

Citizens Cooperation in Road Improvement Programs

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According to a recent newspaper story, Secretary of the Treasury Snyder is recommending that federal excise taxes on gasoline be doubled and that such taxes on automobiles be increased from 7 to 20 per cent. These proposed increases in federal excise taxes levied on motor vehicle transportation are at a much sharper rate than he is proposing for increases in federal excise taxes on liquor or tobacco. Has the Secretary decided that highway transportation is a nuisance that should be taxed out of existence, or is it a luxury that can easily be dispensed with?

From another recent newspaper story, we learn that Charles Wilson, Director of the National Mobilization Program, has advised Governor Dewey that little, if any, steel will be available for highway construction work in 1951 and 1952, except for access roads to serve war industries. This places highways in the same category with grandstands for race tracks, new theaters in areas where theaters already exist, and other non-essential enterprises that have been advised not to expect allocations of scarce materials during these troubled times.

Why does this calm oblivion persist in high places as to the needs of motor vehicle transportation and its essentiality to the national economy and to the mobilization program? Is it because no one person or no one agency can speak with authority for this 40 billion dollar a year business? Are the street and highway needs of the 48½ million Americans who own and operate motor vehicles to receive no intelligent consideration?

There is but one possible answer to the foregoing questions. Our salesmen for adequate road and street facilities have failed to get the job done. They have failed to get the customer's signature on the dotted line. The officials who determine policy at state and national

levels, and the legislators and members of Congress who enact the laws required to implement such policies, have not been convinced of the necessity for an expanded public road and street construction program.

It is time to make a new and searching re-appraisal of the whole situation. We must attempt to discover why our salesmen have been ineffective. As individuals and organizations of individuals, we must find ways of effectively supporting and supplementing the recommendations of our public highway officials who are so keenly aware of existing deficiencies in our public road and street systems.

DEFICIENCIES

There should be no doubt left in the minds of our high officials that deficiencies in our public roads and streets do exist. In recent years widely publicized surveys and studies have been made on a nationwide basis by state and federal highway officials to determine our public road and street needs, and the estimated expenditures that are necessary to meet these needs. These studies all show that the then existing needs were already tremendous and were steadily mounting. Annual losses from deterioration and obsolescence were exceeding the value of new construction. It was found that deficiencies in the Interstate System alone would cost more than \$11,000,000,000. For the entire mileage of public roads and streets, something more than \$41,000,000,000 worth of work was needed, if motor vehicle transportation were to be adequately served. Since highway construction costs in the past year have been subjected to the same inflationary trends that have raised all costs, from 15 to 25 per cent must be added to the above figures if a realistic appraisal of today's needs is desired.

The foregoing estimates of highway needs have never been seriously questioned or challenged. In fact, the proposed standards of construction are less elaborate and less costly than many road users think are needed. Public road officials have suffered so many rebuffs through the years in their efforts to get adequate road and street funds that they are inclined to ask for less, rather than more, than they need. Their enthusiasms have become blunted, as it were. Yet no truer advertising slogan was ever developed than the one which opines that "the memory of quality remains long after price is forgotten."

It is true that these surveys and studies of highway needs were primarily directed at determining the needs for our normal or peace-

time economy. What about the situation today? Is the construction of urgently needed road and street facilities something that can and should be deferred? Should our entire productive capacity be devoted to the production of atomic and hydrogen bombs, tanks, guns, war planes and guided missiles? Is it to be a case of all guns and no butter, quite a few guns and some butter, or has our productive capacity expanded to the point that we can have plenty of both guns and butter? And perhaps even more to the point, are our urgently needed road and street facilities guns or butter?

When Hitler made his momentous decision between guns and butter, he included in his kit of war tools a modern highway system that has excited the admiration of all who have seen it. While this modern highway system did not win the war for Hitler, it did allow him to wage war effectively for two years after Germany's rail transportation had been completely demoralized by enemy bombing. Further, if peace is ever restored to war-torn Europe, that same system of modern highways is certain to be a potent factor in restoring and strengthening Germany's peace-time economy. The same cannot be said for the guns, tanks, war planes, rockets, and other death-dealing contraptions.

IMPORTANCE OF HIGHWAYS

We are continually reminded by our leaders that this nation's greatest strength lies in its ability to produce. Our ability to produce is irrevocably linked with our ability to transport. And motor vehicle transportation is indispensable to our transportation system.

Our rail, air and water transportation arteries are helpless unless motor vehicle transportation can deliver freight and passengers to their fixed terminals. A prominent railway official who resents the inroads of motor vehicle transportation on long-haul freight movements, remarked recently that the railroads recognized the importance of the motor truck in today's scheme of transportation. "If every truck in America stopped at sundown tonight, every railroad in America would be paralyzed at sundown tomorrow night" he stated. "Incoming freight couldn't reach our terminals, nor could we unload freight that had reached its destination."

In addition to being the veins and arteries that make it possible for other forms of transportation to function, the motor vehicle daily performs countless millions of transportation services, great and small, wholly unaided. These services vary from transporting persons to and from their place of employment to the transcontinental

transportation of merchandise that our railway friends think should move by rail. Be that as it may, it is a condition and not a theory that confronts us. To an ever-increasing extent, trucks are supplementing the railroads in long haul, cross country movements of merchandise. If this trend is to be reversed, it will be because the railroads offer better service at less cost than do the trucks. There is no evidence that such a reversal can take place in time to relieve expanding demands upon our cross-country highways, if the growing transportation needs of the mobilization program are to be served.

Motor vehicle transportation has become an indispensable factor in the nation's capacity to produce and distribute. If we are to expand and strengthen our productive capacity, we must expand and strengthen motor vehicle transportation. This means an accelerated program of highway construction—not a repetition of the road building holiday of World War II from which we are still suffering. We must remember that most of those main roads which took the battering of war traffic in World War II are today being battered by a far heavier volume of traffic. They are in most part the same roads—except that they are nine years older and not in as good repair as when World War II was launched.

It is not necessary to sell those in attendance at the Purdue Road School on the importance of motor vehicle transportation. The mere fact that this is the 37th Annual session of the school is ample proof that the School of Engineering of Purdue University and the highway engineers of Indiana are, and for the past thirty-seven years have been, keenly aware of the technical and engineering problems incident to building roads and streets that will serve the needs of motor vehicle transportation.

This school has made notable contributions to the science of highway engineering. It is a nationally recognized leader in the field of highway research. It is apparent that those responsible for planning the program for this 37th Annual Road School realize that something more than engineering knowledge and construction techniques are essential to a successful public road and street program. It is important that we know how to build the kind of roads and streets that are needed to serve motor vehicle transportation. It is even more important that we be given the opportunity to build them.

HANDICAPS TO PROMOTION OF ADEQUATE PROGRAMS

Why have the efforts of public highway officials and others who are interested in adequate public road and street systems failed to

convince policy making officials, legislatures and Congress, at state and national levels that we must devote more money to the building of roads and streets? We must find the answer to this question. There is no excuse for continuing to repeat the same mistakes.

Perhaps it will clarify our thinking and help us find the correct answer if we can first stipulate some facts into the record.

1. We can afford to build adequate roads and streets. They are a relatively small part of the total cost of motor vehicle transportation. As a matter of fact, good roads and streets cost the motorist less than do poor ones. It is too late to decide that we cannot afford motor vehicle transportation. We Americans have crossed the Rubicon with our motor vehicles and do not propose to surrender the standard of living that they make possible.

2. All motorists enjoy and appreciate good roads and streets. They thrill over a fine new highway almost as much as over a fine new automobile. There is no sales resistance to overcome, in so far as the motorist is concerned. He wants good roads, now. He may argue with you as to his share of the cost of good roads, but he is for a good roads program. If you can convince him that the plan for financing such a program is fair, he will support it.

If the foregoing statements are accepted, we may proceed from here in complete agreement that the American motorist needs more adequate public road and street facilities, can afford them, and wants them. Why, then, doesn't he get them?

Here are some suggested reasons:

1. Motor vehicle transportation has no effective spokesman. A discord of voices speaks for various phases of motor vehicle transportation, but no one speaks with authority for all phases of it. Motor vehicle manufacturers, the American Truckers Association, the American Automobile Association, the Highway Users Conference, the Petroleum Institute, the American Road Builders Association and the American Association of State Highway Officials are some of the organized groups with a vital interest in motor vehicle transportation. To date these groups have not been able to agree on a sound program that all would support for providing the kind of public roads and streets that are so essential to the success of motor vehicle transportation. Consequently legislators at state and national levels have been subjected to such conflicting barrages of propaganda from various pressure groups that it is small wonder that adequate legislation has not been enacted.

2. No widely accepted plan for distributing the cost of public roads and streets has been developed. Valuable work in the field of

highway research has been accomplished. Important highway research projects are now under way. In so far as I know, nothing is being done on a comprehensive, nationwide scale to find the answer to that most important of all public road and street problems, i.e., an equitable distribution of public road and street costs between road users and road beneficiaries. There is complete agreement that we need better roads and streets. There is no agreement as to how they should be financed.

3. Public highway officials are handicapped in their efforts to sell adequate financing plans for public roads and streets to legislative bodies by the following factors:

a. The vigorous, short-sighted, and often wholly unscrupulous opposition of strongly organized groups that will profit by improved public roads and streets, but apparently expect someone else to pay for them. There is no need to mention names. You are all familiar with the operation of such groups at both state and national levels.

b. Inability or reluctance to use public funds for financing effective public relations and advertising programs. We are spending approximately three billion dollars annually on our public road and street programs. We should be spending at least four billions. Show me a successful private business of like magnitude with practically no budget for public relations and advertising programs.

c. Most public highway officials are woefully lacking in a realization of any need for a sound public relations program. As a rule, the executive head of public highway department is an engineer with engineering and administrative ability, but no talents for salesmanship. His reports and public releases, if any, bristle with figures that make exceedingly dull reading and mean little to the average layman.

d. Most of our public highway officials holding positions of top responsibility are growing old. Many have already reached, or soon will reach, a reasonable retirement age. They are understandably reluctant to vigorously advocate policies or programs that do not meet with the favor of their political superiors. Retirement programs, if any, for employees of most highway departments are meager. The longer they can continue to draw their salaries as full time employees, the longer they will be able to hold the wolf at bay after retirement has been forced upon them.

e. Highway officials must always deal with their political superiors in advocating the kind of legislation needed for adequate public road and street programs. The boss accepts only such advice from the hired help as he sees fit to accept. If the advice runs contrary to

what the boss believes to be his best personal interests, he brushes it aside. In most cases the highway official's boss holds an elective political office and too often is more interested in his own political welfare than in matters of sound public policy.

f. In many instances, politics plays too great a part in the development of public roads and street improvement programs. Construction projects are used for paying political debts or for seeking political favors. Often this is so obvious that public confidence in and support for the public road program is lacking. The statewide planning surveys have provided a wealth of factual information that should dictate the location of construction projects. In all too many instances, this information is little used in the development of construction programs.

The foregoing are only some of the reasons that might be cited for our lagging public road and street programs. The fact that the programs are lagging is recognized very keenly by the members of the American Association of State Highway Officials. In President Greer's address at the Association's 36th annual meeting at Miami, Florida, on December 4, 1950, he stated: "The principal problem that has always plagued highway officials and gives us even more concern today is the lack of adequate revenues to accomplish those improvements on our highway systems that we know to be vital and necessary to the proper movement of traffic. We have argued this point on the home-front and have presented all of the facts and figures that we could possibly muster to emphasize this problem with the National Congress. Our people at home have told us what they expect to make available to us in the way of revenues in the immediate future. Our National Congress has told us, with the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1950, what they propose to invest in public roads during the coming two year period. We all agree that neither source of revenue is adequate."

What, if anything, can be done by the citizens of the nation—the motorists of America—the people who own and operate the 48½ million motor vehicles—to help bring about adequate public road and street programs? Our public highway officials admit the inadequacy of the present programs. They admit their inability to get state legislatures and the National Congress to provide the funds that are needed to finance an adequate program. Must we accept the situation, resign ourselves to the continued use of inadequate, unsafe roads, or should we attempt to do something about it?

In Iowa and several of the other states, non-profit, non-political organizations have been formed for the sole purpose of promoting

sound public road and street programs. These organizations are all relatively young. They are still feeling their way. Each state has its own peculiar problems and the magnitude of those problems will determine the magnitude of the program that is necessary to cope with them.

OBJECTIVES OF ORGANIZATION

In my opinion, the sole objective for such an organization must be to establish and maintain those conditions that are essential to a successful road and street program. These conditions are:

a. *Sound Laws*

1. Properly fixing responsibility for the several public road and street systems, and

2. Prescribing sound, workable procedure for the public agencies charged with responsibility for the several systems.

b. *Adequate financial support* for the several systems, equitably assessed against road users and road beneficiaries.

c. *Honest, competent, and non-political administration* of public road and street programs, by the duly designated public agencies.

In charting a program for a citizens' organization, it is important that the objectives of the organization be clearly defined and understood. Otherwise, attempts will be made to use the organization to promote particular projects, types of construction or other selfish interests. If the organization is to be effective, it must be accepted as without selfish interests to serve.

LAWS FIXING RESPONSIBILITY

The degree to which proper responsibility for the several road and street systems has been established varies greatly in different states. In many states, efficient administration of local or secondary roads is impossible, because of the multiplicity of small administrative units. Modern, efficient road building and maintenance requires skilled, experienced direction and the use of modern power equipment. Small administrative units, such as townships or road districts of comparable size, can afford neither the technical personnel nor the modern equipment that is essential for efficiency. Such personnel and such equipment must operate in administrative units of sufficient size to permit their continuous use.

In a few of the states, the entire mileage of rural roads has been taken over by the state. This concentration of authority and respon-

sibility at state levels may be a justifiable move, if competent administration at local levels has proven to be impossible. If democracy is to succeed, it must succeed at local levels of government as well as at state and national levels. A state road building and road maintenance organization that extends to every farm and hamlet within the state has patronage possibilities that can hardly fail to appeal to politicians whose interest in efficient road administration is secondary to their interest in continuance in office.

For many of the states, the county unit is probably the most efficient and logical unit of government for administering the secondary road program. There is enough work to be done and enough money involved to warrant the full-time employment of a competent engineer to give leadership and direction to the program. Modern power equipment can also be fully utilized. For the past 21 years, the county has been the administrative unit of government in Iowa for all of the rural roads, except approximately 8,700 miles that comprise the state's primary road system. It is perhaps significant that during those 21 years, no legislation has been introduced in the state legislature proposing that the township be restored as a road administrative unit.

The success of the secondary road program in each of the 99 counties has been largely dependent upon the quality of leadership given the program by the county engineer. There is a steadily growing realization of this fact by the county boards of supervisors. During the past few years, most of the counties have been willing to pay whatever is necessary to secure the services of a qualified engineer and the average quality of secondary road administration is steadily improving.

LAWS GOVERNING PROCEDURE

There is little uniformity in the laws of the 48 states prescribing the procedure to be followed by public officials who are responsible for the several road and street systems. Such laws should be critically reviewed and modernized from time to time to meet changing conditions. Outmoded, obsolete procedural laws are as much of a drag on efficient road administration as are obsolete types of construction and maintenance equipment.

Public officials can function only within the framework of the laws which govern their procedure. Such laws should be flexible enough to permit construction and maintenance work to be conducted in an efficient, practical way. At the same time, they should require

that sound, proven principles and practices be followed, and that an accurate accounting be made for all funds made available for public road and street work.

FINANCES

The financial support for our several public road and street systems should rest upon a broad foundation. It would be most helpful if a sound, equitable and generally accepted plan for distributing the costs of building and maintaining public roads and streets were available for the guidance of our law makers. While no formula for distributing road and street costs can be expected to meet with universal acceptance, it would be most helpful if qualified specialists in the field of taxation, economics, and highway administration could reach agreement on a plan that gives proper consideration both to road users and road beneficiaries.

At present, there are wide variations in the plans that are in use in different states. They cannot all be fair and sound. They are apparently based upon what the traffic will bear at the time the laws are enacted.

It would seem that a sound plan for distributing public road and street costs must take into consideration revenue from the following sources :

1. *Road Use Taxes*

a. Motor vehicle registration fees, representing a readiness to serve charge. Whether a motor vehicle is driven 3,000 miles a year or 100,000 miles a year, it is always necessary that there be usable public roads and streets over which the vehicle can operate.

b. Motor vehicle fuel taxes, representing a measure of use made of the public roads and streets.

c. Fees or compensation taxes paid for the privilege of operating commercial vehicles over fixed routes for hire.

d. All other special state or federal taxes levied upon motor vehicle transportation. Until the public has provided adequate public roads and streets, it is completely unfair to levy special taxes upon motor vehicle transportation and divert the proceeds thereof to purposes other than the financing of public roads and streets.

2. *Taxes upon real estate and other real property*

Light traffic, land-use roads and residential streets do not earn enough revenue from road-use taxes to justify their improvement

and maintenance from road taxes alone. Such earnings should be supplemented by property taxes, special assessments or both.

3. *Federal Aid*

Present federal policies are a handicap, rather than an aid to public road and street financing. The Federal Government has entered the field of taxation upon motor vehicle transportation to a far greater extent than its contributions to public road and street costs will justify. This definitely lessens the amount of road use taxes that motor vehicle transportation can afford to pay to state and local road funds.

There is a widely accepted principle that all special taxes levied on motor vehicle transportation should be used for financing public roads and streets. Many of the states have amended their state constitutions to insure that this be done. If this is a sound principle for states it is equally sound for the Federal Government. Under the present so-called Federal-Aid highway program the Federal Government collects \$3.00 or more from the American motorist for every dollar that is returned, under the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1950, for building public roads and streets.

The Federal Government has a proper and legitimate interest in a limited network of main highways that are necessary to serve interstate commerce and the national defense. To insure that such highways are constructed to proper standards, it is understandable that federal agencies should exercise a measure of control over designs and specifications, and should participate in the construction costs. Federal taxes upon motor vehicle transportation should be restricted to amounts required to meet the Federal Government's share of the cost of such a program.

The recently developed philosophy that there should be no "linkage" between federal excise taxes upon motor vehicle transportation and Federal-Aid highway appropriations seems to me to be entirely unsound. Federal excise taxes for general revenue should be confined to nuisance or luxury items that are non-essential to the strength of our economy. Motor vehicle transportation does not fall in either classification. In view of existing demands upon the federal treasury, motor vehicle transportation should be taxed an amount sufficient to pay the Federal Government's proper share of the public road and street building program and no more.

ADMINISTRATION

In general, we get about the quality of administration of our public road and street programs that we deserve. We either elect our administrators or we elect the officers who appoint our administrators. We are niggardly in the compensation paid to those holding positions of high responsibility in the fields of highway administration and engineering. The highest paid executive officer in the field of highway administration probably draws substantially less compensation than does the lowest paid executive officer of any motor vehicle, tire or oil company. In view of this, we are fortunate that so many men of ability and character have elected to devote their lives to public service in the field of highway administration and engineering. In this respect, the public has fared better than it deserves.

ORGANIZATION OF GOOD ROAD ASSOCIATIONS

What is the best way to organize a Good Roads Association? I do not know. I can only tell you how it was done in Iowa in the fall of 1948.

The state association of Chambers of Commerce was the original sponsor of our organization. At a state-wide meeting called for that purpose, plans for an Iowa Good Roads Association were developed. Appropriate committees were appointed to work out details and at subsequent meetings the organization was perfected. In less than two months from the time that someone decided that such an organization was needed in Iowa, the Iowa Good Roads Association had been organized, incorporated as a non-profit organization, and was doing business. I believe it to be very important that the original sponsors be free of the charge of having selfish interests to serve.

Chambers of Commerce and community clubs have continued to be active in the support of our organization, but have made no effort to control it or to dictate or direct its policies. At the present time, one secretary of a Chamber of Commerce is a member of our Board of Directors, and another one is chairman of our membership committee. Annual membership dues paid by a chamber of commerce or community club vary with the population of the city or town.

ACTIVITIES OF A GOOD ROADS ASSOCIATION

The scope of activities of a Good Roads Association is dependent upon the magnitude of the problems involved. In Iowa, we do not believe that we need to bring about many more changes in order to

have a successful public road and street program. Consequently, we operate on a modest basis and have no need for a big organization nor for a large budget. Our program is largely educational and in the field of public relations. We seek to get and keep Iowans fully conversant with the problems incident to building and maintaining public roads and streets that will adequately serve the traffic that they are called upon to carry. We stress the essentiality of establishing and maintaining the three conditions that we believe to be essential for successful public road and street programs. Sound laws, adequate finances, and good administration are stressed in our releases and talks at public meetings as much as L. S. M. F. T. is stressed in the Lucky Strike advertising campaigns. We believe that if Iowans can recognize the weak spots in our public road and street programs, in due time we will be able to correct them.

I will enumerate certain principles that I believe to be fundamental to effective organizations for "Citizens Cooperation in Road Improvement Programs."

1. The organization must be wholly free from suspicion of having any selfish purposes to serve.

2. It must be equally interested in the sound development of all systems of public thoroughfares—primary roads, secondary roads, and municipal roads and streets. All such systems are needed to serve motor vehicle transportation.

3. It should accept memberships only with the understanding that the organization cannot sponsor particular projects or particular types of construction. With this understanding, it can accept the support of contractors, equipment manufacturers and distributors, material producers, etc., in fact, all persons or groups that have a direct financial interest in the public road and street programs. Such groups should not have a vote in determining the policies of the organization and their memberships should be accepted with that understanding.

4. The organization cannot act as a cheer-leader for any group of public officials. It must be equally free to commend and to criticize. It must be willing at all times to bring to public attention anything and everything that bids fair to jeopardize the success of the public road and street program.

5. The organization must function in such a manner that it is accepted by legislators and others as a reliable and unbiased source of accurate information on matters pertaining to public roads and streets. If it succeeds in doing this, through its state-wide organiza-

tion, it can become a potent force in the promotion of sound highway legislation.

National policies have a far-reaching influence on state and local road problems. At the present time, the Federal Government's attitude toward public road and street work introduces many unknowns in our 1951 road and street program. We do not know whether or when scarce materials, manpower or equipment needed for such programs will be made available. The Federal Government's taxing policies on motor vehicle transportation affects state and local road and street finance. We hesitate to recommend additional taxes upon motor vehicle transportation when it is already paying enough taxes to provide adequate public roads and streets, if those taxes were all devoted to road and street work.

If every state had an active citizens organization, devoting its efforts to the development of sound public road and street programs, a national association of such organizations might be helpful to the public road and street programs of the nation. Help from some source is definitely needed. The rapid spread of toll-road authorities is sobering evidence that Americans are losing confidence in the ability of public officials to provide the kind of public road and street facilities that are needed to serve motor vehicle transportation, and are turning to toll-roads as the only way out. It is a costly means of exit. The average passenger automobile pays a fee that amounts to an additional gas tax of approximately 15c a gallon for the privilege of using toll roads. A much less additional road use tax, fairly spread and soundly administered, would provide a complete system of public roads and streets that all could use. Isn't it about time that we average American motorists, who use the roads and pay the taxes, made a critical "re-examination" of our whole public road and street situation?