

THE VALUE OF COMPETENT ENGINEERING SUPERVISION ON COUNTY ROADS

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It is a genuine pleasure to be with you today, and I consider it an honor to be afforded the opportunity to discuss with you briefly a subject in which we share a mutual interest—"The Value of a Competent County Engineer."

One hears very often the question: "Why do we need a County Engineer?" To the citizens of counties fortunate enough to have an engineer, the answer to this question is so obvious and has become so apparent through actual experience and results down through the years, that no further explanation is required. However, many counties do not afford their government the advantage of having an engineer as a member of their personnel, either for the reason that they fail to realize the vital part he plays in the successful administration of county affairs, or because their financial status will not permit his employment.

By not having the highly valuable technical advice of a qualified engineer at their disposal, these governmental units can accomplish nothing in the way of providing better service to the traveling public. We take pride in the thought that we have made so many revolutionary advances in the past half century, and so we have. One no longer sees the horse and buggy on our highways. This machine age demands that we advance our service to the traveling public to the point where it is equal with the modes of transportation the public employs.

Frankly, I would not attempt to administer the affairs of my county without the aid of a competent County Engineer. I consider Kenton County exceptionally fortunate in having such a man. He is not only of inestimable value in his administration of our affairs, but provides a pleasant and satisfying solution to the problems presented by residents in every section of our county because he is capable of imparting his technical knowledge to the ordinary layman in language understandable to him. By simple logic, our county engineer removes many of the stock complaints ordinarily brought before the Fiscal Court.

He is our representative in dealing with those living along our highways and byways. These people come to him with their problems. He studies them carefully and charts the course to be followed.

Let me emphasize that his problems are many. Although other personnel comprising our county government are educated in many subjects, none are possessed with the ability to talk and plan road problems efficiently with our citizens. We do not have the technical knowledge to properly appraise the situations that exist and to map the most feasible course.

For the successful administration of any government, large or small, some knowledge of law, finance and engineering is required. I am a lawyer. There are other lawyers in our county setup. We have a financial department with trained personnel to deal with matters coming under their jurisdiction. My object today is to tell you how we have found that the addition of an engineering department has paid for itself many, many times.

The first advantage is that of unified service. With proper engineering direction, the entire county can be afforded equal attention and uniform service in the matter of road building. This cannot be done when the county is divided into districts, each one of which is under the care and supervision of a different individual, having no responsibility to any overseer.

Next, I cite the economy brought about by proper engineering guidance. High prices of material and labor necessitate the strictest economy, since the county's income is approximately the same as it was during the days of low prices. Economical results may be obtained with the aid of an engineer, and I refer to the record of my county to prove this. During the past three years, the wage of our county road employees has been increased twenty per cent. About ten per cent of the budget has been applied to the purchase of new equipment. Very little equipment had been purchased in the ten years prior to 1946. Despite these increased expenditures to a budget which has been the same for the past several years, there have been more miles of roads improved and constructed during the past three years in our county than there were during the previous five-year period.

You may ask how this was done. I can explain it very quickly and in a very few words. It was done because we have a competent county engineer at the helm of our road department. It was his skilled knowledge that planned our road building program so that it was carried out in the most economical way possible. There was no waste. Materials were selected and bought wisely. Roads were laid out and built along the lines of least cost. We did not build a road at a certain place just because a man with a number of votes at his command wanted it there. The county engineer located each road and put it where it would give community service yet at the same time, would be built without unnecessary financial outlay.

After our road program got under way, the citizens receiving its benefits soon realized we were trying to do a good job of serving them, and saving them money. After all, the people of any county pay for its roads, and I believe everyone is interested in getting value received for his money.

Shortly after I became County Judge, the Fiscal Court received a post card on which was the picture of a rustic country bridge and the printed inscription "The Old Bridge." The sender had penned the additional words "isn't any good anymore." I am happy to report that that was the first and last of that type of postcard. Under the guidance of Lawrence E. McCartt, County Engineer of Kenton County, we now have that bridge and others replaced with structures that the public is proud of and only too glad to use. We shall continue to carry out this program, and we hope the day is not far off when our fiscal court meetings will be entirely free of delegations seeking to have the roads in their areas improved.

My county is largely urban. It naturally has many problems which never confront strictly rural counties. But, there are many more Kentucky counties containing urban sections, and they, no doubt, have many of the problems that we have. These situations also call for engineering services.

In enumerating some of them, I point to the construction and maintenance of airports; the construction and maintenance of such buildings as courthouses, infirmaries, garages and hospitals. We must also deal with sewage and waste collection and disposal. Home owners should be protected by adequate planning

and zoning. Very little has been done in this direction in many sections, but the crying need for it becomes more evident each day. And, far from the least important, we must have engineering guidance for our water supply and its distribution. All these functions of county government demand efficient and adequate service if we are to have growing and prosperous communities.

I have outlined many of the services performed by County Engineers in urban counties because I am most familiar with them. However, I believe I have an insight also into the needs of rural counties, whose governmental organizations and services are not as complex as those faced by counties having large cities. I urge the employment of county engineers in these sections as well as in the urban counties.

I know that budgets of smaller counties oftentimes do not allow for the employment of competent engineers to serve these counties individually. So, with a view of bringing better government to all, I suggest that smaller counties join hands in obtaining adequate engineering service. This could be done by several counties going together in employing an engineer to care for the work of all. There are phases other than economical which would encourage this procedure. Counties in a given section could map road programs and other projects to serve efficiently the entire area in which they are situated. There would be a general overall picture whereby roads would be located to tie in between counties and bring greater service to each of them.

If I have the proper conception of plans the State is developing for spending more money in the counties, and making available more money for the counties to spend individually, the importance of engineering service for all of Kentucky's counties cannot be too strongly emphasized.

All of us are hasty in seeking the services of a physician when illness knocks at our doors. Why? Because, the physician is an expert in solving the problem at hand. Yet, many of our counties will leave to men who have never studied the art of building roads, the responsibility of saying how and where our roads shall be built. This is not only a bad policy, but a misuse of public funds and public power. The citizens who buy roads deserve the same professional skill in that category as they do in purchasing automobiles. They would not want an automobile, a

tractor, or a milking machine that was built by a lawyer, a doctor or crossroads merchant. It follows that no matter how eager a county judge may be to provide the best roads possible for his fellow-citizens, he will most surely fail in his attempt because of lack of know-how in that particular field. I suppose that each of us fancies himself as a combination of a master plumber, carpenter, mechanic and engineer. However, when we come face-to-face with facts, we realize that we do not know whether blacktop or concrete paving is the proper material for a highway—we do not know the first essence of proper drainage—we may order the trimming down of a hill that need not be touched—we could very easily call in a group of men and build a bridge that would neither withstand the weight of present-day traffic nor be located where it would bring greatest convenience to those who would use it. If we are really interested in serving our county to the best of our ability, we will admit that our meager, slapstick knowledge of engineering is wholly inadequate and will employ a man who has made this specialized field his life's work.

Many good years have been wasted, but the opportunity is still at hand. We can build good roads, wisely and economically, if we have the will to do it. That will should have as its first direction, the employment of county engineers with the zeal to serve the public, and serve it well. Kentucky has such engineers at its command. The Engineering College of the University of Kentucky has long enjoyed national fame. It produces men with proper training and with the vision to carry out this training. The route which all Kentucky counties can follow is an easy one—it requires only that we work at the task of putting our houses in order through engaging those capable of doing it. I look eagerly toward the day when every county in Kentucky will streamline its functions by having adequate engineering personnel top on its list of governmental requirements.