State-County-City Relations on Highway Improvement

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The relations between the counties, cities and the Division of Highways in Illinois are very good. Frankly we feel that they are good largely through our efforts to make them that way. The county and city people are just as anxious for good relations as we are, but we take the initiative in the matter.

Before I go into the "whys" and "wherefores" of these relations, it would be well to give you an outline of those phases of our highway law which require state, county and city contacts, and also an outline of our organization handling relations.

COUNTIES

We have in addition to our primary system of roads, which is entirely under State jurisdiction, a county system known as state-aid roads. The term "state-aid" is to some extent a misnomer and comes from the fact that this system was set up back in 1913, to be built jointly by the state and the counties. This method of construction ceased about 1915 and since then there has been no state-aid except the allotments of state controlled gasoline tax, which I will touch on later.

This system is administered in each county by a county superintendent of highways, who is an appointee of the county board of supervisors. The county board is an administrative body and the county superintendent of highways is the executive. The fact that the designation of this system must have the approval of the state and the appointment of the county superintendent can be made only after an examination given by the state makes immediately for a very close tie-up legally.
Counties may levy a road and bridge tax for expenditure on this system with no restriction so far as the state is concerned. It so happens that for several years the revenue from this source is, in general, not sufficient to carry on any construction and is largely spent on maintenance. Practically the only source of funds for construction purposes on this system comes from one cent of the state collected gasoline tax and it must be spent on this state approved system and under the supervision of the state, which is required to approve location, type, design, award of contracts and supervise construction.

In addition to this system there is the federal-aid secondary system which is smaller than the state-aid system, but consists mainly of roads on the state-aid system. The expenditure of funds on these roads is directly by the state, although counties have been required to match federal-aid secondary funds. The counties have the choice of location, type, et cetera, subject to state approval.

CITIES

The statutory relations between cities and the state is somewhat similar to the county and state set-up. The main difference is that the state has no control over the appointment of the city engineer or any other city official. Cities get one cent of the state collected gasoline tax, as do the counties, and must spend it on a system of streets which are designated by the city council, but which must be approved by the state. The expenditure of gas tax allotments requires the same state approval as in the counties.

The state is in a rather powerful position in its relation with the counties and cities, a position which could be very onerous if the state so desired. We have deliberately chosen a course of action and a type of organization whereby cooperation, rather than cracking the whip, is the motive.

ORGANIZATION AND OPERATIONS

We have a Bureau of County Roads and City Streets which handles all county and city matters that require state approval. This Bureau is subordinate to the Chief Engineer. The central office of this Bureau is located in Springfield. Each highway district has a County Roads and City Streets organization which reports directly to the District Engineer, who is in turn responsible to the Engineer of County Roads and City Streets in the central office.
Theoretically, the state is an approving agent only. We have never operated on the theory that we should not enter into the picture until something is laid before us for approval. Instead we have operated on the theory that it is better to get together on all details before proposals are completed and ready for submission to the department, and iron out all of the details so that we can approve what has been submitted. Our men in the districts take the initiative and go to the counties and cities and find out what they have in mind for work requiring our supervision, offer their services as consultants and agree ahead of time on what is to be done and how. We do have state design standards for all classes of road and we have standard specifications for practically all types of road. We naturally urge that these be used, but we do permit deviation from or modification of them to fit local conditions. Our men are always available as consultants, even on work not strictly under our supervision.

Our relation to the counties is probably closer than the cities. This is mainly due to the fact that we have been dealing with the counties since about 1914 while our dealings with the cities date back only to about 1933. Also, many of the county superintendents are former state employees and talk the same language.

We have fostered the organization of district groups of county superintendents, who meet regularly with the state men with whom they deal. The county superintendents are made to feel that these are their meetings and they take the initiative in discussions. These meetings are held at state district headquarters in some of the districts, while in other districts they are rotated among the counties. Every effort is made to have men from the central office, or other bureaus, including the Chief Engineer, at these meetings occasionally when they can spare the time. In these meetings no punches are pulled, although everything is kept on a friendly basis. We ask that the county superintendents be critical of our control so that we may correct things that are wrong. County Superintendents often bring members of the Board of Supervisors, particularly members of the Road and Bridge Committee.

In addition, the State County Superintendents organization has what is called a Liaison Committee, which meets with the various bureau chiefs and Chief Engineer at intervals to discuss state-wide policies and matters of general interest. Here again, no punches are pulled in the discussions.

Our relations with the cities are just as good, but not so close, as our relations with the counties. This is mainly due to the fact that our official relations with the cities are not of such long standing.
We have had primary roads through cities for many years previous to the allocation of motor fuel tax funds to cities, but these location and design matters have pretty much been decided by our State Bureau of Design without bringing the cities into the picture.

Since 1933, the Division of Highways has had supervision of motor fuel tax funds allotted to cities and our real close contact dates from that time. The fact that city officials change much more rapidly than county officials makes some difference in our close acquaintance with them, as does the fact that there are so many more cities than counties, (1,157 cities compared to 102 counties.)

In the case of cities, we act more as a service organization and as a consultant than we do with the counties. This is necessarily true when you consider that the majority of the cities have no city engineer who is regularly employed, instead we must deal with whatever local official is in charge or with consulting engineers who are acting on a fee basis.

Here again, as in the counties, we do not wait for cities to submit their plans to us for approval, instead we go to them and help them with their overall planning and see that they are off on the right foot before they get off on the wrong one. It is sometimes difficult to know just with whom to deal in the cities and this calls for a careful approach. For instance, in one city there may be a regularly appointed city engineer, who is the man to deal with. In other cities there may be no city engineer and the mayor is very much the boss. In still a third class, the mayor may not be particularly interested in street matters and leaves things to his street superintendent. Each situation must be studied as to the approach and this takes care and diplomacy not to tread on someone’s toes.

Many of the cities employ private engineers on a fee basis. We give them the same consideration that we do the city officials. Our general approach with both counties and cities is never to assume that we know it all and never to tell them that the Highway Department’s way is the only way. We acknowledge that they may have special conditions where our design standards and specifications, which are set up for standard jobs, may require modification. In addition to this, we try to make all county and city officials with whom we deal our personal friends.

I believe our city and county relations are excellent and I believe this is due to the fact that we approach both county and city people at their level and consider their problems at their level and not necessarily at the State level.