Organizing a County Highway Sign Crew

Harold Porter
Highway Supervisor
Wells County Highway Department

The need to establish a traffic control operation at the county highway level has become more and more apparent each year when we consider the rapid growth in the volume of traffic and the total miles traveled on our county highway systems. This increasing volume and usage has created a greater demand for better roads and better surfaces; the improved and paved surfaces invariably invite more and faster traffic.

The next step in this process is an increase in accident experience. We are certainly in this stage now as evidenced by a look at the summary of fatal accidents in Indiana for the year 1965. This is one reason why, as more roads are improved and carry more and faster traffic, control measures can and must be used to advise, to direct and regulate the flow of traffic.

Traffic control, of course, is not a new problem. From the days of the chariots to today's compact cars, traffic movement has been a continuing governmental headache. As an example, ancient Greece was having its troubles with chariot drivers until one of their first highway commissioners tried to impose some restrictions upon women drivers. Legend tells us that his own wife was one of the first women to be apprehended and very shortly her husband rescinded his order. One King of Assyria didn't fool around with parking tickets. He ordered the death penalty for anyone who interfered with the main highway. Obviously we have come a long way in traffic regulations since the days of ancient Greece and Assyria. However signing and marking of county highways, generally speaking, does leave a lot to be desired.

The problem of informing motorists as to what is expected of them, that is the placing and maintaining of traffic control devices, such as, signs, markings, and signals, not only is under the jurisdiction but is the responsibility of the county highway department and must be administered and directed by the highway supervisor. It is necessary that he formulate plans for the traffic control devices required for his individual county based on road mileages, mileage of improved roads, and vertical...
and horizontal alignment of the roads. Also that he determine the extent of traffic control required for the highway system under his control.

Uniformity must be paramount in all signage and markings and is the only sound basis from which the job of traffic control can be started on any highway system. Uniformity simplifies the task of the road user since it aids in an instant recognition and understanding. Simply stated, uniformity means treating similar situations in the same manner. There is more to this sign business than driving a post into the ground and placing upon it whatever sign someone thinks would be appropriate. This has been a practice for too many years in all of our various highway organizations, whether it be state, county or city. This is the reason for the development of the Uniform Traffic Control Manual and for our own Indiana Sign Manual which must be used and used correctly. Without the use of a standard or guide there very likely would be 92 different systems and standards of traffic control devices on county highway systems in Indiana. Thus the sign manual is perhaps the first and most important piece of equipment you will need.

The budget will likely dictate that most county sign and traffic control programs will start small and increase in size each year. This is good, but it means each department must create a basic overall program with a specific part to be accomplished each year and a system of priorities established. The highest priority should be the erection of STOP signs. Probably the next highest should be a road numbering system, following the plan recommended by Purdue University several years ago. In the case of the STOP sign, the highway supervisor must establish preferentiality at each intersection and then through the board of county commissioners, adopt the necessary ordinances to legally support the preferentiality. In other words, all regulatory traffic control devices must be legally established before they can be standard, valid or enforceable. Another major aspect of the traffic control operation is that of pavement markings. The use of paint lines of course can be applied only to roads with paved surfaces. Pavement markings are a very effective method of traffic control and should be used where needed and where they can be used.

After the size and requirements of the traffic control program have been established, the next step is to establish an organization to get the work done. The size of this organization will vary with the size of the program as required by the amount of road mileage involved, the mileage of improved roads, and the traffic volumes on these roads.

The basic personnel needed for most counties will be the sign crew. One three-man sign crew properly equipped and properly supervised will
be able to perform the actual erection and maintenance of the signage program, except in some of the larger more populated counties. It is important that one man be designated as the sign crew foreman. Basic qualifications of the sign foreman must be such that he will be one who can plan and supervise the work to be done, understand the basic fundamentals of proper, uniform signage. He must also have the ability and good judgment to make adjustments to meet local conditions and yet adhere to the basic principles of uniformity. The success of any sign program depends upon the interest and ability of the sign foreman, therefore be very careful in the selection of this man. Remember the best equipment and material can be worthless if it is not used properly.

The converse of this is also true. You must have good and proper equipment for your sign crew to use. The basic piece of equipment for the crew will be the sign truck. The size and capacity of the truck may vary but it should be of sufficient size and design to contain all the necessary sign racks, post racks, tool bins and small parts bins to carry an adequate supply of these items, and the crew, to go out to erect and maintain signs on an efficient basis. It is necessary to have sign and post racks to prevent damage to these materials and to assure that different materials are available from the truck as needed. You can actually wear a sign out by hauling it around, if it is not properly racked and protected. Post drivers, diggers, wrenches, level and stepladder are essential tools.

Most county highway traffic control operations will be based at the highway garage which is generally a central location. This is a good operation as no location in the county road system will be too far away from headquarters. An area in the highway garage should be set aside for the use of the sign crew shop. This should be large enough to provide for sign storage, paint storage, sign machine, posts, miscellaneous hardware, etc. This area must be enclosed if any kind of an inventory and order is to be maintained. As your signing program progresses, a need will develop to replace worn out signs, you may find it economical to refinish old signs and thereby salvage the cost of sign blank material. This will require equipment and personnel for stripping, cleaning and refinishing. You may or may not be justified in establishing a sign refinishing shop.

Another phase of the traffic control operation is maintenance. This too requires the attention of the sign crew. Too often signs and devices are installed and then forgotten. Instances of this can be seen on many roads, and criticism is justified at all levels of the traffic control operation. Maintenance must be scheduled and performed periodically on all traffic control devices to keep them in good condition so that they are
effective at all times. Clean, legible, properly mounted traffic signs and devices command respect. Signs not having a good business-like appearance tend to imply they no longer need to be obeyed. There will be vandalism and damage to individual signs which must be repaired or replaced immediately. All of your highway personnel can help in this matter. They can at least report immediately any damaged signs they observe in their normal course of travel over the county. Periodic maintenance should be performed by your sign crew and should be programmed so that it will be done on a regular basis.

The installation and maintenance of traffic control signs and markings on county highways has become an important business. It is no longer a forgotten element in the design, construction and maintenance of our county road system. The motoring public judges the entire roadway system, to a large degree, by the signs and markings they encounter during their daily trips up and down our roads. It is therefore most important that we make our traffic signing and markings for our county highways as meaningful as possible.

In summary, the traffic control operation on county highways must be based on the following points:

1. A plan of the traffic control devices required must be developed to determine the scope and size of the program in your individual county.
2. All signage and other traffic control devices must generally conform to the Uniform Traffic Control Manual.
3. Legal authority must be established for all regulatory controls.
4. Personnel must be obtained, trained, supervised, and properly equipped to do the job in the field.
5. All traffic control devices must be properly maintained after they are installed.

The application of these five points on the scale to meet your own county’s needs should provide your county with the necessary traffic control devices to properly control traffic on your highway system.