

Partnerships at Work, Part II - "Let them do it"

From an Interview with Jim Hall, March 2008

Meetings with partner agencies are crucial in deciding which projects deserve Federal Lands monies. However, sometimes not all participants can agree on how much money will be needed or how easily the job can be done.

When Jim Hall left headquarters in 1978 to take over the Western Direct Federal Division in Vancouver, the Federal Highway Administration had only just resumed control of the forest highway program after letting the states handle the program for several years. That was part of the reason that during the first few years he was here, Jim recalled, "we didn't have very much work a lot of the time, so I wanted to keep all the work in-house that we could."

Whenever federal funds are put into building or improving roads, the partner agencies are involved in the decision making process. "When you go to forest highways meetings and other meetings outside the office," Jim said, you have people there from the county, state, and FHWA, and you have to "try to decide, 'what do we build?'"

Sometimes that decision doesn't come very easily or very readily. "You get involved in conversations," Jim said, "and people start saying, 'That seems mighty expensive to me.'" As the FHWA representative at those meetings – and the person with the checkbook – Jim often had to "try to ignore those comments, but every once in awhile somebody will say, 'We can do that for half as much,' and then you can't ignore it" any longer.

That was what happened at a forest highways meeting in Idaho. "The county commissioner was there," Jim recalled, "and he wanted us to help (improve the) road from Elk City to Dixie."

Jim had driven that road one time during a trip with Clyde Leighty, who as Planning and Coordination Engineer often accompanied him and took the minutes at forest highway meetings. Jim recalled that "the only thing I had heard about Dixie was that it was a great place to go on New Years Eve, because there's no law there and you can do whatever you want to.

"People would ride their snowmobiles down to Dixie and party and get drunk." The road was on the forest highways system, so one evening when they were in the area, he and Clyde decided to check it out.

"It had rained, the road was narrow, steep on the sides, and the mud was about three inches deep. . . . There was no pavement, just dirt," Jim said, and after about a quarter of a mile the road headed off down a steep incline. "We stopped at the hill," he said, admitting to each other that "if we go any farther we're not getting back out of here."



A flooded stretch of the Banks-Lowman Highway, Idaho. WFLHD Photo Archives

He remembered that trip when they "met with the county people and they wanted us to pave that road – bituminous surface treatment." According to the county, five miles of new road could be put in for \$250,000. "I said, 'There's no way we can do that (road) for that price.'

"The county said, 'We can.'

"I said, 'if you can do that road for that price, we'll give you the money – and we'll never check on it.'"

When he got to the following year's meeting, the county returned the money. "They had found out that they couldn't do it for anywhere near that (price) either," Jim said, and that, he added "strengthened our hand." They didn't do any work – a preliminary study showed it couldn't be done for that price, and "now I didn't have to listen to that anymore. . . . reality occurred."

A similar reality check occurred for the state of Alaska. "In most states we work in," Jim said, "the forest highways are on the county system, but all of the roads in Alaska are maintained by the state. They wanted to build their own roads on their own system, so there was always a little conflict with them because of that."

He recalled one project that was threatened by a mountainside of boulders that were "about the size of a car. The state wanted us to build a project to take away those dangerous boulders. I told them it would take all the money in the U.S. Treasury to clean up that hill."

The state, however, insisted that it would take no more than \$250,000 to do the job. "I said, "OK, we'll give you \$250,000 and you clean up that hill. But \$250,000 is all we're going to give you. If you spend more than that, it comes out of your pocket."

"The next time we met, they had spent the \$250,000 and \$250,000 more and \$250,000 more. They had spent three quarters of a million dollars, and they said, 'The hill still looks just like it looked before.'" Unfortunately, they had not kept a good rein on the project. Jim said, "They had told their project engineer: 'Only spend \$250,000, no more.' When they caught up with him, he'd already spent three quarters of a million dollars. So they had to pay out of their (own) money \$500,000. And they got a lesson."

For his part, the experiences validated a lesson he was already applying in his own management practices. "Sometimes it's better to let them do it," he said. "That's the message there. But you have to make sure you get your criteria defined (before) you let them do it."

Stories in this series have been developed by Marili Green Reilly from interviews and correspondence. If you have memories to share about your experiences on direct federal projects, you may email them to marili.reilly@fhwa.dot.gov.