

The Need of Facts For Highway Planning

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For 15 years or more prior to 1930 direct responsibility for the improvement and maintenance of the main intercity highways, constituting the State highway systems, was vested in all States in the respective State highway departments. The designated systems - at first including approximately 200,000 miles - were increased during the 15-year period, by successive additions of important roads, to about 325,000 miles.

The expense of these State roads was met at first in large part by taxation of real property. By the end of the period mentioned it had become a charge to be met by taxation of road users exclusively in the majority of States and largely by such taxation in all States.

During the same 15-year period the Federal Government cooperated with the States; and for the greater part of the period its aid was extended only to the improvement of the most important interstate and intercounty roads which were included in the designated Federal-aid highway system. Initially limited to 7 percent of the total rural road mileage, this system was gradually increased by successive additions from less than 170,000 to more than 200,000 miles. The Federal funds were required to be matched by State contributions, and were not available for maintenance, but for construction only.

All rural roads not included in the State and Federal-aid systems remained throughout the period mentioned under the care of local authorities. In aggregate about 2,700,000 miles - roughly 90 percent of the total rural mileage - these roads are generally less heavily traveled than those included in the Federal-aid and State systems, but are known to include some sections on which traffic is denser than it is on many parts of the two selected systems. In large part the roads remaining under local control are believed to serve mainly local purposes, but, again, there are exceptional sections that undoubtedly serve to a considerable degree as through routes. At the beginning of the 15-year period the roads administered by local authorities were financed almost entirely with revenues resulting from local property taxation; but this condition was changed from year to year until, by the end of the period, nearly 25 percent of the cost had come to be supplied by motor vehicle and gasoline taxes.

In 1930 a movement for reduction of the local highway tax burden in North Carolina resulted in the transfer of all authority over local rural roads from the counties to the State Highway Commission and the abolition of all existing highway taxes on real property. Similar changes have since occurred in Virginia and West Virginia and less sweeping changes in other States.

Strong influences are working in all States toward the same objectives; and it is to be anticipated that the movement will eventually result in a general taking over of responsibility for all rural roads by the State governments. In view of the recognized superior efficiency of the State agencies the change is a desirable one and should be encouraged.

As it is generally promoted, the movement involves also the complete or partial abandonment of the property tax as a source of revenue and dependence upon motor vehicle and gasoline taxes wholly or in a very large part to meet all costs of the rural highways. This raises questions of the sufficiency of such revenues at the existing rates or of the changes in rates of taxation needed to supply the necessary funds.

For the guidance of State legislatures certain to be confronted with these problems, and as a basis for the work of State planning bodies and highway departments it is highly desirable that accurate information - now unobtainable from any source - be accumulated. The information to be obtained should relate to the entire rural road system and should be sufficient to develop fully the present state of all roads, their degree of adequacy and relative service, and the probable future cost of supporting the necessary maintenance of the entire system and the desirable improvement of portions of it at a satisfactory rate.

Perhaps the most doubtful questions are those that relate to the large mileage of secondary and local roads. The information concerning them is especially inadequate, and notoriously inaccurate. Even the mileage involved is not known with any reasonable accuracy; and of the state of improvement and the adequacy of such improvement there is little dependable knowledge. The local control under which these roads have always existed has, with few exceptions, developed no rational classification of the large mileage involved, and decisions upon questions of capital outlay and maintenance expenditure have been made upon inadequate and often definitely erroneous information. It is a matter of common observation that improvements have often been made where there was no recognizable need and have been omitted where the justification would appear to have been greater. If, as appears probable, the State governments are to assume responsibility for the care of the local roads, the State agencies will need full information concerning the relative usefulness of all parts of the large mileage, in order that the errors and weaknesses of local administration may be avoided and corrected.

To supply such needed information the Bureau of Public Roads has suggested that comprehensive road planning and financial surveys be made uniformly and as quickly as possible in all States. It has offered its cooperation in general terms and is about to propose a definite measure of Federal contribution to the suggested studies, which it is hoped will lead to the early beginning of work in all States.

The proposal of such cooperation by the Federal Government is a recognition of the fact that its interest in the matter is now as direct and practical as that of the States. National participation in road construction has already been extended beyond the main highways, to which it was formerly limited; and under the necessity of unemployment relief, if for no other reasons, the Government will probably continue to spend money on local roads. Whether the purpose be emergency relief only, or, as it may very properly be, the general economic and social development of rural America, there is equal desirability that the expenditure be made upon roads of the greatest usefulness in the promotion of an ordered plan of rural development. The information necessary to such a selection will be provided by the surveys proposed and can be satisfactorily obtained in no other way. That the matter is similarly viewed by State governments is indicated by the recent legislative and administrative actions preparatory to the conduct of similar surveys and by the insistent requests for Federal assistance and guidance in such projects received by the Bureau of Public Roads.

While the problems of administration and finance are most acute in respect to secondary roads there are problems of design and location on the main roads that equally require organized study. In general these are associated with the changes in main highway design necessitated by increases in the speed and density

of the traffic movement on these roads. Prompt solution of these problems and corresponding action are essential to maintain and enhance the efficiency of highway transportation and above all to lower the alarming rate of traffic accidents and fatalities.