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Federal Aid Helps Close Highway Gaps

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For the past seven years highway building has been the greatest single public activity in the United States. In 1921, for the first time in our history, the total expenditure for the construction and maintenance of roads reached a billion dollars and each year since, the expenditure has exceeded that figure slightly.

If it seems that a billion dollars a year is a heavy expenditure for a single purpose, I would suggest that it be measured against the yearly expenditure by motorists of more than two billion dollars for gasoline alone. And it may also be borne in mind what that expenditure is providing for the American people.

It is buying surfaced highways at the rate of 40,000 miles a year and it is maintaining the highways already built as they have never been maintained before. In 1921, there were 387,760 miles of surfaced highways in the entire country. Today, there are at least 200,000 miles more, and the roads that have been built are not only not being allowed to depreciate as the new ones are built but, on the contrary, are being progressively improved.

At this moment the last 15-mile section of unimproved road between Portland and Florida is being improved. Before the year is out a large part of the road in South Carolina and Georgia that has previously been only graded or surfaced with sand-clay will be covered with a hard surface, and in another year or two there will be an all-year, dustless, mudless road running the length of the Atlantic Coast. The road referred to is United States Route No. 1, one of the important routes of the United States highway system; and it will be so marked uniformly for the guidance of travellers in all States.

What is happening on Route 1 is taking place at the same time on other roads throughout the country, as any one who drives an automobile can scarcely fail to realize. The gaps are being closed - and rapidly.

Federal Government Active

In this great work of public improvement, the Federal Government is bearing its share. It is cooperating with the States in the improvement of the 186,000-mile interstate highway system known as the Federal-aid system. At present, some 70,000 miles of the system have been improved with Federal assistance, the government sharing the cost of construction with the States in approximately equal proportions. Upwards of 8,000 miles now under construction will be completed in 1928 under the same auspices, and construction of an approximately equal mileage will be begun during the year.

As an indication of the character of the Federal-aid improvements, the records of the U. S. Bureau of Public Roads classify the 64,210 miles completed up to last June as follows: Hard surfaced pavements, 20,664 miles, macadam and gravel surfacing, 26,857 miles; surfaced with sand-clay or graded 16,521 miles; and 168 miles of major bridges from 20 feet to upwards of a mile in length.

The necessity of Federal participation in the improvement of these most important interstate arteries becomes more clearly evident with the growth of interstate travel. In many States, particularly those of New England and the Middle Atlantic area, traffic counts on the main roads show that the number of vehicles bearing the license tags of other States is almost as great as the number of local vehicles; and each year, the closing of unimproved gaps and the resulting reduction of the inconveniences and time of travel add to the volume of the interstate movement.

In the West the building of the through roads is peculiarly a national problem. Sparse population and the great distances to be spanned, especially in the intermountain region, make Federal help a positive necessity if the growing demand for transcontinental arteries is to be met in a reasonable length of time.

Additional Federal Appropriations Expected

The clear understanding of these facts by Congress gives assurance that the participation of the Federal Government, already provided for up to June 1929 will be extended two years more by the authorization of annual appropriations, probably in the amount of \$75,000,000 for each year.

Hearings are now being held by the House Committee on Roads and it is expected that the legislation which will be recommended by that committee will pass into law with little change and no serious opposition from any quarter.

Bills referred to the committee provide for the authorization of appropriations for the fiscal years 1930 and 1931 in amounts ranging from \$75,000,000 to \$150,000,000 for Federal-aid roads and from \$7,500,000 to \$15,000,000 for forest road construction.

Among amendments of the Federal highway act which have been proposed and which from present prospects are likely to be adopted, is one that, under certain conditions, would lift the present limit of \$15,000 a mile that can be paid by the Federal Government. The conditions recognized as justifying larger Federal payments are those involving construction in mountainous, swampy, or flood lands, on which the average cost per mile for grading and drainage exceeds \$10,000 per mile. It is recognized that when the mere preparation of the road bed is so expensive, the cost of completing the construction by surfacing

is likely to exceed \$30,000 a mile and that under the present \$15,000 limit the Government can not pay its full half of the cost. This amendment, if passed, will also permit the payment of half the cost by the Federal Government in the case of roads built in the more densely populated sections of the country, where because of the greater width and thickness of pavement required to accommodate the traffic the cost inevitably must exceed \$30,000 a mile.

The additional participation that would be permitted by this amendment is desirable and there is a strong probability that it will be enacted into law. If so it will benefit especially the States of the East.

Other amendments have been proposed which have little effect upon the situation in the East, but which are greatly needed by the Western States.

One of these is the provision that would permit the payment of any portion up to the whole cost of Federal-aid construction by the Government in the public-land States where the population does not exceed 10 persons per square mile.

Another with a similar purpose would authorize the appropriation of an additional \$3,500,000 for each of the fiscal years 1929, 1930 and 1931 to be expended by the Bureau of Public Roads in the construction of the main roads of the public-land States, through unappropriated or unreserved public lands, non-taxable Indian lands, or other Federal reservations.

Federal Construction of Express Highways Not Favored

The legislation that will finally be enacted is far more likely to follow the lines of these proposals than those of the more radical advocates of greatly increased Federal expenditures for the construction of great arterial or express highways. One of these proposals provides for the construction, maintenance and regulation of a nation-wide system of hard-surfaced post roads under the supervision of the Secretary of Agriculture, to be completed within five years or as soon as may be thereafter. For this purpose the bill that has been introduced would authorize a Federal bond issue of 5 billion dollars.

Owing to the general satisfaction with the present Federal-aid plan of operation it is not likely that any such ambitious scheme of solely Federal construction will find sufficient favor in Congress to secure its adoption; and the same may be said of the bills, of which there are at least two, which would provide for an extension of Federal aid to local roads over which the mails are carried. One of these bills would authorize appropriations of fifty, sixty-five, and seventy-five million dollars, respectively, for the fiscal years 1929, 1930, and 1931, to be expended on rural post roads not included in the Federal-aid system. The chance that any such bill will pass is small in view of the express opposition by President Coolidge to the extension of Federal aid for any but trunk-line roads.