

We Can Take Pride In The Progress

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Highway History

In anticipation of leaving office as Federal Highway Administrator, Bertram D. Tallamy wrote this article for the January 1961 issue of Highway Highlights magazine. It reflects the progress made during the Eisenhower Administration on the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

We Can Take Pride In The Progress

Former Federal Highway Administrator Feels Much Has Been Accomplished Since 1957. However, He Warns: · Fiscal Problems Remain · Program Is Under financed · Total Cost of Interstate System Will Be \$41 Billion.

by Bertram D. Tallamy

AFTER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY as a highway engineer for various public authorities, I have resigned as Federal Highway Administrator with mixed feelings. It was a distinct honor for me to have had these various opportunities for public service. I have enjoyed the privilege of meeting and working with so many dedicated and highly qualified people in Government and public enterprise. I do believe, however, that I have received my greatest compensation in seeing the benefits which always flow from the building of new highways.

When I arrived in Washington in February, 1957, to become Federal highway Administrator, the accelerated highway program was just getting under way. Today I think everybody concerned, including the highway users who are paying the Federal share, can take pride in the progress that has been made.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 gave the Bureau of Public Roads and the states two principal jobs to perform. One was the completion of 41,000 miles of freeway, the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, a trunk network designed for the traffic of 1975. The other was reinforcement of the state primary and farm-to-market roads.

A quarter of the total, or about 10,000 miles, are already open to traffic on the Interstate System. In round numbers more than 5,500 miles have been completed since July 1956. The remainder represents highways taken into the System, in accordance with the law, which had been completed by the states and toll authorities.

Already it is hard to keep up with the ribbon-cuttings. On September 30, more than 4,500 miles were under active construction, and engineering was being executed and right-of-way acquired on another 10,000. Out of the 41,000 mile total, work had been completed or was underway on nearly 25,000 miles.

The second job that Congress gave the Bureau and the States was accelerated improvements of the primary and secondary Federal-aid highways, sometimes called the ABC roads. Contracts to modernize about 110,000 miles have been completed since 1956, and work is under way on another 22,000.

The Expense. All of this has cost money, of course. Federal funds paid to the states in the four and a half years have exceeded Federal-aid highway payments in all the preceding 40 years of joint Federal-state road building and they have been raised on a pay-as-you-build basis. The states also have made a large investment by paying for half the cost of the ABC improvements and 10 per cent of the Interstate costs.

So much for the tangible accomplishments that can be reckoned in miles and dollars. There are other achievements to be counted.

The Bureau of Public Roads, the states, and industry overcame the initial shortages of engineers and materials.

They have proved that a joint undertaking on the vast scale of the Interstate System can be efficient and successful.

They have demonstrated the value that good highways have, in promoting safety, in saving time, in providing new sites for industry, commerce, and housing developments, and in stimulating the economy.

They have shown that our national traffic problem can be solved if sufficient financing is available.

IN THE WHOLE PROGRAM, we have done our best to get the ultimate value of the taxpayer's dollar. The first thing was to plug any holes through which money might drain away. Early in the program we established a Project Examination Division, to audit and spot-check both our own and the state operations. The states, of course, had their own watchdog procedures. The Project Examination Division has conducted reviews and inquires in all but two of the 50 states, and has gone into certain other areas. A number of cases of irregularity have been referred to the Department of Justice, and at times Federal reimbursement has been withheld pending further examination.

Positive Measures. But more important have been the positive measures to hold down expenditures. Part of the saving has come as a result of research into the best methods of engineering and construction, sponsored directly by Public Roads or jointly with the states. The drudgery part of engineering and road building has been, so far as possible, put onto the tireless metal shoulders of electronic devices. As an example, there is the Computer Program Library set up in Public Roads headquarters three years ago. Some 400 programs have been received from the states, other Federal agencies, and private sources. Of these 30 have been converted into library versions, expressed in English and mathematical terms, which may be coded for use in any digital computer. In time it is planned to have about 80 such versions embodying the problems most often encountered by highway engineers and administrators.

The most spectacular research project-indeed the largest ever undertaken in the study of highway-is the AASHO Road Test near Ottawa, Ill., of which the traffic phase has been completed with the application of more than 1,00,000 truck axle loads. The states, Federal agencies, and industry have invested \$27 million in the project, and I am sure that when the data analysis and research reports are completed the money will prove to have been well spent.

Equally important are two reports that the Bureau has been preparing with the cooperation of the states. One is a new estimate of the cost of completing the Interstate System, and the other is the Highway Cost Allocation Study, begun more than four years ago to provide information on the basis of which Congress can determine an equitable distribution of the tax burden necessary to support the highway program.

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS that will confront my successor? He will find, I am sure, a great smooth-working machine comprising the Bureau, the state highway departments, and the highway construction industry. His chief troubles will be fiscal. As a magazine writer put it recently, the highway program has always been underfinanced. The facts are that the total cost of completing the Interstate System will be about \$41 billion, considerably more than was envisioned in 1956. The \$25 billion that was authorized to be appropriated over 13 years, as the Federal share, will have to be augmented somehow by another \$11.6 billion. There will be the choice between a stretchout to 1976 and the provision of additional revenue beginning in 1964 to reach the goal in the target year, 1972.

Understanding Needed. The real burden will fall upon the new Congress, whose members will have to solve this important problem. But, Congress can't do it alone. The support and understanding of the whole country will be needed. A most important segment of the public in this regard comprises the highway users. It will be necessary for the National Highway Users Conference to continue its enormous assistance. Without its help and that of other organizations, it will be impossible to complete on schedule the construction program we now have under way.

But I leave the Bureau of Public Roads with the almost certain conviction that it will be continued and with the comforting knowledge that the program will be guided by a man of many years of experience in highway work. He is a man of recognized professional ability and integrity. It is good to know this, and I am sure that all of us will give our full support to the new Administrator, Rex Whitton.
