down the path that would lead him to his career.

"I worked summers and weekends for one of my friend's grandfather, who had a surveying company in north Texas," Kness recalled.

When he was 17, he made the move to Houston, where he started working at Windrose Services, a professional land surveying firm. Now a principal and chief operating officer, Kness has been a part of the Windrose team for going on 18 years.

"I just love surveying. Every project's different; every one's unique," he said. "I get the opportunity to be at the ground floor of some of the most interesting and unique developments in Houston and around Texas."

The list of projects Kness has been involved with is impressive, ranging from the Goodman Global facility in Waller County (the largest industrial building in Texas) to BBVA Compass Stadium.

"it's always interesting, being able to see and do all those things," Kness said. "I've been blessed to have a great team to work with and they make it interesting and rewarding every day."

That team at Windrose has been especially busy over the past five years as a building boom of sorts hit the Houston area after the Great Recession.

"It's been crazy. We've easily grown almost 15 to 20 percent per year the past five years. I think in 2008 we had six crews and now we have 13," Kness said. "In January, the AI Ross Group acquired the company from my original partners, so now we have a strong, aggressive growth plan to be the most dominant stand-alone surveying company in Houston."

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Kness' passion and years of experience made him and his Windrose team, including director of surveying Mike Kurkowski, RPLS, and director of planning/project manager Andrew Allemand, our go-to source for learning about what commercial real estate professionals should be on the lookout for when it comes to surveying.

REDNews: What kind of advice or services would you suggest to developers looking to expedite projects?

Windrose team: In a lot of cases, surveying is one of those services you need it when you need it. It's hard to tell someone, 'You need a survey today.' But for buyers, builders, developers and architects, surveying normally comes into play during the due diligence phase, so a surveying firm is one of the first points of contact you make when you're looking to purchase or develop a piece of property.



Robert Kness

We're one of the first firms you call to determine how much land is there and whether there are any easements, setbacks or restrictions. We're basically the front-line people who go out and assess those things.

As far as expediting a project, we tell all of our clients, 'As soon as you put a property under contract, call the surveyor. Find out what the issues could be, where the stumbling blocks could be and make sure you're hiring a surveyor who understands local development codes and subdivision platting, as well as all the hiccups and hurdles that we deal with in this unique Houston environment.' Because we don't have zoning here, there are certain codes and ordinances that control all the development across Houston, along with surrounding counties. If you don't know those, you can get into a lot of trouble really fast.

REDNews: What are some of the biggest obstacles or hurdles you commonly run into?

Windrose team: Right now, we're seeing a lot of setback regulations. Chapter 42 of the Houston Code of Ordinances establishes building setbacks along all public streets. With the growth in Houston and the traffic pressure that creates, a lot of streets have



been reclassified from your local street to a major thoroughfare or a local collector due to the increased traffic volume and road improvement plans.

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When that reclassification happens, the building setback rules change as well. You might've been fronted on a nice local street that had a 10-foot setback. But if the city reclassifies it as a major thoroughfare, it now has a 25-foot setback.

A great example of this is the Westheimer corridor, which has been around for a long time in the downtown to midtown area. For years, it had a very minimum right-of-way with a 10-foot building setback. Now that road is considered a major thoroughfare, so all the old buildings are inside the City of Houston building line because it's been reclassified to a 25-foot setback. Now we have to go and do variances and special exceptions or modified buildings.

REDNews: Do you run into different obstacles in other Texas cities, such as Austin, Dallas and San Antonio?

Windrose team: Every jurisdiction has unique requirements and quirks that can make doing business challenging. The population size, land mass, development character and relationship between the development community and the jurisdiction all play a part in how your firm must approach a project. The City of Houston has very particular surveying and platting requirements compared to other cities. With the City of Houston, an applicant works with a single department on most submittals. Everything is submitted online and their system is built around getting plats to the Planning Commission in a timely manner.

In other cities, an applicant still works with a primary department but other departments and related organizations can interject and really affect the review timeline. Additionally, there are little-known technical requirements that have to be fulfilled. An out-of-town firm may not realize that there is an established Houston Downtown Centerline Monumentation System that has a major effect on boundary determination and possible right-of-way

dedication. Other cities use centerline mapping systems, but in many cases they are limited to a particular corridor. These systems are oftentimes not recorded in the public records and must be sought out during the due diligence period.

REDNews: Do you have any tips for circumventing issues?

Windrose team: The most important tip to avoiding project management issues is to maintain and promote communication. Open, honest and timely communication between all parties will avoid most problems and prevent small problems from growing into larger ones.

From the due diligence period on, it's the project manager's responsibility to keep all lines of communication open between the client, government jurisdictions and other real estate professionals. As soon as the project is authorized, contacting the appropriate city engineering, planning or surveying representatives will clarify requirements and help the project benchmarks fall into place.

Tracking the regulations of the jurisdictions that you serve is also important. Cities and counties constantly change their ordinances and administrative procedures, so staying current is essential to avoiding any unpleasant surprises. Your firm must be flexible and open to change so that you can stay competitive in an ever-changing real estate market.

REDNews: What are some of the biggest challenges your firm has faced?

Windrose team: One of the biggest challenges facing our industry is the lack of institutions that offer a degreed program in surveying. As the number of survey degree programs continues to dwindle across the country, the demand for existing and newly registered surveyors continues to rise. Recruiting, training and retaining talent must be one of your firm's top priorities if you hope to succeed in the long run.

Because finding new talent is such a critical part of the industry, one of the best surprises that a business owner can experience is seeing one of their existing employees excel in a new role. While we expect employees to positively and proactively take on their current assignments, sometimes an employee goes above and beyond the call of duty and shows that he has the potential for growth within the organization. These employees not only pave the way for their

own growth, but their infectious attitude provides a blueprint for others to follow.

Surveying is a required step of any development, playing an integral role in any project, whether you're building a new subdivision or adding utilities to an existing site. The key is understanding what issues your property may face and working with an experienced surveying firm to overcome them. ●

