

# Indiana's Responsibilities for Funding of Highways in the Eighties

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Because there just is no way I can talk about highway funding without stating a number of facts that most Indiana highway users already know, the following items are introductory material.

Indiana's roads and streets are in bad shape and getting worse. Bridges are falling down, and our roads are creating safety hazards and are contributing a great deal to energy waste.

The problem of highway decay stems from a combination of inflation, a drop in fuel use, and too low a priority for road work among local, state, and federal governments.

Continued lack of attention will result in letting our roads and streets deteriorate. Even existing levels of service cannot be maintained unless policies are adopted which ensure adequate funding.

It is possible to stop further road deterioration and its consequences by decisive action — NOW — before the problem assumes overwhelming proportions.

A highway program which vigorously addresses our road problems would obviously serve the best interests of public health and safety, energy conservation, the environment, the consumer, and our state's economy.

Having recited the obvious, the question, then, is: Are these funding problems going to be resolved in the 1980's? And if so, how?

I can't recall a time in all these years when my own industry and public officials alike, at all levels of government, were more urgently in need of two things: (1) a good, strong, sustained communications and public relations program (2) more personal involvement in the political system.

We're talking here about the need for money. Lots of it. And, of course, there is only one source for public money in our state and that is the Indiana General Assembly and the Congress of the United States.

Every citizen in this state is represented by two persons in the legislature — a senator and a representative. These are the people who will be making the critical bottom-line decisions as to whether our highway

system continues to nosedive in the eighties or whether adequate, long-term funding is provided.

If we want sufficient monies for our roads and streets, then, we must make absolutely sure that the people who represent us know precisely how we feel. And sometimes in no uncertain terms!

Good roads have never been a “self-sell” item with the public, with state legislatures or, for that matter, with the Congress. In fact, highways generally are not a matter of much concern one way or another. They’re usually taken for granted—until they become so bad that they’re an obvious threat to our safety and mobility.

A person will spend \$8,000 for a new automobile, \$350 for a set of tires, or \$300 for car insurance, and then scream his head off and write nasty letters to the editor about a two-penny increase in the gas tax to fix his roads.

After all, a tax is a tax—although the gas tax which *really* is a user charge and probably the fairest tax that has ever been created. People are upset about taxes, and they’re upset about the high cost of government generally. Witness the Reagan landslide! And since we haven’t told them otherwise, at least often enough, they assume highway spending is up there in orbit along with everything else.

This explains why sometimes they look at us in disbelief, when we try to tell them that the state’s gas tax has been raised only a half-cent in 11 years, inflation notwithstanding.

They all seem to know about that “powerful highway lobby” so why should they believe anything as ridiculous as that?

I don’t mean to belittle the efforts of my own industry or of yours as city, county, and state officials. But, for reasons over which we’ve had little control, highways have been skidding down the government’s priority pecking list for years.

Look at the record. The federal budget and our own state budget ballooned more than threefold in the 1970’s. But, at the same time, total road and street spending was increasing at less than a third that rate and, for the last year and half, it has been going down.

Had spending levels for all of Indiana’s other endeavors paralleled those of the federal-aid and state highway program for the past 10 years, Indiana would be wallowing in a multi-million dollar surplus today rather than worrying about the prospects of a rather huge deficit.

But now isn’t the time to discuss our state’s chronic, apparently incurable, propensity for treating the highway program as little more than a convenient spigot—something to be turned on or off whenever the need arises to camouflage deficits and spending indiscretions in other programs.

There is no question about the need for all of us during the 1980’s to start rethinking some of our basic highway financing concepts, a

complicated and controversial subject in itself.

The government is risking an eventual monumental transportation mess when it persists in sweeping its highway responsibilities under the rug. All the fine talk we hear about Indiana's "renewal" and industrial renaissance is inspiring. But we can kick these lofty goals into a cocked hat if we continue, year after year, to neglect the transportation facilities that are, literally, the assembly line for our entire economy.

All of this is moot both in Washington and Indianapolis at the moment. Both had even bigger, more immediate problems to worry about. And, like it or not, these problems spell cutbacks, not increases, in planned federal and state investment.

All this brings me to the subject I want to emphasize if we are successful in our efforts to obtain more money for roads in the eighties. We must continue to do everything we can to enlighten our state senators and representatives and our executive branch, as well, about transportation's essential contribution to our state's growth. Because, for the next several years, the battles that will determine whether we are to stop the decay of our highway systems will be fought and are being fought in our state capital.

These encounters will be crucial during the 1980's and, speaking from long experience, they are going to be tough. If they are to be won, they demand *every* legitimate resource my industry and yours can bring to bear—political action committees; knowledgeable, constructive lobbying and, as the indispensable underpinning for these efforts, a solid, sustained public information program.

The General Assembly will be making the decisions and it is incumbent on us to send people to represent us who understand and who will support an aggressive, sustained, adequately-funded highway program in the 1980's.

You can have all the political and public relations ingredients and still see your legislative campaign go down the tube. Politics and public relations are not the most exact of sciences, and the circumstances surrounding them tend to be unpredictable.

It's been said that politicians in all their maneuverings can be depended on to give precedence to two jobs above all others.

The first, of course, is to get elected. The second is to get re-elected.

Which is to say that any taxpaying citizen who seriously believes his political representatives are actually as interested in solving his problems, including adequate funding for roads, as they are in securing his vote is likely to be kidding himself.

Why is it that a kind of political paralysis seems to seize legislators when they are asked to charge motorists or truckers the *true* cost of maintaining roads and bridges? They seem to have an incredible fear of reprisals back home if they vote for any tax increases.

With their roads, streets, and bridges continuing to fall into disrepair, it is understandable that many taxpaying motorists wonder how does one go about convincing their political representatives that it is to their political *advantage* if they face the issue and solve the problem instead of letting neglect compound itself for political position.

How do you convince a state legislator that it is politically counter-productive if he does not provide the additional long-term funding that is so obviously needed?

How does one make him understand the grim bottom line: more money is needed, quickly, to fix crumbling freeways, roads and bridges or accept the prospect of a crippled transportation system by late in this decade.

There is no doubt about it. State legislators need to recognize that a transportation system is indeed the lifeblood of our economy.

I would suggest in closing that if the accountability lines can be drawn clearly enough to our state capital, it is unlikely that the people who represent us in our general assembly, will eventually permit our roads and bridges to deteriorate beyond a point of no return to our state's ruination.

The key words in our public relations efforts are *sustained credibility*. The most frequently repeated miscalculation by interest groups such as ours is to ignore a problem until it becomes a roaring crisis and then overreact with a make-shift program. This is a tried and true method of wasting a ton of money and losing stature and believability in the process.

What I am saying finally is this: there is no good reason our state should not have good roads, but the answer to the problem is us!

I would suggest in the years of the 1980's that we pursue two specific assignments:

1. Work towards a PR program dedicated to the single goal of improving our roads and streets and give this program emphasis and priority commensurate with the problem.
2. That we look in the mirror. . . . often. We must make absolutely certain, in every position we take and every resolution we favor, and every vote we cast we are entitled to public support, or at least acquiescence, in our quest for more money for roads.

If we are to achieve this goal, entitlement of public support is paramount. It is the real test, the personal showdown. It is as nothing else the genuine center and core of a good public relations program.

If, sincerely and honestly, we can say that the things we support in our efforts for adequately-funded roads and streets are things the public will approve *if it knows about them and understands them*, then all else in our program becomes a matter of adequate and accurate communications.

It becomes a matter of seeing to it that the motorist who foots the bill and the legislator who represents us in the state capitol does know and does understand.

It is not a question of morals and ethics but, rather, a highly materialistic consideration. Like it or not, it is the public who will determine the kind of treatment we get.

If the public approves of us and what we are fighting for, we will get good treatment. If it disapproves, bad.

The public cannot be misled or deluded very long.