

# Local Roads Are Important Too

JAMES W. SPENCER

Highway Research and Extension Engineer  
Department of Agricultural Engineering  
Cornell University  
Ithaca, New York

My response to the title of this talk could be extremely brief. If I were an irreligious man, I could say "you're damn right." A religious man could shorten it up more with "Amen." You men—and myself—know that local roads are important. There's no problem here. But do other people know it? I'm afraid not.

## A CLOSER LOOK AT PUBLIC ATTITUDES

I've looked over quite a few local rural roads this spring and I'm discouraged at what I've seen. I've wondered if there is any field of human endeavor where so many failures show up year after year. In contrast, let's look at an individual property owner. If the tires on his car are in pretty poor shape, he patches for a little while, but it doesn't take him long to wise up. He soon realizes that for dependable transportation, he'll have to spend some money. Let's suppose this same man is building a new poultry house and you're consulting him on the job. Suppose you tell him he might possibly get by with an 18-inch footing but you would recommend a 24-inch footing. I'll bet that he'll place the 24-inch footing—and I'll bet he'll feel good about it. Human nature feels pretty smug when it thinks that a dollar spent will save two dollars worth of trouble. People will spend their money when they see a benefit. But—and this is a big *but*—when individuals group together in some unit of government, they seem to grip their pocketbook pretty tightly. I'm afraid that most individuals just detest the word "taxes."

If my daughter is sick and the doctor prescribes some terramycin, I go to the drug store, reach in my pocket, and pay for the prescription. Sure—I flinch a little when the druggist says \$2.55 but I pay it because I think it's a good investment. For human disease, we're willing to pay a tax to the druggist.

*But*, what's the public attitude toward road disease? They'll watch it and complain about it but they don't want to spend any money for a cure. Instead they pacify themselves by blaming the county commissioners—or more likely, the road supervisor. As the public watches county road performance, especially during the early spring, I believe that many people think we don't know any better.

What are we doing about it? Profanely—"damn little," more gentlemanly—"not much."

### SOME TYPICAL COMPLAINTS

You know, road men and taxpayers have a lot in common. They both have arms, both have legs—and both want good roads. Right there, though, I sometimes think the likeness ends. We need money and they don't want to spend it; and after we do the best they can afford, they don't think it's good enough. From where I sit, it seems that we're often pretty discontented with human nature—and human nature (the taxpayer) is generally discontented with us.

I've heard some complaints from local road officials in other states and wonder if any of them might apply to Indiana:

1. We don't have enough money to adequately maintain our old roads or even do a good job of clearing and grading on the new ones.
2. We don't have enough equipment and some of what we do have is tied together with baling wire.
3. People want velvet smooth roads but they don't want taxes.
4. People think the only important road is right in front of their house.
5. (And maybe I don't dare quote this one) The county commissioners are a little bull headed, they don't seem to understand the problems.

I've heard some complaints from rural residents too:

1. They generally think the roads are pretty poor (if they can't complain about the weather, they complain about the roads.)
2. Many think that highway departments are pretty inefficient organizations.
3. Some of them think they aren't getting much for their money.

It seems that we hear more complaints than compliments about roads and road departments. And what's our response? I think there are two parts: 1) people are either dumb or bull headed and 2) to heck with them. We're not satisfied and they're not satisfied. Why?

Did you ever know a person from a distance and decide you didn't like him very much and then for some reason you got to know him better and you became good friends? I think that if rural people could get to know more about roads and road problems, our job would become easier and more satisfying.

### PUBLIC ATTITUDES—DISCOURAGEMENT OR CHALLENGE

Let's agree right off that a *good* road supervisor has to know how to build and maintain roads. But, I'd like to add, a *very good* road supervisor has to know how to build and maintain a public understanding of road work and road problems. Sometimes, in public life, this is the toughest part of the job. In fact, we might say a successful road supervisor is a *magician*. By magician, I don't mean he's an expert on "hocus pocus." We've been accused too often of hocus pocus. Rather, he is able to accomplish what most people think is impossible—the improvement of public attitudes toward road work. The task isn't easy but it can be done and I think that the best tool is education. I hope you'll agree that most people ought to know more about roads and road problems. If you agree with this, I hope you'll agree with this statement: if *we* don't do the teaching, who will?

Right now, I'll bet a nickel you're saying to yourself, "Why doesn't he wise up; doesn't he know a hopeless situation when he sees one?" To me there's but a very fine line between discouragement and a challenge and I'd rather be optimistic and see the lack of public understanding as a challenge.

### OUR TASK

If our objective is a healthy public attitude, I think there are three places where education is needed.

1. The general public
2. The county commissioners
3. The road crew

We might say that a good magician's "bag of tricks" includes work on these three groups.

### THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Most school teachers would give a lot if little Mary cared as much about geography as the average person cares about roads. Mary's interest (or lack of it) might be likened to a paper-wad hanging loosely on a rubber band. Not so with the users of our local roads. A certain rural resident has a car (this begins to tighten the rubber band). He

likes to drive along at a pretty good speed (more tension yet). He becomes annoyed with potholes, washboard and dust. His concern at this point can be likened to a paper-wad on a fully tensioned rubber band; and you can bet he'll release this tension somehow. Will he aim this concern at the real problem or will he pacify himself by aiming it at the county road supervisor? Part of our job is to direct this public concern toward a solution of our mutual road problems. But we have a problem in directing the interest of these road users. People are not only interested in roads; they tend to overestimate what they know. Where roads are concerned, opinion is cheap. Everyone is an expert.

Large corporations like General Motors or U. S. Steel have a director of public relations. Who's the director of public relations in a county road department? If anybody is to take the responsibility, I think it should be the county road supervisor. Why? Because he knows the most about roads.

I don't care how we reach the people. All of us have had opportunities and we've turned a lot of them down. Local church groups, lodges, or granges are a natural for teaching people more about roads and road problems. People are in a much better frame of mind than when they come in with a grievance. In fact, year round education will decrease the grievances. Two other outlets are the radio and newspaper. Most of us are afraid of microphones but I think that any road supervisor or commissioner (or perhaps their state association) could get free radio time. Newspapers realize that everyone is interested in roads, and even though they sometimes get their stories mixed up a little, they are a good channel to the people. The pipeline between us and the people is already built; all we need is the desire to pump road information through it. I believe that for every gallon of road information we send through one way, two gallons of public understanding will come back the other way.

For what they're worth, I'd like to offer a few suggestions for successful public education.

1. We have a tendency to overestimate what people know about roads. A legislator in our state, considered well informed in road matters, asked me why our local highway departments were building roads so wide (he was referring to a 16 foot gravel road). He asked me why we spent the time and money to straighten out sharp curves. I'm convinced that we must do more explaining of *why* we raise the grade line, *why* we slope the banks back, etc. This makes good sense to us but about all the average road user thinks about is a pavement.

2. Don't save your public relations efforts until the grievances come in. It's better to anticipate possible complaints and answer them before they are asked. It's pretty tough to convince a man with a chip on his shoulder.

3. We should recognize two basic human traits: curiosity and thrift. Can you walk by a "wet paint" sign without an urge to find out for yourself? To perhaps a lesser extent, people who drive on our roads everyday are interested in how they are built. These same people are interested in thrift—a feeling that they are getting a lot for their money. (What the housewife calls a bargain.) I've heard that there is no greater satisfaction in life than parking on what's left of the other fellow's nickel. *Let's make people realize that good roads are a good investment.*

4. The most frequent mistake when road men talk to other men is that we don't talk in terms the average person can understand. Sometimes we don't even talk in terms other road men can understand. Suppose I say "No. 1 stone"; what comes to your mind? Probably a base course stone about 2" size. A man from Ohio would immediately think of about a 3" stone. A New York State road man would immediately think of  $\frac{1}{2}$ " stone. If we can't understand each other, how can we expect one of our taxpayers or road users to understand what we're talking about? If we're describing how we built a particular road to a man who is not familiar with our state specifications, No. 1 means nothing. We all know what an inch is, though, and the term "two-inch stone" will mean something to everyone. If you loosely use the word "calcium," a school teacher may immediately think of less cavities in the children's teeth. If you refer to the use of calcium chloride in road work, make sure you explain that this chemical draws moisture from the air and the moisture reduces dusting on the roads. Sometimes when we talk about asphalt emulsions, we use the term MS-2. To me, a taxpayer, this sounds like some secret weapon. Why not remember to tell a layman that this brown stuff is simply a mixture of asphalt, soap, and water. In a nutshell, if people are going to know what we're talking about, we'll have to talk in terms they can understand.

5. I think that perhaps our biggest mistake in talking to the public is in our way of expressing highway costs. A dollar means something to me; it means something to you. We can go over town and go to the movies or buy a new tie. We have a feeling for what a dollar is worth. But yet, when you pick up the paper and read about a \$101-billion highway program, what's

your response? I just shrug my shoulder and say "that's sure a lot of money." \$101-billion doesn't mean much more to me than one billion, or a million for that matter; it doesn't stir much response because I have never seen a million dollars. In New York State, we have a state aid program for rebuilding our town highways. Depending on a town's ability to pay, the state participates in from 25% to 75% of the total cost, up to a maximum total cost of \$7,000 per mile. It will seem strange to you but when this program was first described in the newspapers, one taxpayer friend was quite flabbergasted at the \$7,000 per mile. He asked me if our highway superintendents were going to build concrete roads. I have concluded that to a man who doesn't have it, there's not much difference between \$7,000 and a million dollars.

During a day on the job or at the Road School, we toss around the figure \$10,000, almost like it was pin money. Yet when I go home at night, I'm apt to sit down to hamburger for supper. Why? Because it only costs 35 cents a pound. Some of you may be in the same boat. So let's remind ourselves that when someone sits down to read the paper after super and reads something about roads, he's in a "35 cents a pound" frame of mind and \$10,000 or even \$5,000 sounds like utter extravagance. And he's in the same frame of mind if you're the principal speaker after a potluck supper at the grange.

So, remember the man you're talking to. If you're talking to the local millionaire's club, go ahead and use millions, but if you're talking to people like me, pick something else. If you were explaining to me that a new expressway costs a million dollars per mile, I'd have a better understanding if you'd tell me that this million dollars would buy about 1.5 miles of brand new Chevrolets, parked bumper to bumper, everyone with radio and heater. I bought a car a few years ago and I'd have a good feeling for what you were talking about. If you're talking to the local boy scout troop, a new car doesn't mean much but just watch the eyes open up when you tell them that a mile of expressway is worth a line of brand new bicycles stretched from Lafayette almost half way to Indianapolis.

Another thing, the public doesn't appreciate where the maintenance dollar goes. If you tell a taxpayer that it costs \$350 per mile to maintain his road for one year, he may wonder where you're burying it. But suppose you were to ask him what his frontage is. Maybe he says, "500 feet." Suppose you were to tell him, "OK—I'll fire all my men, sell all the equipment and drive down your

road every morning in my pickup and put 9 cents in your mailbox. You pocket the money and then keep that 500 feet of road in shape the way you like it." Do you think you'd get any takers? I don't.

I've labored this point long enough. In dealing with the public, we should be ready and willing to teach, but remember to put things in terms the taxpayer can understand.

6. One last comment on our relations with the public, let's make sure that our teaching and road work is aimed to benefit all of the people in our county. It's natural for any of us in public life to listen a little bit more to the person who talks a lot. We've all heard the saying "The squeaking wheel gets the grease." That's hocus pocus not real magic. Good road supervising means taking the time to plan a work program that best serves our county as a whole.

Road complaints are much like assessment complaints. People aren't apt to get too disturbed because their road is rough; they're more apt to get disturbed if their road is rougher than the road by someone else's house. It's a relative matter and we should be able to explain to them why it is necessary to work on some roads before we have the opportunity to get to the others.

### THE COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Somewhat associated with taxpayer education is education of the county commissioners. Close as a county commissioner is to county affairs, he may not have much background and experience in road work and road problems. If we can liken the hazard of planning a road program to the hazard of a 60 mph trip by the county commissioners and the road supervisor down the Olympic bob-sled run at Lake Placid, who would you want to be steering? I'm quite sure that I'd put the road supervisor at the wheel, I'd put the chairman of the county commissioners at the brake, and I'd have the other two commissioners lean on the curves and add some weight. Too often, I think, the road supervisor is stuck somewhere in the middle of the sled.

When a board of county commissioners is considering road matters, how can we convince them that the road supervisor is more than a road foreman? How can a board of county commissioners learn more about roads? If a road supervisor wants them to learn more, he's going to have to do the teaching, and if he's going to show the way, he's going to need some facts. In your experience have you ever seen an argument settled by opinions? Not too often. We're going to need facts, facts like how much traffic uses that road, what does it cost to crush a yard of gravel, etc.

Another thing, does any member of your board of county commissioners ever make road commitments to the taxpayers? When someone out in the county talks to a commissioner about a culvert or some gravel in his driveway, does the commissioner say "I wish you'd talk to Joe, the road supervisor," or does he immediately sympathize with the need and say "I'm sure Joe will be able to do something about it." What kind of a spot does this leave the road supervisor in? If this ever happens, I think some education will help. If a taxpayer has a pending problem with a police officer or justice of the peace, does anyone else tamper with it and offer any promises?

### THE ROAD CREW

What is the attitude of your crew toward you, personally, and the county road work? I think that the best index may be a visit or a telephone call to the county garage when the road supervisor isn't around. I've never tried this in Indiana, but in my home state, I think it's a pretty valid index. You'd be surprised at the different responses you can get to the question—"Is Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in?" I know of some highway departments where this question is answered by a laborer or truck driver with "I'm sorry, he's out on \_\_\_\_\_ road and should be back about 4:30. Can I ask him to call you?" I know of another highway department where the response to the same question was "Naw, I don't know where the hell he is."

What does the difference in these responses indicate? Obviously, this second man doesn't have much respect for either the road supervisor or his work in the road department. We might say that he hasn't associated himself with the road department. This sort of attitude certainly hinders the amount and quality of work he performs but just think of what it can do to the public attitude toward the road department. To any caller, either in person or by telephone, who doesn't know you this man is the road department. To his neighbors or friends, many of whom may not know you, he is the road department. His attitude, good or bad, can easily infect theirs.

How can we improve the morale of the road department? You're probably thinking—give them all \$5 per hour. That would surely help. But isn't there more to it? I think there are three steps to better morale:

1. A living wage is essential.
2. Give them some responsibility.
3. Give them credit when jobs are well done.

Many of us hover over a job like a mother hen—all in good faith. "Pick up that stone over there." "Spot that load right here." "Grease that shovel tonight." If a man has the responsibility of picking stone, of spotting loads, or full responsibility for the welfare of the shovel,



he'll feel like more than a hired hand. I don't think anyone of us likes to feel like a hired hand. Most hired men have little responsibility and get little credit. I think that a satisfied road man has all the responsibility that he can handle and gets his full share of credit. We're too apt to say, "I built two miles of road last year." Where does this leave the men who helped us?

If a friend asks one of your men next summer, "What did you do today?" will he say, "I picked stone," or "I roosted on the grader all day," or will he have associated himself with the work enough to say with pride, "We finished up the last half mile of the county line road."

### IN BRIEF

This fall I was in a section of the world where road taxes were practically nil. Can't you just see some of our taxpayers' eyes light up? But I might add that there were also very few roads, many of them oxcart paths. After riding several hundred miles on oxcart paths, I've decided that regardless of where we live in this world, we get what we pay for.

I had a very frustrating experience in trying to learn a little bit about road practices and road problems in the interior of Brazil. Face to face with one of their road officials, we would draw pictures, point to a map, talk with our hands. There was practically no communication because he spoke Portuguese and I spoke English. I now have a lot of sympathy for any person who says "It's all Greek to me." Is your road program "Greek" to the taxpayers?

In Indiana, where we all speak English, there is no reason for a lack of understanding but we have a job to do. I think the public—and sometimes we—are apt to approach our road problems like a brand new baby. When we first bring a baby home, he sleeps a lot. When he is uncomfortable and needs something, he gets all red and flails his arms and legs in random behavior. *But* in a few months, the baby knows how to get what he needs without much waste motion. When it comes to a solution to local road problems, the taxpayers, I'm afraid, are still getting red and flailing their arms and legs. They must be led to understand that the only way to get the roads we need is to pay for them. Who has to get this across to them? We do!

I've perhaps wandered too much in making these points but I think that I can summarize in two sentences. Improving the understanding and attitudes of the public can, I believe, make road supervising a more satisfying job and, in time make available more of the needed funds for local road work. We should consider three needed areas for improving the understanding of road problems: 1) the general public, 2) the county commissioners, and 3) the road crew.