

# Public Relations for Road Work

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Today almost every one of the 92 counties in Indiana has a serious problem in getting the county highway systems back to where they were before the war, and then keeping them there. Roads have been war casualties just like other kinds of businesses, with not enough men, money, and materials to do the job that every road man knew should be done and wanted to do.

The same situation has prevailed in the state system: a shortage of men, materials, and money for keeping up with traffic needs by way of construction and maintenance.

As a dyed-in-the-wool Hoosier and a constant booster for our Indiana road systems, both state and county, I've stuck my neck out many times in supporting the work that you men have done and are doing. I've made the statement often that Indiana gets as much or more for its highway dollar than any other state. We do not need to take our hats off to any state.

We've heard much about the need for money to finance road and street programs. A measure is now pending in the Indiana legislature to increase the gasoline tax, another to increase truck license fees, and other legislation is proposed to provide funds for financing roads. This program includes a proposal to repeal the moratorium imposed in 1932 on county road bonds in Indiana and also another proposal for a direct property tax for construction and maintenance of county roads. Then there is a movement to bring up to date the method for financing city street improvements.

All such issues naturally are controversial and it is impossible to forecast the action of the legislature on any of them. But they all point toward the very definite need for more road and street funds.

## AN INTELLIGENT PUBLIC RELATIONS PROGRAM

Now, this brings us immediately to the part an intelligent public relations program can play in obtaining public support for anything that

road and street men need, such as the present dire need for increased funds. There is little question that the public would support any or all of these legislative measures had the public been told over a period of years the story of Indiana roads and streets, and the problems in their construction and maintenance. By the general public, I mean everyone in every community.

In some counties the story has been told and told well; in others, not so well; and in others, hardly at all; which all adds up to the fact that the public relations program concerning roads is as varied as the colors in Joseph's coat. I presume that our state is average from this standpoint, but I hope that as a result of this discussion we will get busy on this idea of informing our own people about our roads, day in and day out, and that we'll be well above the average on this score in the years ahead.

Relatively few people know that this state has, roughly, 83,000 miles of roads, county and state, of which all but 11,000 miles are improved—something better than a dirt surface. Likewise, relatively few people know that through the years we have been spending something like \$30,000,000 a year on roads in this state (both state and county systems). Road business in Indiana has stood second in the matter of public expenditures for many years, being exceeded only by education, which has used between \$60,000,000 and \$70,000,000 a year. This is what we would expect under our democratic form of government, of which education is the backbone.

Road building and maintenance in Indiana is of tremendous interest and value to every taxpayer. As a stockholder in the roads, he is entitled to know what his business costs, what it produces financially and in satisfaction for himself and family. You men not only have the opportunity, but also a duty as public officials to tell him about the business which you are in charge of. It's his money as well as your own that is being used, and the tasks you perform are for him and all the people.

When we think of public relations, we think of newspapers and radio as the tools most readily available. They are, and will produce for you the greatest results of any agencies in informing the public of what you are doing and planning to do.

#### COMMENTS FROM NEWSPAPER EDITORS

When Ben Petty asked me to talk on public relations, at the suggestion of the program committee, I immediately thought of newspapers. Although I was an editor some years ago, I decided to write ten

representative editors of the state and ask them what information they were getting from our roadmen, and what they thought of the public relations program for Indiana's great network of highways. Everything was fine with some of them in the matter of highway publicity. With some of the others, it wasn't so "hot". But let the editors tell their stories:

From a small-town editor in central Indiana:

Insofar as the city is concerned, the Mayor is my source of information and he is very cooperative.

In county matters, we get the information if we see something going on, and go down or phone the superintendent and ask what is being done.

In matters concerning the state system, we get the regular hand-outs from the Indianapolis office, but there is no volunteer information coming from the district office. On a few occasions when I have called and asked about a specific thing, after a certain amount of buck-passing, I get the information I seek. This makes me think that the primary reason for the situation is that no one is specifically delegated to the task of informing the papers and through them the people.

The state and county men don't object to giving information, but they never volunteer anything. As a result, they miss a lot of good publicity, and we miss entirely or are slow on quite a few interesting items. Our road men just don't have a nose for news.

It seems to me that the public would be a good deal more satisfied that they are getting their money's worth for the considerable sums being spent if they had a running account of projects planned, work being started, progress, miles of black top, oil mat, yards of gravel being used, bridges repaired or to be repaired, etc.

His last paragraph offers ideas that every road man can follow, and every county or district office can use.

This from a southwestern Indiana daily editor, a good live wire, with years of experience:

We have had the best of cooperation with all the highway departments, state, county and city. We have a district highway office, and it is always a source for yarns on a dull day. We watch the county roads through the county commissioners, but the superintendents are always helpful.

We probably have good cooperation because we have a good, veteran editorial staff. It's a matter of educating your news sources. When officials are cagey about talking it's generally because they haven't confidence in the reporter or they don't like the newspaper.

Perhaps some of you have been cagey in your dealings with the press from past experiences that haven't been too pleasant.

Here is what a good, live weekly editor in northwestern Indiana says:

The county highway superintendent, surveyor, street commissioner and others are all for publicity but say, "You fix it up." This we are glad to do, but naturally I know very little about roads, bridges, street crossings, fills, new projects and the like. Most of the information we get in this field comes from the county auditor when he must advertise for bids."

And this is from the city editor of one of the larger papers in the state outside of Indianapolis:

Highway supervisors, both county and state, street commissioners and county surveyors could get better newspaper coverage with a little more cooperation. Here they are nice enough to work with in that they will answer all your questions, but seldom do they volunteer any information or tip us off to stories. In a nutshell, they don't seem to be newsminded or realize the value of publicity.

This is a sentence or two from a southeastern Indiana publisher of a good daily paper:

A lot of times county highway authorities could help themselves a lot by giving stories about roads being blocked for improvements, etc., and particularly about driving over highways with heavy loads when spring comes. The public is interested in roads.

A good live managing editor in a fair-sized city in the north end of the state says this:

Frankly, the county highway department is poor in its public relations. One reason is the location of the garage. Reporters do not call there regularly. The highway superintendent is busy in the county daily, but he never volunteers any stories, and when we ask him about something he usually refers to the commissioners.

The county surveyor and claim clerk, alert to news matter, often supply missing information, this man reports, and adds that the city street department is a good source of news and that the commissioner occasionally suggests a story. The highway district office yields little, if anything, according to this editor.

Now to gladden your hearts a bit, here is what an eastern Indiana editor reports about one of your members who may blush a little at the bouquets:

County Highway Superintendent Ernest Coffin keeps this newspaper well supplied with information concerning improvements underway contemplated, needed, and completed. This type of information makes good reading and people are interested in it.

He realizes too that the newspaper is particularly interested in time of floods, deep snow and high winds, in being able to tell its readers the roads that may be blocked and the approximate time they will be opened.

As a newspaper we can rely on Coffin to gather this information, and be ready to give it to us when we call. In winter, when snow is falling, he often will call and say that if the snow continues, certain roads are liable to be blocked by the next morning. This is the kind of cooperation which helps the newspaper and keeps the public aware that their highway supervisor is "on the ball."

These quotes I have just given indicate the variety of public relations that exist throughout the state, as I tried to get a cross section of counties typical of the state, small towns, small cities, and medium and large cities.

#### YOU ARE THE SOURCE OF PUBLICITY

But they do bring out certain fundamental facts that I shall mention: first, that you will get publicity if you give the news or information of which you are the source to your newspapers. Usually those stories will be handled carefully and will be reasonably correct. When you have plans completed for a repair project or new construction, or contracts are to be let or are let, see that the reports get to the paper promptly, the same day and early in the day, if the paper is a daily, or early in the week if it is a weekly.

You are the source of news; and it is up to you, whether you are a road superintendent, a surveyor, a commissioner, or whatever your position, to see that the news of what you are doing gets to the public. This is your best publicity. News will be published and will help acquaint your constituents with what you are doing. Know your editors and work with them. Don't be afraid to discuss your problems with your editor or publisher. If you are making a trip over your county roads, perhaps with Ben Petty or possibly with a representative of the state highway staff, invite the editor to go along or send someone. They'll like it and will get a good first-hand story—tell the story of your roads. That's what you want.

I would make it a point to discuss with your local editors or publishers your spring and summer program. Take the tip offered by the editors whose letters I have just read in part. Warn of heavy loads when the frost is going out, and until the roads are settled and able to take it. Tell what is planned in the way of bridge repair, what bridges, estimates of cost, etc. Tell what road improvements are contemplated, what roads, mileage, costs, etc., when contracts are to be let; then when bids are opened and contracts awarded, see that it gets to the newspapers at once.

Let's not overlook the opportunity to tell the story of our roads to the local luncheon clubs—how many miles in your county, what it costs

a year to maintain them, what you should have to do the job the way it should be done and the way they want it done, what you need in the way of equipment over and above what you have. In other words, tell the story of your work.

This applies to the state the same as to the county or the city. People want to know the story, and the solid facts that you can put out will pay dividends in a better road program than we have ever had before.

I have not mentioned radio. There are 25 radio stations in the state, and more are coming. Those of you who have radio stations in your city may not be Kaltenborns, Gabriel Heatters, or Bing Crosbys, but you often could get news about your roads on your local radio station with occasional roundtable discussions or brief talks on your highway problems. If you use these channels of publicity, your friends and neighbors will know much more than they know now about roads and the tough problems you men encounter day in and day out.

I've mentioned only a few things that offer suggestions in helping your public relations programs. There are countless others, but it is essential that you think of things in which the public is interested or will be interested, besides the swath cut by your mowers or graders. You'll cut a much bigger swath with the public if you do take to heart some of these tips.