FEDERAL-AID HIGHWAY PROGRAM AFTER INTERSTATE

by

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When I was invited to address this distinguished conference, I promptly accepted the invitation. I recognized at once that it would be a distinct honor to represent the American Road Builders' Association at this outstanding annual meeting. In fact, I was so quick to accept that I was already committed before I finished reading the letter of invitation and found out what my subject would be. I quote: "Because of the tremendous interest in the future of our Federal-Aid Highway Program, we would like for your remarks to be oriented around the following subject, The 'Federal-Aid Highway Program after Interstate'."

And then, as I read on, I discovered the identity of the distinguished gentlemen with whom I am honored to share the platform, both of them leading authorities in the administration of the Federal-State highway program. With this kind of talent available, I wondered why I was selected to gaze into the crystal ball and come up with a talk outlining the future of the Federal-aid highway program. It is our reasonable expectation and fond hope that the Federal-aid highway program of the future will be generated by the sound thinking of the State highway departments and the highway engineering professionals in the Bureau of Public Roads. Commissioner Hazelrigg and Mr. Swanson are certainly well qualified to suggest to us what the future may hold.

On the other hand I may have been assigned this topic because, as a spokesman for the highway industry, I am relatively unrestricted by governmental policy guidelines -- that is, my thinking may be expressed a little more freely, I may be a little more candid with you, than if I were a part of the government organization.

I finally decided that it was simply your program planners' way of trying to make things easy for me. For the last several years, as you may know, one of the major objectives of the American Road Builders' Association has been to promote the formulation of the post-Interstate highway program. Various spokesmen of the ARBA, myself included, have been testifying before Congress, writing articles and making speeches about the future highway program for many months. Maybe someone thought I could simply pull a speech off the shelf and bring it down here.

Unfortunately for me, it's not that easy! We used to have a pretty good speech about the post-Interstate program called "After 1972, What?" Then as the Interstate program ran into a series of delays, we had to revise the speech. It was then called "After 1974, What?" Then there was another version called "After 1976, What?" Now it's just "After the Interstate Program, What?" and I think it's time we threw that speech away and started off in a new direction entirely.

Our highway program is in such serious trouble that many people connected with it are beginning to wonder whether Federal-aid is really the right answer. Let me quote one sentence from the address of A. E. Johnson, Executive Director of the American Association of State Highway Officials, at the recent annual meeting of the Southeastern Association of State Highway Officials. Mr. Johnson said: "The State highway departments and the Governors of the States should take a good look at whether or not we should continue indefinitely with a Federal-aid program of the present size and scope or whether the major highway programs should again become State-oriented."

Paraphrasing Mr. Johnson's comment, he was saying that, as we gaze into the crystal ball and try to gauge the shape and size of the Federal-aid program of the future, we should consider all of the alternatives, including the possibility of sharply reducing the size and scope of the Federal-aid program and substituting for it a collection of State programs, to be organized, financed and administered wholly on the State level. This is strong talk!

Earlier in his report to SASHO, Mr. Johnson outlined some of the frustrating disadvantages of the present arrangement. His central theme was that there is an hierarchy of Federal control over the Federal-aid highway program that is far different from what was practiced only a few years ago. Some of us can remember a time when the Bureau of Public Roads was, for practical purposes, almost an autonomous agency of the Government. The Bureau of Public Roads answered to the Roads Committees of the House and Senate, and coordinated its activities closely with the State highway departments. The highway program was run by highway specialists. Now the Bureau of Public Roads is one of three bureaus comprising the Federal Highway Administration which, in turn, is one of several branches in the Department of Transportation. This arrangement may sound logical from an organizational point of view, but the very nature of the new alignment creates a myriad of problems.

To illustrate my point let's consider for a few minutes the immediate burning issue in the Federal-aid highway program. I refer to the action of the Federal Highway Administrator in proposing new Federal regulations to govern the conduct of highway public hearings, including the so-called two-hearing procedure. I don't know any State highway official who thinks that

these proposed regulations make sense. Most of them think they will result in administrative chaos.

I can't take the time to discuss the merits of these regulations without getting too far away from my assigned topic. I comment only on the fact that the regulations -- good or bad -- are not at all in line with the thinking of the State highway departments who, after all, have the responsibility of holding the public hearings and of acting on the information received from those who participate in the hearings.

Where did the pressure come from? Let me now quote briefly from the Second Annual Report of the Citizens Committee on Recreation and Natural Beauty, dated June 21, 1968:

> "We again recommend that the Secretary of Transportation make Federal highway aid contingent on route selection procedures that give full consideration to resource, recreation and aesthetic values. Further, we recommend that the Secretary establish specific procedures for bringing the citizen into the decision-making process at the earliest stage of planning. Specifically, provisions should be made for two public hearings (on routing decisions) and the effective implementation of a Federal review board."

In case you are not familiar with the Citizens Committee, it is a group of distinguished individuals who serve as advisers to the President's Council on Recreation and Natural Beauty, a committee of Cabinet-level Federal officials. Under date of October 23, the President's Council reported back to the Citizens Committee that the Secretary of Transportation "expects to implement the two-hearing procedure recommended by the Committee in the very near future."

I am not trying to tell you that this was the way the two-hearing regulation came about. I've told you only a small part of the story, and only to illustrate how pressures from outside the Department of Transportation have a strong influence on decisions affecting the future highway program.

We have seen the same sort of thing taking place with respect to highway cutbacks and deferrals of funds. The Highway Trust Fund was set up as a means of insuring a constant level of financing for the highway program, not affected by the temporary changes in government expenditure policies. It has been only partially successful.

I won't dwell on this point either. I have said enough, I think, to illustrate the current situation in Washington affecting a long-range continuing highway program.

One of the important tools for determining the future of the highway program will be the functional classification study ordered by the 1968 Highway Act, to be completed by January, 1970. This study, in effect, will be an inventory of our highway network, including roads and streets of all kinds, from the standpoint of the type and volume of traffic handled by each segment of the road network. This study of the road network will provide some basic data that need to be considered in determining which of our highways should be the responsibility of local government and which should be the responsibility of State government, and what should be the role of the Federal government in providing assistance.

When we speak of Federal assistance, we are thinking primarily of financial aid, but one cannot escape the fact that the Federal role will also include a certain amount of coordination and guidance, to ensure that national highway program objectives will be given attention. And there, of course, is the rub. Will the national highway program objectives, as defined by the Federal administrators of the program, be consistent with the highway program objectives of the States, municipalities and counties?

On the whole, I am optimistic. I see no compelling reason why national, State and local highway program objectives should not be consistent. I think our recent experience has shown us that they are not automatically consistent. There has to be a continuing effort on the part of all concerned. This means that the State and local governments must have the opportunity to participate actively in the formulation of national programs. We have been hearing a great deal about the importance of coordination among agencies responsible for the various modes of transportation, but we have not heard so much about the need for Federal-State-local coordination in the management of the highway program.

I have only a few minutes left, and I would now like to speak more directly about the post-Interstate highway program. It has been the subject of much study and discussion among both Federal and State officials. A few general concepts are emerging. I can mention them quickly, for they are neither surprising nor radical.

1. Highway construction needs for the period 1975-1985 are estimated conservatively at about $21 billion annually. AASHO, which made this estimate, states that it includes for the ten-year period $130 billion in needs for the State highway systems and $80 billion for roads administered by counties and cities. On this basis, AASHO has developed a $78 billion plan for the Federal-aid program for the decade, a plan that utilizes all foreseeable revenue but still falls short of what is needed. The financial resources of the Federal, State and local governments will be strained to meet the apparent needs.

2. Improvements are sorely needed on all systems. Along with a limited extension of the Interstate System -- probably not more than a few thousand additional miles -- we need to upgrade many thousands of miles of primary and secondary routes. Some of the regular primary routes will be improved to standards equal or better than the current Interstate standards.

3. With American population increasingly concentrated in the urban areas, greater attention must be given to urban road problems. However, as urban land values continue to increase, it will be increasingly difficult to find acceptable locations for multi-lane, controlled access freeways in densely populated areas. This means finding other solutions, such as sharing highway corridors with buildings built over and under the highway surface, "stacking" multiple-lane arterials so that they have a bi-level configuration, and making traffic-flow improvements to existing city streets as contemplated by the TOPICS program. This is a fruitful field for engineering ingenuity. The Federal Government should take the lead in promoting new urban highway concepts but, at the same time, should be careful not to be so dogmatic about it as to shut off the exercise of ingenuity at the local level.

4. There will be continued emphasis on locating and designing highways to maximize community values, the social and economic benefits stemming from highway development. These community values include esthetic values. While Mrs. Lyndon Johnson has been a strong advocate of highway beautification, it would be a mistake to believe that she has been a lone voice in this field or to suppose that there will be a lessening of interest when Mrs. Nixon becomes the First Lady. There will be a continued demand for highways that blend attractively with the landscape or cityscape.

5. Improving highway safety will continue to be an important national goal. The National Highway Safety Bureau, which administers the Federal share of the highway safety program and is responsible for encouraging highway safety activities at the State and local levels, will continue to urge that as much safety as possible be built into the highways of the future.

These are a few general themes. You will be hearing them, with variations, over and over. I am enough of an idealist to believe that these idealogical themes will be translated into concrete realities simply because they are the right things, the things that our nation must have to ensure continued progress in highway transportation.

I am enough of a cynic to believe that even though we move in the right direction, we will move too slowly and too late unless we take aggressive steps to enlist the support of members of Congress, State legislators and Governors, and the general public. The people must understand what is needed. They must appreciate the benefits which will be derived from a sound and adequate highway program. The people must trust the competence and integrity of the officials responsible for the administration of the program.

To promote public understanding, ARBA has set up an activity called TRIP -- The Road Information Program. Cooperating with other organizations, both in government and in the private sector, we are moving in a number of ways to tell the highway story. We want to help you in your efforts here in Kentucky and we want you to help us.

Time is short. The need is great.