

HIGHWAY POST-WAR PLANNING

PYKE JOHNSON

President, Automotive Safety Foundation

We meet today in a period of great crisis.

In all areas of the globe our country is waist-deep in conflict; and before the war is won, the currents of war may swirl still faster.

That the Allies will win, none can doubt who read the daily stories of the gallantry of our men abroad and the miracles of production at home. The going may be grim, but there will be no faltering until the goal is achieved.

For so long as the test of arms may endure, all of our actions must be geared to that single job. But we cannot forget that when the war is done, we must be ready on every front to provide for the returning men, our sons, brothers, and friends.

The controls that have been necessary in all walks of life to pull us down to essential consumption have given us a breathing spell in life at home which should be used to appraise the civilian needs of the future and to prepare for their fulfillment.

Transportation Vital Key to Future

As we attempt to scan the future, it seems clear enough that much of our ability to provide ourselves physically with an ever-developing way of living rests upon our transportation facilities.

In a modern society, science has provided limitless opportunity for movement in the airplane, the railroad, the waterway, and the motor vehicle. The tools are at hand for a fusion of city and country life far beyond anything known to kings half a century ago. The problem which remains is one of how best to avail ourselves of this opportunity through the possession of safe, efficient facilities for the use of transportation vehicles.

Perhaps in no single field has so much been done as in that of highway construction and maintenance. And yet, all that has been accomplished thus far is but a prelude. The job is still ahead. In the last analysis, its doing depends upon the vision of the public officials in all divisions of government, upon whose shoulders rests the responsibility for carrying on. Obviously these public officials—you men here today—must be backed by an informed public opinion.

Federal Highway Policy Now Set

As 1944 came to a close, the Federal government met its highway responsibilities with the passage of a law that sets the future Federal highway policy. Characterized as a notable milestone in highway development by a truly great highway official, Thomas H. MacDonald, Commissioner of the Public Roads Administration for the last 25 years, this act provides a framework within which he expects the highway achievements of the nation will be hammered out for the next 25 years.

What is this law? What are the provisions which deserve such praise? What are the obligations which it imposes upon the federal, state, county, and city authorities? What does it mean to the future of the nation?

A discussion of the background against which the action was taken, the principles adopted, the substantive clauses of the bill itself, gives preliminary answers to all these questions.

Law, Challenge to Authorities Everywhere

No final answer can be given until public officials everywhere have tested and proved its provisions, for this law is no mandate from Washington. Instead, it is a challenge to state, county, and local authorities to assume their responsibilities in providing the people of their own communities with those facilities which they demand and for which they already are paying.

Look first at the general philosophy back of the measure as paraphrased from the report of Congressman Robinson, chairman of the Roads Committee of the House, concurred in by Senator Hayden, who sponsored the measure in the upper chamber:

1. This is no WPA law. Its authorization of one-half billion dollars annually for the first three years after the war rests upon highway transportation needs as testified to by officials from every state in the Union. Employment will flow from it, but it will be employment based upon a useful job which will add to the capital wealth of the nation, not upon "leaf-raking."

2. The law retains all the safe-guarding provisions of the original Federal Aid Act, under which the states must initiate all projects. There is left to the Federal government only that veto power which is necessary to insure that Federal funds shall be employed only on such roads and in such manner as necessary to protect the interest of the nation in highway development as expressed in terms of the law. The state remains the point of contact with the Federal government.

3. The law is a practical expression of the fact that there is a national interest in the development of safe and efficient highway transportation for all segments of the economy, whereas, in the past, large parts of our population have been denied direct participation in Federal funds.

4. The right of private contract construction under competitive bidding—free enterprise—is maintained.

Thus, none can say truthfully that this is a "grab for power" by Washington, or that it is a "spenders" law, or that it imposes anything upon the states which their citizens through their public officials do not expressly say that they want. Nor can it be looked upon as a "pork barrel" device, since all areas participate on the basis of an apportionment formula in the law.

Important Additions in Principle

On the substantive side of the law, the most important additions in principle are these:

1. For the first time, Federal funds are set aside for direct use in the construction of main highways within urban areas, thus recognizing the fact that these thoroughfares are essential links in interstate roads.

2. Similar recognition is given to the need for a system of secondary roads, which are defined as roads in rural areas, including farm-to-market roads, routes used by school buses and for the transportation of mail.

Interregional System Authorized

1. An interregional system of highways is authorized to consist of not more than 40,000 miles of the principal highways of the United States, which shall connect and traverse principal centers of population; but designation is left to the state authorities in consultation with the PRA.

The report of the Interregional Highway Committee, upon whose study this legislation is based, estimated that such roads would comprise about one per cent of the highways of the country but, when improved, would carry 20 per cent of the nation's highway traffic. Because of that single fact, coupled with the necessity for providing the nation with an adequate highway system for the national defense, the Committee recommended that the standards of such roads should be higher than those in effect upon any existing system, envisaging limited access and divided highways wherever required by traffic volumes.

2. Participation by the Federal government in the cost of rights-of-way is agreed to, and the PRA is authorized to join in up to one-third of the cost in such undertakings under the state programs.

3. Coordination between air and highway authorities is required in the future location and construction of highways serving airports.

4. The PRA is authorized to approve uniform signals, signs, and markings on federal-aid highways in the interest of safety.

Anti-Diversion Stand Reaffirmed

Fresh treatment of subjects already within the law is found in clauses which (a) reaffirm the opposition of Congress to the diversion of motor vehicle revenues to other than highway purposes; (b) make available up to 10 per cent of the total funds for railroad-highway grade separations, under new definitions of benefits; and (c) modify the traditional formula for apportionment of funds.

Whereas in the past all allocations were on a basis of one-third population, one-third area, and one-third road mileage, now the \$225,000,000 set aside for expenditure on the primary system is the only amount so apportioned.

In the case of the secondary rural system, to which \$150,000,000 is allocated, apportionment is based equally on factors of rural population, state area, and rural mail delivery routes. The apportionment of the \$125,000,000 set aside for use in urban areas is based on the percentage relationship each urban area of 5,000 or more bears to the total population in all such areas in the United States.

Stepped-up expenditures by the Federal Government for roads wholly within nationally-held lands are a continuing feature of the legislation.

Each State Must Handle Own Problems

From the point of view of the state legislators and state, county, and city administrators, passage of this law raises a series of questions as to what each must do to qualify for participation in the funds made available by the Act.

These are not questions for an outsider. Outsiders should not and cannot answer them. They can be dealt with only by residents who know the status of the state law; and you have on this program the one man best qualified to discuss them—Samuel C. Hadden, whose high statesmanship as chairman of your state commission contributed much to the enactment of the Federal law, as it has to highway development in Indiana.

Standing off to one side and looking at the measure through the eyes of a citizen who hopes to benefit from use of these highways, I shall make a number of observations which perhaps will add something of value to this discussion.

Pressing Need for Safe Roads

First among public considerations I place the pressing need for safe and efficient roads for use by the millions who will be found on them every day.

In the past, there has been too much tendency to weigh the question of whether we can afford safe roads on the immediate issue of their direct cost. We have tended to forget that every death, every casualty on the highway, every hospitalization case, every family thrown upon the community by loss of a breadwinner, must be measured into the total cost of highway travel.

Nor can we hope to cure these conditions by statutes designed to repress traffic movement, as Sidney Williams of the National Safety Council has so well pointed out. The true cure, he finds, remains with "built-in safety," which is defined as roads built to meet the standards of modern traffic where traffic conditions require them. Not to every farm house, of course, but at least upon those major highways which will pay for themselves and more in traffic dividends of safe and efficient volume movement.

Future National Defense Requires New Standards

Second only in manner of statement is the need which this war has borne in upon us for adequate defense in case of future national emergency.

Without the highway system we have today, without the millions of trucks and cars plying our roads, the railroad and waterways could not have done the war job they have done; indeed, the war plants, dependent as most of them are upon motor transportation for their workers and much of their material, could not have produced the needed finished products.

Yet, it is a fact, adequately documented in the records of every state highway department, that we still have only a few hundred miles of the 40,000 miles of Interstate System roads built to the standards which will be necessary to link centers of population and production safely and efficiently.

True, a great job, the greatest of all highway jobs, has been done; but never yet have the highway engineers had the funds necessary to the development of a modern interregional system designed to care for a safe and efficient movement of the trillions of car miles which our post-war roads must carry in their pavement lifetime—designed for an essential peace, but able to meet the test of war.

Likewise, it can be said that we have not yet gotten down to the job which finally remains, that of providing all-weather roads for all our rural population. In fact, only one state thus far—Iowa—has even publicly proclaimed its intention to give that kind of service to all its population.

Only Now Approaching Urban Problems

And when we turn to that other important phase of the modern problem, largest when measured in terms of cost, we have only just made the faint beginnings of an approach to the urban transportation situation.

Just as we have overlooked accident costs in the country, so we have tended to forget congestion costs in the centers of population. We have forgotten that congestion is as serious a disease in the life-stream of a community as is lack of circulation of the blood to the human system.

Real estate values cannot survive if the public cannot get to the land. Blighted areas in the heart of every great center bear mute testimony to the fact. Assessable values, we are told, have declined 25 per cent in our cities. Yet these same areas, municipal authorities say, cost enormous sums to the public in pro-health and anti-crime enforcement.

From every point of view, we must get at the job of redeveloping our urban areas. Everywhere planners and engineers are joining in saying that the core of that undertaking is the provision of modern transportation facilities which will take into account the vehicle not only in movement but at rest as well.

These comments hint in broad outline at the complexity of the undertaking ahead, just as in more concrete detail the provisions of the new Federal Aid highway law set down the part which the national government is prepared to play in its fulfillment.

The part which still remains to be determined is what the state, county, and local officials are prepared to do about it once their legislatures have passed such enabling legislation as may be necessary to qualify their states for participation in the Federal funds.

Selection of Roads Important Step

First of all, of course, comes the task of selecting those roads which should be designated for each of the systems mentioned, as well as the priority and degree of improvement which may be needed to bring them to safe, efficient modern standards of use.

Obviously, there are involved at once large questions of fact. Fortunately, the foresight of the Federal and state officials in joining years ago in detailed rural highway planning surveys has eliminated much of the error of guessing and the waste of political log-rolling which otherwise would face us.

The rural traffic studies, supplemented by new origin-destination surveys in cities, show where the traffic wants to go, its origin and its volume, whether in the congested areas of the city or in the outermost rural regions.

New Relations Set Up Between Officials

Second, there is the great need for a new and more intimate co-operation between public officials in all the countless jurisdictions into which our political units are subdivided.

Usually this is possible of quick attainment, for this is a job wherein men of good will and knowledge can quickly come together. But when difficulties arise, then behind these forces there is another which is supreme, the force of an informed public opinion that must be concerned with all decisions as never before, because upon the wisdom of these decisions depend the life and happiness both of whole communities and of all those individuals who comprise the body politic of the state.

Last in the sequence, but also determinative in its character, is the question of how these undertakings shall be financed.

Actually, in so far as the single question of matching the Federal funds is concerned, the problem is a relatively simple one in practically all the states. In the past, Federal Aid has never been more than 11 per cent of a highway budget, which was running at two billion dollars annually when the war closed in.

Motor Funds Supply Large Part of Answer

Even if we can assume that Federal Aid is to play a larger part in the future, the enormous sums which are annually supplied by highway transportation in the form of special motor vehicle revenues constitute a large share of the answer to the problem, particularly if the Federal admonition is heeded and motor funds are conserved as they should be in all equity for the road purposes for which they were voted.

But beyond the considerations of motor vehicle revenue arise other questions which have already been noted in part in this talk.

Safety is a factor in every insurance cost, which concerns each of us directly. Realty values are a matter of consequence to every landholder, be he farmer or downtown businessman. The costs of crime have their definite place in every city budget. Accessibility of home to place of work can be measured in terms of time.

Roads Essential to Modern Living Standards

Let me give you a concrete example of what I am talking about.

Outside of Washington beyond the Pentagon development are two communities that did not exist two years ago, but that today give modern homes to 20,000 people.

One of these communities was built by an insurance company; the other by the government. Both offer attractive homes away from the through stream of traffic, with circular service roads to each cluster of homes which provide parking—with freedom again from through traffic. Modern shopping centers serve them. Schools and recreational areas provide places for education and safe playgrounds for the children.

Two years ago, the land upon which they stand was green and idle. To that area the government built a modern limited-access highway with divided lanes of travel and service roads fed into the main stream by overhead circular highways.

The realty development followed at a cost of 46 million, including community services. The highway cost less than 1.7 million, or less than 4 per cent of the total cost of the development. Today, the people who live in that area have modern facilities at relatively low costs and yet are but a brief ten minutes from the heart of Washington, and at the most not more than fifteen minutes from their places of work.

In such developments, which are just beginning in other areas throughout the country, we begin to see the outline of a new way of living for the people of the country. What was done outside a city can and should be done also for home owners within the heart of urban areas.

Benefits Not Limited to One Class

To the cost, motor vehicle funds can be applied and will be; but who will say that the benefits are limited to the owners of motor vehicles? Who can say that the costs should all be assessed against a class when a whole way of living is at stake, as well as our national security?

The answer, it seems to me, rests in a full understanding by the public of what modern highway transportation facilities mean in terms of individual safety, efficient movement, and those higher standards of living that can only be realized as each of us is given an opportunity to share the privileges of farm and city life without having to bear for the future all the drawbacks that both have had in the past.

The realization of this kind of program is not something that can be accomplished by the waving of a wand. To do it, there is required careful planning, engineering, blueprinting and years of labor backed by sound, statesmanlike, over-all administration and financing.

Every Public Official Has Important Part

More than anything, perhaps, is required a knowledge by every public official involved that his job is an important part in a larger whole which can only be realized as he is ready to co-operate with the other fellow.

Congress has set the Federal policy and directed the Public Roads Administration to do its part in co-operating with you.

From here out, the job rests with you.

That it will be well done is best attested by the record of the past, and the sound beginnings you have made on postwar preparations.