The Urgency of Local Road Needs

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In our early history transportation, although an important problem, was much simpler. People settled where they could obtain the necessities of life, and they were content to stay put. Today, however, the transportation problem is greatly aggravated because no one seems to be where he wants to be and nothing's where you can use it.

The first settlers in our country found a complete wilderness, and they built their homes along the rivers and bays close to water transportation. When lands close to navigable waters were completely occupied, new settlers moved on inland, and roads were built to the nearest wharves, but often they consisted only of clearings through the forest.

Prior to our War of Independence, travel was mainly on foot or horseback. Roads were nothing more than trails. The first extensive broken-stone roadway built in this country was between Philadelphia and Lancaster, completed in 1795. In the next 40 years, many such turnpikes were constructed. They were built of graded gravel or broken stone by companies organized to make a profit through tolls. In this period stagecoach lines developed rapidly, and many freight hauling businesses were established. Pioneers were pushing their way westward in an expansion of settlement that eventually reached the Pacific Ocean. There was great need for land transportation. In 1806, the federal government began the construction of a road from Cumberland, Maryland, to the West known as the National Pike or the Cumberland Road. Then, as now, some businessmen recognized the economic value of highways. Businessmen of Baltimore urged this improvement in order to carry on commerce with the rich lands being settled in the West. In 1830, all indications pointed to a period of extensive highway construction, but in August of that year the steel locomotive proved its superiority over the horsedrawn vehicle on the first tracks of the Baltimore & Ohio railroad near Baltimore. Rapid development of the railroad soon convinced the public that it was the ideal instrument for transportation over long distances. Soon the resources of the country were devoted to the construction of railroads, and highways entered a
dark age from which they did not emerge until the coming of the motor vehicle. By 1900, the country had again reached a stage in its development when economic forces caused a strong demand for highways.

A need was seen to get the farmer out of the mud and to get him to the nearest railroad. The demand was for roads extending from two to five miles to the railroad station. A network of highways either connecting the cities and serving the business and social life of the nation was not seriously proposed even by dreamers in this period. Progress in meeting the need was to be at a snail's pace for many more years, but forces were at work which would cause continued progress in mechanization of road building and development of the motor vehicle. Eventually, these made possible the world's most extensive system of highways.

Today the United States has a network of highways reaching to every part of its area and of great importance in every phase of national life. The farmer, however, is still looking for the adequate improvement of local roads to meet his transportation needs. The Public Roads Administration, in a recent report, stated that at the end of 1946 there were included in the total of our 3,009,000 miles of roads, 838,000 miles of primitive and unimproved, and 667,000 miles of graded and drained but unsurfaced roads. That adds up to the amazing total of about 50% of our total rural mileage in the unsurfaced classification.

THE FARMER'S STAKE IN GOOD ROADS

According to the latest statistics (1945) compiled by the United States Department of Commerce, nearly one and one-half million trucks, equal to 30% of all privately-owned trucks registered in 1945, are owned by farmers. Twenty-five years ago only 2% of the nation's farms reported the ownership of trucks. The percentage of farms reporting trucks increased from 15.5% in 1940 to 22.3% in 1945. Significant variations are apparent in the different states. The 1945 data show that in 15 states the number of farm trucks equals 40% or more of all trucks registered as compared to the national average of 30%, ranging as high as 88% in Vermont, 74% in North Dakota, and 62% in Montana. Indiana had a farm truck registration for 1945 of 38,411, representing 26.1% of all truck registrations within the state. Twenty-one states showed an increase of over 50% in the number of farm-owned trucks from 1940 to 1945.

In this record of 25 years of farm trucks, ownership portrays the growing importance of trucks in farm operations. The data showing in detail the uses to which these farm trucks are put, the size and kind
of trucks, or the average annual miles of travel, are very limited. From rather limited surveys it appears that about 80% of the farm-owned trucks are in the one-to-two-ton-capacity group. I believe that your Agricultural Experiment Station at Purdue University, in making a survey of a group of central Indiana counties, found that in 1937 farm-owned trucks were used on the average of 197 days during the year.

Many of our farmers in some of the heaviest agricultural-producing counties do not own trucks. Nevertheless, today nearly all products leave the farm in trucks which are either company- or farm-owned, for those farmers who do not own trucks hire motorized transportation. Much of the traffic on our primary highways originates on the local roads. About one-half of all our fruits and vegetables arrive at the large markets by trucks. Trucks rolling over our highways give wider distribution of food commodities by putting supplies regularly into small cities, towns, and rural areas and into retail stores which cannot use car lots. In many areas a large share of the feeds, fertilizers, petroleum, and other products consumed on the farms is delivered to the farms by the dealers' trucks.

This movement to and from the farms in other than farm-owned trucks emphasizes the fact that the condition of farm roads is of vital concern, not only to the farmers who live along them, but also to those business firms and individuals who buy from and sell to them. And of course, good roads which make possible quick transportation of perishable goods to the markets are of inestimable value to the consuming public. Even big city industries also stand to benefit, for it seems fair to assume that if farm prosperity continues and if we provide improved local roads, there will be a continued steady demand for trucks by farmers.

The surfaced or all-weather road provides the farmer a way of getting to market any and every day of the year. Farmers on dirt roads are not so fortunate. They find it necessary to move their crops to market when the roads are dry. The loss resulting to the farmer because of impassable roads is considerable. Farmers who would like to diversify their operations by adding dairy herds cannot do so, since the dairy industry depends upon an all-weather road to maintain a regular schedule. The value of such service to the consumer is apparent. From the standpoint of farm economy, the surfaced road adds to the farm income by saving time, by reducing expense, by improving marketing conditions, and by making possible a more profitable type of farming.

Much emphasis is being placed these days on the nation's health, and here, too, better local roads can play an important role. In case of sickness or accident, the life of our rural people may depend upon the
ability of the doctor to respond quickly to the call. Impassable roads may mean the sacrifice of lives. Many are the services that may be extended to our rural population with the improvement of our total rural mileage. Ambulance service, hospital service, medical service, fire-prevention service—all of these may be made available if we provide adequate roads. From the standpoint of recreation, the improved local road is a two-barreled instrument. It extends to the rural people the recreational facilities of the urban community and also extends to the urban dweller the recreational advantages of the rural community.

EFFECTS ON RURAL EDUCATION

Dr. Robert Eaves, National Education Association, in speaking before our County Division of the American Road Builders' Association at our conference in Washington recently, stated that more than half of the children aged five to seven years in the United States live in rural areas. Of that number, nine million live in the open country. Among the schools for rural children are some of the best in America, but also a disproportionate number of the poorest. In 1940, there were ten million citizens who were illiterate, most of them residing in these rural areas. Current educational literature reflects the manner in which poor roads are handicapping school transportation, a major factor for the development of good schools. A report from a state department of education states, "Nearly one-half of the school districts of the state consider bad roads their major problem." The report of the National Commission on School District Reorganization shows that adequate rural roads are essential for the effective consolidation of school districts so seriously needed in many states to provide better education at less expense. Citizens in many instances are not willing to join together in large organizational school units when they are in doubt as to the efficiency and safety in the transportation of children. Dr. Eaves stated further that he believed in all road-building programs that concerned school bus routes, school administrators should be invited to sit down with the engineer, the highway official, the businessman, and others and discuss the road building program. He called our attention to the urgent need for the improvement of rural roads and stated that he believed this problem should arouse the best in our citizens in order to give adequate attention to our greatest asset—the American children.

RURAL MAIL HANDICAPS

Mail service to rural people living on unimproved roads is curtailed whenever those roads are impassable. An all-weather road makes pos-
sible an uninterrupted mail service. Willard Manning, President of the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association, speaking at our recent ARBA Conference, stated that he had made a recent survey to determine the cost of maintaining delivery equipment and found that costs ranged from a low of 8.6 cents per mile in one state to a high of 14.2 cents in another, with a national average of 9.9 cents per mile. He offered four reasons why so much of local rural traffic is still at the mercy of unsurfaced dirt roads.

1. Lack of county highway organizations properly staffed with competent engineers and operating with enough equipment.
2. Inadequate local funds.
3. Failure of state highway departments to recognize the importance of county organizations and to cooperate in improving them.
4. Failure to develop standards and specifications appropriate for county roads.

He stated further that "too often" the density of traffic is the sole determining factor in the selection of roads to be improved. "We believe," he said, "that this should be one of the determining factors; but more consideration should be given to the importance of transportation to a smaller number of people, to the value of uninterrupted mail and school bus service to rural families, and to adequate roads upon which products of the farms can move without delay. We also believe that consideration should be given to the traffic that would develop if an all-weather road were available."

Our local roads are really the lifelines of our great urban centers, supplying essential food products and raw materials for industry. For this reason, these roads are important from a defense standpoint as well as in peace time. In time of war they would be an important part of our supply lines. If improved to adequate standards, they would also enable traffic to disperse from the arterial systems in case of atomic or even more conventional type of bombing of our cities. They would serve as alternate or relief routes in case of emergency.

THE FEDERAL-AID SECONDARY PROGRAM

In the wake of the 1944 Highway Act, much publicity was given to statements which greatly exaggerated the potentialities of the secondary road program. Many rural people believed that surfaced roads would be built to their door almost immediately. As a matter of fact, on the basis of present federal appropriations, the program is barely
sufficient to construct a mileage of principal secondary roads of over 15% of the total rural mileage within a period of 20 years. Even if continued indefinitely, it cannot be regarded as the whole program of local road construction, but only a small part of it.

In Indiana, for instance, you have made fair progress in this program. But in all stages of programming and construction your total program includes the improvement of only 243.2 miles. Indiana has 72,657 miles of local roads under county control. At the end of 1946, 10,611 miles of these local roads were surfaced from low-type bituminous to concrete. Some 52,500 miles were surfaced with gravel or stone, leaving about 10,000 miles completely unsurfaced. Improving these roads to higher standards to meet the transportation needs of the citizens of Indiana is the responsibility of the county highway administration. To many of us who have been permitted to observe county highway administration at work, it is apparent that it must be improved if it is to meet the challenge of our transportation needs. It is in this field that the Federal-Aid Secondary Program can render its greatest service. If properly directed, it will serve as an instrumentality to improve local highway administrative practices. It can, and should, serve to stimulate cooperation between the federal, state, and county agencies.

County roadmen in every state report needs far in excess of finances available at the county level of government. No one can estimate the amount we need to spend to bring our local roads up to adequate standards. When needs are compared to revenues in most states, the time required to do the job indicates that it will take 30 years or more to accomplish present objectives, to say nothing of the traffic needs of tomorrow. A study should be made of our needs for local road construction and of the benefits that will accrue to the motoring public and the revenues commensurate to acquire these facilities in reasonable time.

Distribution of highway-user tax funds to county highway administrations is often referred to as dispersion. If we had better county roads, perhaps we could have real dispersion—dispatching some of our traffic from our overcrowded primary system. Every week-end thousands of motorists crowd and jam the main highways, not going any place in particular—just taking a jaunt. If they were assured they would find good surfaced roads out on the county by-ways, they would be delighted to use them. America is not content to stay at home. It wants to ride, to go places, to see things. Aside from the inadequacy of our highways, the only limitation to the use of our roads is the lack of leisure time and the cost of travel. These last factors have not deterred us too much, and there is every reason to believe the trend toward more leisure hours
will continue. There is reason to believe, also, that the automobile of the future will give more economical performance, thereby cutting travel cost. At any rate, we will be unrealistic and shortsighted if we do not anticipate and plan for highway traffic far in excess of what we have today.

Considering the importance of these local roads, suffice it to say that recent years have brought us a new concept of our highway needs. We know that we must have a well-integrated system of highways designed to serve all types of traffic as efficiently as possible in order to maintain our economic prosperity. Successful administration of our expanding highway program will depend upon how well state and county organizations are prepared to meet the situation. In some instances, state highway departments still have the organizational structures that were set up 25 years ago. When we consider county administration, the situation in many instances is still worse. Many obsolete types of organizations exist. The only solution is a major reorganization to effect a modern, efficient and integrated structure of organization essential to present-day administration. The need for improved local roads is recognized. It presents a challenge to county highway administration.