

Benefits of an Efficient County Road Association

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Out of respect for a departed friend I shall attempt to substitute for him. The late Al Cuthbert, engineer-director of the County Road Association of Michigan, was to have spoken to you at this time. He had started to prepare the discussion which he would have used and had been working on it less than a half hour before his untimely death cut short his efforts.

A major portion of the material used herewith is borrowed from data compiled by Mr. Cuthbert during his seven and one-half year tenure of office as engineer-director of the Michigan organization. Some information will be given which he would not give if he were here. A sense of modesty would have precluded his discussing several accomplishments of the association which were the results of his own personal efforts.

The forerunner of the present County Road Association of Michigan was organized in 1918 and was known as The Michigan Association of Road Commissioners and Engineers. The object or purpose of the original Association was "to promote higher efficiency in the operation of the county road system." Little change has been made in the objective since that time, as note the following taken from the constitution and by-laws of the present Association—the County Road Association of Michigan, whose purpose is defined as, "the purpose of this association shall be to promote higher efficiency in the operation of the county road system of Michigan and to provide and furnish to member county road commissions, at cost, consultant service and advice on all phases of county road activities in order to promote such efficiency."

In 1944 A. O. Cuthbert, a registered professional engineer, was appointed engineer-director of the County Road Association of Michigan. During his term of office all the road commissions were brought closer together and a cordial relationship with the other highway agencies, the State Highway Department and the Municipal League, was fostered to the benefit of all concerned. In conformity

with the belief of the founders of our association that all rural non-state trunk highways should be administered close to the people, at the local level, every effort has been made to secure the cooperative action of all the counties. As a result, the various county road commissions are now functioning as a unit and no longer do counties try to go it alone in matters that are of concern to all.

Michigan has a new, basic road law enacted at the 1951 session of the legislature, replacing, so far as the counties are concerned, an act passed in 1909. Under the new law three highway jurisdictions are recognized, namely the Michigan State Highway Department, the county road commissions and the incorporated cities and villages. Funds for the three jurisdictions come, for the most part, from state-collected revenues consisting largely of motor vehicle registration fees and a four and one-half cents per gallon tax on gasoline. These funds are apportioned to the participating agencies on the basis of 44 percent for the State Highway Department, 37 percent for the county road commissions and 19 percent for incorporated cities and villages.

County roads are classified as county primary roads and county local roads. So far as can be determined now, about 25 percent of county road mileage will be classified as county primary roads and under the law will receive 75 percent of the funds apportioned on the state level. The local roads comprising three-fourths of the total county road mileage will receive only 25 per cent of state apportioned funds. Additional funds required for local roads must be raised locally. Once every two years county road commissions must submit a construction program for the ensuing two years to the state highway commissioner. Once each year, on forms provided by the state highway commissioner, a report showing funds received and how disbursed must be made. Another annual report required is one showing the condition of all roads in the county—whether adequate for traffic or inadequate. All these reports go to the state highway commissioner who is required to summarize and include these in his biennial report to the governor and legislature.

COUNTY ROAD ASSOCIATION OF MICHIGAN

The County Road Association of Michigan is a quasi-official entity of government, having legal status as a service organization for the road commissions. It is owned and operated, through an elected board of directors, by the 83 county road commissions of the state. The eleven man board of directors is elected annually by written ballot. The directors elect their own officers, consisting of a president,

vice-president and secretary-treasurer. The directors employ an engineer-director who is a registered professional engineer, as the chief executive. The engineer-director is in charge of the state office at Lansing, Michigan, and operates the affairs of the association under the policies established by the board of directors.

The personnel of the association is not large, as most of the technical work is done by a series of committees, serving without remuneration and appointed annually by the president. These committees cover such fields as accounting, administration, airports, auditing, engineering, equipment rental, public relations, and standards and specifications, to name just a few. They are all working committees. These committees are called to the Lansing office either by the committee chairman or the engineer-director. Decisions reached by these committees, after study and deliberation, are transmitted by bulletins to the various county road commissions. If the subject matter seems to be controversial, the committee makes a report and reasons for the conclusions at one of the four annual meetings.

Open discussion is welcomed and, after such hearings, the conclusions reached are adopted and later transmitted by bulletin to the county road commissions for their guidance. By following this method, cooperative uniform procedures have been obtained on most phases of county road operation. One particularly successful objective was the adoption of uniform accounting practices, which system has gained national recognition.

No doubt a perplexing question for some county road associations is how to secure the funds necessary for operation. Michigan law provides that county road commissions shall employ a competent highway engineer and may engage such other professional and consultant services as it deems necessary to carry out the requirements of law and to promote efficiency and economy in the operation of the county road system. Although most road commissions employ a full-time, resident, registered professional engineer, it is not possible for him or the superintendent to keep up with all the ramifications and problems confronting a road commission. Instead of each individual county building up adequate personnel to cope with all such problems, the association provides the required consulting service and advice. It can be readily seen that having a place to go for answers to engineering, legal and personnel problems, for example, is not only a convenience, but also far less expensive than to provide the same service in each county.

The following list of services, on file with the state, does not contain all the services rendered, but are those officially approved

in authorizing the expenditure of county road funds to support the association :

1. Expert counsel and advice on all phases of road commission operations, including study, analysis and report with recommendations on technical problems and questions submitted relating to :

- (a) Road, park, airport, sewer, water main, and sewage disposal system construction, maintenance, improvement and operation.
- (b) Equipment rental rates and equipment maintenance.
- (c) Engineering standards.
- (d) Federal and State regulations and priorities.
- (e) Purchasing practices and appliances.
- (f) Sources of materials and appliances.
- (g) Personnel matters.
- (h) Administration and adjustment of workmen's compensation as self-assured.
- (i) Employee group insurance and procedures.
- (j) Accounting practices and procedures.

2. Collection, compilation and distribution in bulletin form of latest information on :

- (a) New and improved methods and practices in road maintenance and construction.
- (b) Priorities and other federal regulations affecting road commissions.
- (c) Federal aid and other legislation affecting roads.
- (d) New and improved office and accounting procedures and personnel practices.

3. Instruction of employees by correspondence and schools of instruction on latest methods and practices in various phases of road commission operation such as :

- (a) Equipment maintenance and operation.
- (b) Accounting.
- (c) Road and bridge construction and maintenance.

4. Personal representation in business contacts with state departments.

The next question usually asked regards the method which is used to apportion the cost of the association's service among the 83 county road commissions. Several years ago, the board of directors established a classification method based on the amount of state collected revenue each road commission receives. There are eight classifications, with the largest number of road commissions falling

into the lowest service charge class. The low income counties fall into this classification, and their service charge is \$300 per year, per county, while counties having higher incomes pay proportionately higher service charge. All counties are entitled to equal service regardless of the amount they pay. As might be expected, the counties paying the smallest amount require the greatest amount of service, because they do not have the funds or the need for a large resident personnel of professional assistants. The board of directors establish the budget each year, after which the association sends statements to the county road commissions, in accordance with the classification. No further charge is made in that year, although it is possible to handle any matters of emergency finance by a special charge.

One item of service that is new, since the foregoing services were established, is the association monthly magazine called "Highways and Byways." Every road commission receives 40 copies per month as part of their annual service. Copies greater than that number are ordered by the individual road commissions and are paid for at cost. The monthly run is 8,000 to 10,000 copies. Most of the distribution is made by the road commissions to their employees, local citizens, supervisors, etc. The balance of the distribution is handled from Lansing, going to members of the legislature, state officers, contractors, equipment and supply houses, etc. Each issue contains at least one technical article, usually prepared by one of our county engineers, also news from the various employee groups and other articles of general interest. Although numerous requests for advertising space have been received, no advertising is carried in this magazine. It is felt, as a public relations medium and as a method of education for the road industry, that it has better readership by not including advertising.

HIGHWAY FINANCING AND ADMINISTRATION

As everyone knows, operating a highway system is an expensive business and any unit, such as a county road department, which is under-financed will inevitably, sooner or later, find itself in public disfavor. The traveling public wants good highway service and is little concerned with the cost if the service is satisfactory; but, when obliged to use poor roads, usually one of the first criticisms voiced is that the highway authority is spending too much money.

If county road departments are to be perpetuated in good standing, adequate financing is indispensable. A fair share of highway revenue raised in a state must go to local highway units if they are to render highway service that will insure public confidence and

support. To bring about this condition there is just one place to go—the legislature. It is unlikely a county acting alone will accomplish very much in convincing the legislature of the need for highway legislation, but when all the counties in a state join hands and act as a unit, favorable public opinion can be created which is an invaluable requisite for securing favorable legislative action. That is exactly what the counties in Michigan have done. After years of acting alone, or in small groups, all the counties have united in an effective organization which has produced results never before accomplished.

For a long time Michigan has felt the need, on all levels, for additional highway funds. In 1946 the County Road Association of Michigan took an active part with other members of the Michigan Good Roads Federation in a survey to determine the actual need in dollars and cents necessary to put all the roads and streets in the state in a tolerable condition. The result of the survey was the formulation of a definite legislative program. Even with indisputable proof of the need for additional funds, the opposition was able to delay the enactment of the program into law until 1951. The association, with a large collection of highway statistics, was able to serve in an advisory capacity to the legislature, furnishing reliable information on highway matters that were not attainable from any other source without long delay.

The legislature raised the gasoline tax to four and one half cents, an increase of one and one half cents a gallon. At the same time the registration fees on trucks was increased 5 million dollars. In all, highway revenues have increased from a total of $86\frac{1}{2}$ million dollars in 1950 to an estimated total of 130 millions in 1952. The county road commissions will benefit to the extent of 37 percent of the overall increase.

Along with the increase of highway funds, laws were enacted providing for improved administration, classification of roads, better accounting and a requirement that each county employ a registered, professional engineer. In case of failure to employ a registered, professional engineer, a county will forfeit a part of its income. All these measures had the endorsement of the County Road Association.

The efficiency of a county road association depends on the management. Without honest, aggressive and informed leadership it is a foregone conclusion that the needs of the association will not be met in most instances. Cooperation with all highway agencies is imperative in securing a united effort for adequate appropriation and an equitable distribution of highway funds to these agencies. A county road

association should be interested and use its best efforts to see that the state highway department and all other agencies responsible for roads and streets are provided with sufficient funds and that laws be enacted that will permit efficient highway administration on all levels in conformity with the highest standard consistent with the needs.

While adequate financing is important, a properly managed association will bring other benefits to its members. Expert advice and counsel on the various problems arising in a county road organization will always be available. The latest information on the various phases of highway operation will be collected and compiled and distributed to the membership. An interest will be taken in county road employees to the end that they may be better trained to discharge the duties of their jobs. Personal representation will be provided for business contacts with all state departments, saving member counties time and money in traveling to and from the state capitol. These benefits, as well as many others, will accrue to the members of a county road association that is well managed.