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## IMPROVEMENT OF SECONDARY ROADS

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Evidencing continued interest of the Federal government in the lesser as well as the main roads of the country, the last Congress authorized appropriation of \$25,000,000 for each of the fiscal years 1936 and 1937 for the construction of secondary or feeder roads.

From 1916, the year of the first Federal-aid road appropriation, to 1933, Federal money was available only for the construction of the more important interstate and intercounty roads. Federal dollars, during that period, paid a considerable part of the cost of the important highways that now interlace the nation.

This long established policy was altered in 1933 by the National Industrial Recovery Act, which permitted not more than 25 percent of the road construction funds it provided to be spent for secondary roads. The immediate purpose was to increase employment. Rural as well as urban communities were hard hit by the depression. Feeder roads penetrate into every rural community. By permitting the Federal money to be spent for their improvement, it was made possible in 1933 and 1934, to give needed employment in nearly every county in the United States.

The results of the first appropriation were so satisfactory that another was made by the Hayden-Cartwright Act in 1934, and this time the feeder roads' share of the whole appropriation was required to be not less instead of not more than 25 percent. Of the two

appropriations the sums allotted for secondary roads totaled \$149,949,000 most of which has now been spent for the planned improvement of 25,000 miles of the more useful feeder roads, with direct benefit to almost every community in the country.

These first Federal appropriations for secondary roads were outright grants. Those recently authorized for the fiscal years 1938 and 1939 are not. These latter funds, the first of which will be apportioned by the Secretary of Agriculture on or before January 1, 1937, are required to be matched by the States. The basis of matching is that established by the Federal Highway Act, which means usually a 50 - 50 sharing of the cost. Acceptance of the Federal money means, therefore, a total expenditure for work planned under each appropriation of roundly \$50,000,000 - a total of \$100,000,000 for the further improvement of the country's second-string roads.

One effect of the Federal appropriation is to place the direction of the secondary road construction it pays for under the supervision of the State highway departments. Under such direction, with the cooperation of the Federal Road Bureau, it may be expected that the improvement of the roads will be more systematically planned than has been possible in much of the work done under local authorities.

The required matching of the Federal contribution should also be beneficial as a means of halting the tendency of States and local governments to divert road funds to other purposes. The matching money

will have to come in most States either from local property taxes or from State motor vehicle and gasoline taxes allotted for road purposes to the local governments. The necessity of self help will thus be reasserted, and local governments will be put on notice to prepare to resume burdens of which they have been relieved by the large outright emergency grants of the Federal government during the last three years.

There is undeniable need as well as strong popular demand for the improvement of some additional mileage of local roads and for the further betterment of some part of the mileage already improved. There is, however, a disquieting tendency to expect these improvements to be made without increase of highway expenditure. In some instances the demand for more improved local roads is raised by the same people who seek by various means to reduce the total of available road revenues.

Transfer of responsibility for local roads from county to State authorities without corresponding transfer of revenues is one of the ways in which reduction of road taxes has been attempted. Diversion of motor vehicle and gasoline taxes to other than the road purposes for which they were pledged when levied is another; and proposals to decrease gasoline and motor vehicle taxes are still another. It is a rather remarkable fact that many who support such proposals are also to be found among the most insistent of those who demand improvement of additional local road mileage.

The danger of ill-advised yielding to these mutually inconsistent demands is a threat to the essential maintenance and needed further improvement of the main highways. There can be no question of the need of more improved secondary roads, but they cannot be obtained without paying for them, and they must not be bought with money needed for the protection of the investment already made in the primary highways.

What additional secondary road mileage should be improved? What will be the cost of these improvements? How will the cost be met? These are important questions to which it is difficult to obtain satisfactory immediate answers. There are almost two million miles of local roads still unimproved. In what part and in what order should this mileage be improved? The cost of the improvement will not be a single outlay, once made and never repeated, but, on the contrary, a regularly recurring annual expense, the amount of which will increase directly with the mileage improved. How much of such expense will the taxpayers be willing and able to support?

Properly to answer these important questions it is necessary to know a good deal that is not now known with any certainty about the real and relative importance of all parts of the large unimproved local road mileage. The ultimate answers, whatever they may be, must also take full account of the simultaneous needs and cost of the primary highways.

It is with the purpose of amassing the large variety of facts needed for such answers to the problems of both the secondary and the primary highway systems that the Bureau of Public Roads and the highway departments of forty States are at present conducting in the State-wide highway planning surveys, the most intensive studies of highway needs yet undertaken.