

COUNTY HIGHWAYS AND THE NEW FEDERAL HIGHWAY LEGISLATION

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For the first time in our history a potential national plan for highway improvement is available for the use we, as highway officials, are able to make of it. The qualifying term "potential" is defined as "existing in possibility, not in actuality." If it appears inconsistent to introduce such a questioning note as to a plan which is now a Federal law and which has been recognized and supplemented by many important State laws, this apparent inconsistency is due to no uncertainty in my own mind as a Federal highway official, of the virtues inherent in this legal framework. There is no question that a great and enduring structure of highway administration and highway engineering can be built upon this framework through the combined efforts of local, State and Federal officials. The essential element to make possible this structure for the service of the Nation is an attitude of mutual understanding, tolerance of one another's ideas and ideals, and above all, faith in the motives and objectives of our associates in the work. This is not a mere stringing together of soft words. It is an expression of my own articles of faith in those who serve the public in the highway field. During many years of wide contacts with these officials, the number who proved to be unworthy of confidence is negligible. But to make this new highway plan work, much more than honesty of purpose is needed. There are other elements to be fitted into their proper perspective and to be given the weight their significance requires.

More than four hundred fifty years ago Columbus landed on the shores of this hemisphere; one hundred fifty-five years ago the Constitution of the United States of America was ratified by all of the original thirteen States. The long periods, 1492 to 1790 and 1790 to 1945, have been filled with the efforts to settle a new country, inhospitable to the European pioneers, to make the lands habitable and productive, and to establish and maintain a government, through the action and consent of the governed, and a free economy. Many times it has been necessary to meet aggression from without by the united front of our people. The attack by Japan at Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, welded all elements of the Nation into a war machine of such dynamic power it surpassed our own early conception and pyramided far beyond the imagination of the aggressors. The violence of the shock which ran through every citizen with the news of the attack was, in its intensity, a new experience to most of us. The reaction was to bring together in a single purpose a whole Nation of determined people, who have perhaps as widely divergent characteristics of physical and mental make-up as exist anywhere, and who demand an individual freedom of thought and action that is real and not curtailed by stolen or assumed authority. It seems almost trite to repeat these things here, which, in a broad sense, are so widely known and accepted as true--yet these facts must be restated in a frank recognition of the difficulties in bringing together in a common purpose and a coordinated plan of action, the very large number of agencies of local, State and Federal government who have both authority

and responsibility over highway matters. There is no shock of Pearl Harbor to unite us. There are the human and economic problems of staggering dimension and import to face and to win through, as the aftermath of war.

While the potential highway improvement program is only one, it is an important one of the many private and public undertakings upon which the country must rely in its struggle to maintain our own ideals and values of the common good in a war-wrecked world. It is the only one of these for which highway officials, as such, are responsible. As highway officials we will carry this responsibility in the degree we are able to unite and to go forward together over a long period of years to make our full contribution to recovery--a recovery measured not alone by the Nation's economy but by the degree of enrichment of human values. These unspectacular but all essential objectives will, when fully understood, be adequate to unite the highway front against aggression from within--the aggression of all the critical problems which are the inevitable harvest of war.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 provides a legal plan for the administration and financing of a comprehensive highway improvement program through the cooperation of the States and the Federal government. This legislation is an outstanding example of constructive statesmanship exercised by the Congress. It reflects in its terms intimate knowledge and experience in highway matters resulting from long years of service and study by the members of the highway committees of the House and the Senate.

In the many previous Federal highway laws since the basic act of 1916, painstakingly fashioned to meet new needs as they arose, is the foundation for the present plan. There is no major principle incorporated in the new law that has not been previously incorporated and tried in at least a limited degree over more than a quarter century, 1916 to 1944. Congress has now provided a plan for the joint operations of the States and their subdivisions, and the Federal government which in the light of our present knowledge approaches an ideal concept of shared financial responsibility and nicely balanced authority. This is not a personal opinion but the considered verdict of those who know highway administration through the realistic school of living the experience. There may be fault found by some with the division of funds between the States or between the several systems of highways within the individual States. The virtue of such criticism is yet to be proved. It affects in no way the soundness of the administrative plan provided and affords no escape for the highway officials, Federal or State, who fail to put the plan into effective operation.

As a result of the State-wide highway surveys, the different classes of traffic which must be served are well defined. These classes of traffic are not wholly distinct each from the other. There are wide overlapping areas.

The separation of roads into systems is not based upon traffic characteristics alone. It is in part a recognition of the administrative controls over units of government involved.

Based upon the combination of traffic characteristics and administrative control, four systems of highways are to be selected:

1. The system of Interstate Highways to carry the major established flow of long-distance traffic between principal centers of population and at the same time to serve the heaviest concentrations of local traffic between these centers and their satellite suburban and rural communities along these routes. In its simplest terms this system is comprised of the principal traffic arteries of the Federal-aid highway system.

2. The Federal-aid highway system, the trunk-line rural highway system first provided by the Act of 1921, and since then modified and extended in some degree. It is now sufficiently extensive to carry the preponderant part of town-to-town and city-to-city traffic, and also serves concentrated flows of local traffic near the towns and cities. It forms a reasonably comprehensive network covering the United States, about 230,000 miles in extent.

3. The Federal-aid secondary system, comprising an extensive mileage of the principal secondary and feeder roads which collect and distribute traffic in rural areas to and from the trunk lines of the Federal-aid highway system.

4. The extensions of the Federal-aid highway system within urban areas composed of the arterial and express routes necessary for a free circulation and distribution of urban traffic.

Each of the four systems is a necessary element in an over-all integrated highway net designed to serve all classes of traffic efficiently and safely. A recognition of this fact is a necessary first step to reach the mutual adjustments between the several official groups of highway officials, and to accept on the part of each group the justice of allotments of the highway funds to carry forward the improvement of each system simultaneously.

It would be a foolish policy to attack on such a far-reaching front without first deciding upon the objectives.

The Federal Highway Act of 1944 clearly defines the objectives. With such broad conceptions there emerges a fully adequate charter for a national highway program,--not a haphazard or provisional policy,--rather a plan for a long-range, well founded program designed with consideration to meet local, State and national highway problems.

The conception is that of universal highway service to be reached through a sustained effort over a considerable but not unreasonable number of years.

The regulations state the concept as follows:

"(1) To establish the pattern for a long-range program of highway development designed for the national defense and to serve the major classes of highway traffic. *****

"(2) To recognize the State highway department as the legal representative of the State including all government subdivisions in the administration of the Act within each State.

"(3) To provide for a more comprehensive rural-road program through cooperation between the State highway department, the county or other appropriate local road officials and the Public Roads Administration in the selection and improvement of the system of principal secondary or feeder roads."

Confining the discussion now more particularly to the county rural roads, the administrative steps are not difficult.

1. The selection of the rural secondary system.
2. The determination of the program of projects to be improved with the annual funds available.
3. The preparation of plans and specifications.
4. The construction of each project.
5. The payment for the project.
6. The continuous maintenance of each project.

In general the details of operation within each State are to be agreed between the State highway department and the county or other local road officials.

The Federal regulations and the interpreting memoranda issued by the Commissioner of Public Roads have been written with the intent to recognize fully the sovereignty of the State. The follow through on this policy will be through an agreement between the Commissioner of Public Roads and the American Association of State Highway Officials, which will doubtless be signed this week.^{1/} The agreement provides for a new technique of administration between the highway agencies representing the State and the Public Roads Administration, representing the Federal government, in the cooperative formulating of operating procedures under the new law. This method can only have the one result that the operations under this legislation have the support of a majority of the State highway departments. This in turn, with cooperation

^{1/} The agreement has been signed.

established within the State between the State highway department and the County highway departments, provides the county officials with representation and a voice.

There are some questions that are asked which deserve attention because of their importance in county highway policies. Without attempting here even an approach to a complete answer, a few will be briefly considered. For example, why should there be required the selection of a secondary highway system? Here is an answer from Mr. Gilbert Smith, President, County Judges and Commissioners Association of Texas:

"I believe it is a modest estimate to say that today in Texas we have 30 percent more lateral-road mileage than is actually needed. The cause of this is the lack of far-sighted planning of the commissioners' courts of a few years ago in trying to give every man a private outlet to his nearest trading-post. It is easy to open a road, but it is tough when you try to close one.

"If every one of our counties today, cooperating with the State highway department, will make a survey of its road needs, with an eye to the practicability of abandoning roads, and will establish a sound system of roads for all-weather improvement, designate them and set up the machinery to build the system, it will discover that it can eliminate many miles of unused roads and turn the revenue now being spent on them toward the upkeep of a modern road system."

Here is supporting evidence from Colorado. The following table represents for three counties in Colorado the road mileages which have been eliminated as a county responsibility through cooperative land use and highway studies:

County	Original Mileage Miles	Abandoned or Reverting to Private Ownership Miles	Percentage Reduction Percent
1	812	297	37
2	3200	2169	68
3	2600	1600	61

For Iowa: Mr. Fred White, Chief Engineer of the Iowa State Highway Commission has estimated that 17 percent of secondary road mileage in Iowa could profitably be abandoned.

Another question. Why should roads be built by contract? Because an agreement upon the work to be done and the prices to be paid is a sound public policy and has been proven the lowest cost method for most types of highway work.

What is the place of the county engineers? This is a matter to be decided between the county officials on the one hand and the State highway department on the other. It is pertinent, however, to note that it is doubtful if there are sufficient engineering organizations of fully competent character in all categories to make plans for, and to supervise construction of, as large a highway program as is contemplated. The correct answer to this question would seem to depend upon the factual evidence in each case.

The final statement that should be made is an answer to an anonymous, whispering campaign insinuating an inflexible dictum as to unreasonably high standards of construction on secondary roads. The Public Roads Administration has not in the past issued detailed

standards for secondary roads. Both plans and construction requirements have been reduced to minimums, which does not mean, however, that we should or will throw aside the experience gained through the years in pointing the way to requirements which will reduce upkeep expenditures.

The matter of standards has been the subject of intensive study through the proper committees of the American Association of State Highway Officials, in cooperation with Public Roads, and through this method of approach there will be developed sound design policies. The objectives of the standards are hardly open to disagreement. Secondary roads must be built to furnish all-weather service, and must be capable of maintenance at a reasonable annual cost.

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Since the preceding discussion was presented before the officers of the National Association of County Officials, the Committee on Design of the American Association of State Highway Officials, in cooperation with the Public Roads Administration, has given extensive consideration to the matter of standards for the various classes of roads to be constructed under the new legislation. Agreement was reached upon standards, minimum and desirable, to recommend to the Association. The Executive Committee of the Association, after review of the recommendations in detail, approved the report and directed that the matter be submitted to the individual States for ratification. The Road Committee of the County Officials' Association were invited to meet with the Committee on Design and to present their views while the standards were under discussion.

Other procedures are in the making designed to foster full consideration of the needs of rural roads, and the viewpoints of the County Officials as to their improvement. There is no doubt that the program contemplated under the new highway legislation can be fashioned in the postwar period into a smoothly working operation. During this trial-and-error period there will be required a reasonable degree of tolerance and good will among the officials representing the different units of government, and from present indications it seems evident that these will not be lacking.