

Sent to Engineering News-Record for inclusion in a special issue to be published simultaneously with the annual convention and road show of the American Road Builders' Association, Cleveland, Ohio. January 1938. November 1937.

Highway Planning Surveys to Answer Important Questions
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In 45 States and the Territory of Hawaii comprehensive highway planning surveys are now in progress. In a few of these States the work is just beginning; in many the various field observations have been almost or quite completed, and the labor of analysis, necessary for the interpretation of the facts gathered, is well under way. All of these surveys conform to the general outline suggested about two years ago by the Bureau of Public Roads. All are being actively prosecuted by the several State highway departments with the cooperation and advice of the Federal Bureau.

As indicated by numerous published descriptions, the surveys go far beyond the usual traffic survey in their search for facts. Traffic surveys are included—surveys that seek to establish the relative flow of traffic on all rural roads; not merely on the State highway systems to which all previous efforts have been confined. Moreover, these traffic surveys aim not simply to determine the volume of vehicular movement, but also its origins and destinations, its purposes and precise character, and the relative demands it makes upon all roads by reason of the weight of its units as well as their numbers.

In these surveys, however, joined with the studies of traffic, there is a complete inventory of all rural road facilities and there is also a financial investigation - three interrelated groups of studies which, taken together, are expected to supply all of the facts necessary for a review and revamping of current highway policies and practices to fit them more closely to the present need.

By the steady application of State and Federal efforts to the improvement of the limited Federal-aid and State highway systems, these main rural arteries have been improved to a degree that permits a heavy traffic to flow between cities, States, and regions from end to end of the country. That the improvement is not wholly adequate is a matter of common report; but precisely what shall be done to make it so, what will be the cost of the further improvement, and how such costs are to be met are questions that await satisfactory answers.

While the main roads have been in progress of improvement to their present admittedly inadequate state, the lesser rural roads have been variously improved through the uncoordinated and sometimes misdirected efforts of thousands of local, county and township authorities. Even the mileage so improved is unknown; and as, with unimportant exceptions, there has never been a traffic count on these roads, there is nothing but the probably fallible judgment of local elected officials to give assurance of the adequacy or the need of the improvements that have been made.

No one now knows with any degree of accuracy what part of the whole rural highway traffic movement is served by the roads that have been thus far improved by the Federal, State and local governments. It is roughly estimated that somewhat over a million of the approximately three-million-mile total of rural roads have been improved. It is assumed that improvement of the whole mileage will be neither necessary nor financially possible. But whether the mileage already improved is near or far from the mileage that ultimately should be improved to afford a justifiable service cannot be said until the current surveys supply the yardstick for measuring need and the first reliable record of road condition.

It has been reasonable thus far to deal with the improvement of the whole highway system in parts. The special and concerted attention given to the important part that comprises the clearly distinguishable main arteries has been justified by the greatly superior need for its improvement. The more casual and disjointed improvement of the lesser roads has been tolerable as the best that could be expected under the existing circumstances. The stage construction policy, with its implication of temporary acceptance of improvements known to be less than fully adequate, was the best answer possible in a situation in which the minimum need for improved mileage far exceeded the accomplished improvement.

However, time and continued construction have now brought nearer the realization of complete adequacy. At the lower end of the scale of utility there is an approach to the margin beyond which improvement may not be economically extended; and on the main system the point has been reached where - a pioneer improvement completed - subsequent betterments, many of them necessarily radical and expensive departures from the existing designs, must aim as nearly as possible to meet ultimate or long-time needs in order that future obsolescence may be held within reasonable limits.

For the improvement of more and more of the local road mileage there is an emotional demand, politically expressed, that does not stop short of an all-year road to every farmer's gate. For the further and more adequate improvement of the main thoroughfares there is an equally insistent demand and a balancing emotional appeal that - without very sound evidence - would attribute to defects of the highways the causation of many of an unfortunately increasing number of highway accidents, injuries and deaths.

For the wherewithal to carry out these demanded further improvements there is no source other than the public purse, reached through some form or forms of taxation, levied by some agency or agencies of government. The extent to which the improvements are economically justifiable may be determined by an estimate of the

returns they will yield for the money expended upon them. The extent to which they can actually be carried out rests upon the willingness of the public to pay not only for their initiation, but also for their perpetuation by maintenance, reconstruction as needed, and by the many and increasing services necessary for the operation of a modern highway system.

Herein lies the very serious rub. For, whereas, on the one hand, there is no lack of demand for further improving effort and a demonstrable and continuing need for such effort within reasonable limits, and further for the constant maintenance of the expensive highway plant that has been created and that is being steadily enlarged, on the other hand there are abundant signs of a marked reluctance to pay for what is demanded.

The collection of property taxes, long the recognized major support of the local roads, becomes steadily more and more difficult. Motor vehicle license fees and gasoline taxes, at first regarded as the appropriate sources of revenue for main rural highways, are increasingly diverted from this original use to the replacement of abandoned property taxes for the support of the local rural roads and city streets.

The raising of road user tax rates and the growth in the yield of such taxes no longer offer the easy and certain means of providing large additional sums of road revenue. The rates, in

certain States, have obviously climbed close to maximum levels, and a definite and organized opposition has arisen which not only resists further increase, but calls for actual reduction. The large percentage increases in motor vehicle registration and the correspondingly large proportional increments in motor revenue are obviously no longer to be expected. And, for such increases as the acceptable rates will continue for a time to produce, there are competing claims which constantly and unblushingly press for a diversion to other than highway use.

Thus far the loss of property taxes for highways has been about balanced by the increased appropriations of the Federal Government. An anticipated eventual reduction of these enlarged appropriations has recently been proposed by the Secretary of the Treasury as a budget balancing measure.

Obviously these various tendencies toward reduction of revenue are incompatible with the growing demand for expenditure on both the main and the local roads, and the steadily increasing cost of maintaining the expanding improved highway system. Clearly, the demands and needs must be brought into balance with the obtainable resources, and that quickly. And in the process of adjustment it is important that there shall be a new definition of the proper

contributions of the several branches of government - Federal, State and local - which, recognized by each, will be maintained without abrupt change for any but the most compelling reasons.

Coupled with this pressing problem of the essential adjustment of highway revenue to highway need, there is the equally urgent necessity for a national revision of the laws of the State and Federal governments regulating the use of the roads. In their effects upon the weight, size and speed of vehicles, these regulations fix or should fix the standards of road design. It is important that they be adjusted to demonstrated economic need and, when so adjusted, that they be really enforced in order that roads built in accordance with them shall be protected against illegal and harmful usage. It is highly important also that the existing illogical variety of regulatory measures in force in the various States be reduced to a closer harmony consistent with actual economic needs.

The highway planning surveys are collecting a wide variety of data in 45 States which, when compiled and analyzed will for the first time permit intelligent and satisfactory answers to be given to the important fundamental questions here outlined.