

CAN WE TAKE A ROAD-BUILDING HOLIDAY?

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To the proposal of a road-building holiday, more or less regularly put forward, the first impulse is to say, with the lawyer whose innocent client had been jailed: "It can't be done." With benefit of second thought a less positive assertion appears advisable for the same reason that moved the lawyer's client to retort: "It has been done."

Not that there has been, or is likely to be at any time a complete cessation of all road-building activity. The proposal is generally not quite so sweeping. But there have been at least two notable trials of what may be termed a partial holiday, generally indulged, experience of which would appear to justify at least the milder assertion that: "It can't be done without seriously harmful effects, immediate and far reaching."

There are those perhaps, who recall that road building was held during the World War to be a "non-essential" industry, as such to be allotted the barest stint of labor and materials. More, doubtless, remember the disastrous results of the roadbuilders' struggle, so deprived, to hold none-too-ready road surfaces against the onslaught of an overwhelming movement of army trucks that was not held to be "non-essential". At least one highway official, surveying the aftermath of that holiday, was moved to submit an

uncollectible claim for damages to those at whose behest the holiday was taken.

But, if there are few who remember these now historic incidents, there are many who know that, but for the largess of the Federal government we should now be enjoying the similar consequences of a holiday ordered in the name of retrenchment and budget balancing in the early days of the depression. The evil results of that holiday also were quickly manifest - results that took the forms of disrupted highway engineering organizations, insolvent contractors, inactive and almost idle road material and equipment industries, and another large body of out-of-work labor.

All such damage has now apparently been repaired with the Federal funds that were poured out for the purpose, but the retrogressive acts of States, counties and cities are in many instances uncorrected and will again give trouble if and when the Federal contributions are materially reduced. Abolished property taxes will be difficult to reimpose. Diverted motor vehicle revenues will be hard to get back. The habit of letting George do it will not easily be broken. Yet nothing is more certain than that, soon or late, the State and local governments will have to reshoulder their cast-off burdens. For, though, at a price, it is possible to take a holiday, no holiday can last for long. And if the true cost of a road-building holiday were appreciated there would be few indeed who would entertain the suggestion.

That there are many who are willing still to entertain it means simply that there are many who, incredible as it may seem, still think of highways as luxuries; who fail utterly to comprehend the dependence of the modern economic structure on highway transportation; who have no adequate grasp of the magnitude of the investment already made in the highways or of the necessity of protecting that investment against the steady erosion of depreciation and obsolescence. It means that there are many, too, who have no conception of the magnitude of the industrial organization employed directly and indirectly in the building and maintaining of the highways, or of the serious economic repercussions that must inevitably follow any disturbance of the normal functioning of that organization. It means that many have no sufficient knowledge of the actual state of the highway system or of the further improvement demanded by the existing traffic; and little or no understanding of the processes by which the present structure has been created and further improvements must be effected.

The True Cost of a Road System

It will generally be found that those who accept the idea of a road-building holiday, regard the cost of highways as a price to be paid to obtain "good roads", and not, as it truly is, an unending payment to maintain a highway transportation service. When this latter conception has replaced the former in the general public mind there will be less talk of road-building holidays. Until it has done so it may be expected that the essential continuity

and regularity of the processes of roadbuilding and maintenance will be periodically interrupted by changes - increases as well as reductions - in the provision of revenue. And, as between the feast and the famine, in point of their harmful effects, there is perhaps little to choose.

It is, therefore, the supreme duty of all who have intimate knowledge of the necessity of such regular provision for highway work to join in making it so widely understood that there will be in the future no possibility of the ill-considered legislation, and arbitrary and unwise tampering with highway appropriations and revenue that have in recent years threatened the security of one of the nation's largest public investments. It is for the purpose of supplying the irrefutable facts that are necessary to counter the mass of prejudiced opinion of one shade or another upon which such disturbing actions are taken that the Bureau of Public Roads and thirty-nine State highway departments are now engaged in the most intensive studies of the highway situation yet undertaken. The central objective of these studies is the determination of the minimum continuing cost of maintaining a publicly desirable and physically adequate highway program through a future period as long as the limits of fallible foresight will permit. The minimum annual cost so to be determined will mark the danger line below which annual revenues will be reduced only at the known peril of tangible loss, and it will set a standard for the provision of tamper-proof resources for a conservative and business-like highway program, to

which, if wisdom prevails, the present undependable provisions will be adjusted.

If there is in all this an imperative ring it is not the presumptuous order of a special interest, but the undeniable demand of economic necessity, affecting the interest of the public as a whole in many ways.

Unavoidable Maintenance Expenditures

Simplest and best understood of these imperative needs of the highways is the need of maintenance. We have already created an improved highway system that is subject daily to the wear and tear of ordinary usage by upwards of 26,000,000 motor vehicles, and steadily beat upon by natural forces that tend to destroy it. The need of a correspondingly constant maintenance activity to repair the damages thus caused, has come to be generally appreciated; and none but the least prudent now would risk the inevitable loss that would occur if there were any failure to provide the where-withal to continue this stitch-in-time process.

With increase in the mileage of constructed roads and increase in the average age of the roads in use, the annual cost of maintenance tends to increase. The construction in recent years of a large mileage of the lighter and less costly types of surfaces is also reflected in greater maintenance liability. In consequence, a given total of annual expenditure, after deduction of the essential maintenance reserve, leaves less and less for

construction; and any reduction of the total appropriation means still further curtailment of the construction program.

Although it is not generally understood, such reductions in the funds available for construction, causing temporary cessation or even reduction of construction activity below a certain minimum rate, are also productive of inevitable loss. This is true for the following reasons.

Imperative Reconstruction

The improved roads that now exist have all of them been built within a period of 30 years or more. These roads, all of them, within the next 30 years will have to be reconstructed. Some of the less durable types will doubtless require partial reconstruction several times within such a period, and as, year after year, the original constructed mileage grew, so, year after year, it will come to the need of reconstruction. In the initial improvement of many of these roads the work done was deliberately limited. A result was accepted that was known at the time to be less than would ultimately be required for completely satisfactory service of the traffic, with the definite intention of adding to the improvement at a later date as need should develop and funds for the purpose materialize. This is the policy of stage construction, well established and entirely reasonable. It was justified by two circumstances that have surrounded the work of road improvement during the pioneer period now closing.

First, there was the fact that while there was always the prospect of traffic growth, there was always the possibility of giving adequate temporary service with a degree of road improvement less than would ultimately be required.

And, second, there was the incentive and necessity to seize the possibility mentioned in order to extend to a maximum of mileage some degree of improvement as quickly as possible, with the limited annual funds the public could be induced to provide. The prime need was to "get the traffic through." When that was done it would be time enough to talk about refinement and elaboration of the improvement.

Let it be recorded here that no other course would have given us the extent of improved mileage and the degree of road service we now have. But it did involve the deferment of construction obligations that now are reaching maturity.

So, there is now and will be henceforth a certain annual construction requirement on the roads already improved; a requirement to reconstruct as the original improvement wears out, and a requirement to complete an originally partial improvement. These requirements must be met, else we suffer loss as direct and tangible as that which results from the neglect of maintenance. There is no possibility of reducing the amount of this absolutely necessary work. On the contrary, there is every reason to anticipate an increase, since in the annual amount of original construction there was a year-by-year increase.

In this work of reconstruction and stage construction, that cannot be avoided, it will be necessary to do more than merely re-establish worn out existing surfaces or upbuild them to greater strength and adequacy. Without concurrence in a recently published pessimistic appraisal of the value of the best past efforts of road builders - an appraisal that must be regarded as less fortunate in its attainment of accuracy than in its sponsorship - it is possible to see that there have occurred in the last few years great changes in the performance ability of motor vehicles. It is impossible to neglect the obligation that these changes impose to correct pioneer highway alignment, to widen pioneer surfaces, to increase sight distances, separate traffic lanes, reduce grades, and to do whatever else may be needed to make the highways amply safe for modern usage.

Undeniable New Improvements

All of which means that, without adding by so much as a single mile to our present mileage of improved roads, there will be need of a construction and maintenance activity in the future at least as great as that which characterized the period just preceding the depression. An unremitting, never-ending activity, it will have to be, that can be shirked or reduced only at the cost of direct, tangible loss by depreciation of the existing highway plant, to say nothing at all of the even greater, but less tangible losses involved in the decline in adequacy of service to the traffic.

And - most assuredly - we have not yet built our last mile of highway. Few, even of the would-be holiday makers, believe that we have.

Our surfaced roads now total somewhat over a million miles. We have thought of our total road mileage as in round figures 3,000,000. Both figures may be considerably altered by the measurements made in the planning surveys now in progress. But whatever the true figures prove to be, it is certain that there will be found to be still a wide margin between the total existing road mileage and the mileage thus far improved. In that margin there will doubtless be found a certain group of the remaining more useful secondary roads which, by even the narrowest test of utility, will merit improvement. How much beyond this point we should or will go into the improvement of less traveled land-serving roads for general economic and social reasons; how much the mileage of improved roads will be increased by future construction of roads that do not now exist at all, in response to the need of relief for now crowded main highways and the normal need of new roads to serve a growing and possibly redistributed rural population; how much of new mileage will be added in belt lines around cities and in parkways and special express highways: These are questions that the future will have to decide.

But that, for several years, we shall continue to increase the total of improved road mileage is a probability that no one in the least familiar with the economic need and public demand will deny. And every added mile means a permanent increase in the main-

tenance and reconstruction obligation created for the future - a permanent addition to the inescapable annual cost of the existing highway plant.

Proposals for a road-building holiday, when they are not thoroughly dishonest and vicious, generally express the hope that highway expenditure may be reduced, temporarily or permanently, in order that revenues raised for road purposes may be diverted to other public uses. Whenever else the holiday may be intended to benefit, it rarely, if ever, holds prospect of relief for the payers of special motor vehicle and gasoline taxes.

From what has preceded it should be apparent that there can never be a permanent reduction of highway expenditure; that, on the contrary, an increase must be expected. It should be apparent also that even a temporary let-down can be indulged only at the price of immediate loss, in consequence of highway depreciation, and increased future expenditure to make good such loss. In the regular and timely performance of needed and unavoidable work lies the one possibility of holding the cost of our highways to a minimum; and such regularity and timeliness can be achieved only when there is assurance of revenue in the required amount. In the dedication of motor vehicle revenues to highway purposes there will be found the principal basis of efficient and effective State highway administration in the past, and the vice of current diversions of such revenues to other purposes is that they tend to destroy the

essential proportionality of highway revenue to imperative highway needs. If it be conceded, as surely it must, that there is in any event no prospect of reduction of the special taxes of road users; and if, as this article endeavors to prove, there is an annual cost of highways that cannot be avoided - a cost that exceeds the total yield of road user taxes at their present rates; if these propositions be accepted, then there can be just one reasonable conclusion regarding the diversion of motor vehicle license fees and gasoline taxes from the highway uses for which they were originally imposed and to which they alone of all public imposts bear a relation of cause and effect. That conclusion is that such diversion is folly; nothing less.

The Public - The Final Arbiter

Lest it be mistakenly concluded, from the emphasis that has been laid upon the inevitability of highway expenditure, that what shall be done upon and to the highways has somehow got beyond popular control, it should be added that this is not true at all. The public will, formed in the knowledge of public need, is still the final arbiter of highway policy. All that has been done to provide the means of more perfect highway transportation has been done in response to insistent public demand. Conflicting with every past proposal of a road-building holiday, that demand has continued strong. It continues today in the face of willful diversions and withdrawals of the revenues needed to satisfy it - diversions and withdrawals approved in many cases by the very

groups that most insistently demand increase of improved highway mileage and concomitant highway cost. The inconsistency is obvious. Like the average individual who is said, these days, to have two points of view - the pedestrian and the vehicular, the public also is apparently of two minds about the highways - of one mind in its desire for better and more complete highway service, and of another when it is asked to pay for the service it wants.

Obviously this conflict of public desires must be reconciled. The nearer we approach the final limit of wise investment in the highways the more important does it become that the public be given a real opportunity to express its will on the basis of a full revelation of the two sides of the ledger.

It is such a revelation of the exact progress thus far attained in meeting the essential highway needs, of the further needs awaiting service, and of the permanently continuing cost of meeting the sum total of recognized needs, that the State-wide highway planning surveys aim to afford. These surveys will supply for the first time precise knowledge of the physical state of the entire rural highway system, of the degree of approach to complete improved highway service to rural and urban populations, of the volume and character of the vehicular movement over all parts of the highway system and the further highway improvements needed for the economical service of this traffic, of the present financial provision for the meeting of these needs, and of the probable ultimate cost of supplying a completely satisfactory and economically

defensible highway service. Presenting both sides of the equation in terms as concrete as may be possible, and replacing the inaccurate, conflicting and often prejudiced beliefs and assumptions that have served hitherto as the only available information, it is hoped that these surveys may form a foundation upon which may be erected a constant and enduring highway policy. Through them it is expected that it will be possible to present for public consideration the true and inescapable costs of the highways economically and socially desirable - the costs of these highways, to have and - as the wise old legal phrase continued - to hold. There is in that ancient verbiage a very salutary reminder that keeping is usually a less lightsome affair than getting; and it is a reminder that can be heeded with profit in all future decisions respecting the highways. Giving it heed there may be less of holiday gaiety in embarking upon new and untested highway obligations and less thought of holiday respite in holding to those we undertake.