

County Transportation Planning Present and Future

PAUL T. VERMILLION
Engineer of Long-Range Planning
Indiana State Highway Commission

State and Federal Planning Acts

The Indiana General Assembly in 1921, enacted two bills; one provided authorization to cities to establish zoning ordinances and to prepare a comprehensive plan. The other act allowed subdivision control five miles beyond the city limits. These two acts, as amended from time to time, plus a brief county planning and zoning act passed in 1935, formed the basis for planning in Indiana until 1947. By 1945, public acceptance of local planning as an important design tool in shaping community growth and prosperity was emphasized by the existence of 120 community planning agencies throughout the state.

At the national level the Hayden-Cartwright Act of 1934 authorized the expenditure of federal-aid funds for long range highway planning purposes, broadly including both urban and rural areas. The early results of the highway planning surveys inaugurated under the authority of that act formed the basis of the reports, *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, in 1939; and *Interregional Highways* in 1941.

Also in 1941, the Federal Aid Highway Act authorized advanced engineering surveys and plans for future development of the highways and by-passes around the extension into and through urban areas. This led to the establishment of a separate urban highway division in the Washington Office of Public Roads.

The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1944 first ear-marked federal funds for construction expenditure exclusively in urban areas.

Against this background of national legislation and the earlier planning and zoning activity in Indiana, the General Assembly passed the "Planning Act of 1947". This has served as the basis for almost all the organized planning activity in Indiana since that time. A few of the larger areas in the state have special authority, but with few exceptions, the county or city plan commissions are a result of local action under this permissive legislation.

This act gives the city council, the town board of trustees, and the board of county commissioners authority to create a plan commission.

The plan commissions are to act in an advisory capacity and in this connection, local legislative bodies are given certain regulatory powers to carry out the purpose of the act. Zoning is probably the best known of these regulatory powers but there are a number of others commonly used throughout the State such as set-back lines, subdivision ordinances, etc. Plan commissions exist in nearly all of the larger counties and in all the larger cities of Indiana. Some have proven more effective than others but the tools for planning, including county transportation planning, are at hand. The secret is motivation. The advantages of planning should motivate the plan commission members to prepare a master plan—the heart of community planning. When the plan has been prepared, it should be adopted by the legislative and administrative bodies of government in the county.

A transportation plan, called a *thoroughfare* plan in most instances, is a key part of the master plan. It is the recommendation of the plan commission to best serve the present and future needs of the community. It remains only a plan, however, until it is adopted by (in this case) the county commissioners and implemented, by programming and scheduling the most urgent needs, followed with a *long-range improvement program*.

There have been other planning laws passed by the General Assembly. In 1953, metropolitan plan commissions were authorized for counties within a specified population range to allow city and county cooperation.

A special law for metropolitan planning in counties with first class cities, Marion County and Indianapolis, was passed by the General Assembly in 1955.

In 1957 a general law was passed to authorize cooperative planning under the style of area planning departments.

Also in 1957, a general law to facilitate interlocal cooperation in any functional area was passed.

The Sagamore Conference

In 1958, at Syracuse University's Sagamore Conference Center, a meeting was held that is now known as the "Sagamore Conference" and is also referred to as the "National Conference on Highways and Urban Development". One of the results of that meeting was the establishment of a special committee by the American Association of State Highway Officials whose purpose was to develop a program to inform highway officials on problems of urban growth and development.

One of the results of the "Sagamore Conference" was the adoption of a policy statement which has had the support of state, city and county

officials generally and has served as the basis for much of the recent national planning and highway legislation. This statement carefully stated the areas of responsibility which the state and local governmental agencies should serve, for example:

1. Local government should fulfill their primary responsibility for community planning to insure maximum benefits to the local area.
2. Local governments, in fulfilling their responsibility, should prepare a comprehensive plan for the physical development of the community embracing a land use plan, a transportation plan including public transit, and a program of land use controls. To achieve this objective, urban areas should have competent and continuing planning service.
3. Regional planning should be initiated in every metropolitan area.
4. Local governments should consult regularly with the state highway department in the preparation of comprehensive plans for urban areas.
5. If legislation is lacking to enable proper planning on a local, metropolitan or regional basis, the state and local governments should work jointly to have such legislation enacted.

Much of the thinking which went into this conference is reflected in the emphasis given planning, particularly in the larger urban areas of the country, by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962. This act states, in part:

“After July 1, 1965, the secretary shall not approve any program for projects in urban areas of more than 50,000 population unless he finds that such projects are based on a continuing comprehensive transportation process carried on cooperatively by states and local communities in conformance with the objectives stated in this section.”

State and Local Transportation Planning

Each board of county commissioners in the State received a letter from Governor Welsh dated September 25, 1962. The State Highway Commission, as a part of the Executive Branch of State Government, has been guided in its relationship with local communities by the policy outlined in the letter. The letter begins,

“As you know, during the past 18 months the Indiana State Highway Commission has sought, through every means at its disposal, to work in close cooperation with the elected officials and the general public in each community throughout the State. It is our

belief that enough progress has been made in this direction to indicate that the communities of Indiana should be consulted more closely and have a more direct part in the Highway Commission's construction and maintenance program planning process.

"To this end, I am requesting that you develop a 15-year road program for your area. I suggest that you may want to consult with, or even form a committee of, representatives of various groups and organizations vitally concerned with roads, so that the program you develop will have the broadest possible base of public acceptance.

"I suggest further that, in consultation with members of your community, you develop a list of projects *in order of priority* so that the State may be informed fully and officially of the future road needs of your community and adjust its planning accordingly.

"As you recognize, I am sure, this will permit the State Highway Commission to program more equitable road and bridge construction in the various areas of the State.

"You will want to consult with specialists in the State Highway Commission before you complete your plans. I have instructed them to work cooperatively with you, furnishing you the results of their experience and studies of needs in your area. In addition, I suggest that your comprehensive road program should include not only those traffic arteries which the State constructs and maintains, but purely local roads and bridges as well. In this way, there will be realized a truly comprehensive and integrated program of county, city and State roads to serve better the needs of the motoring public.

"It is my hope that through the development of such a program, with local communities and their leaders taking the initiative and with local interest groups consulted fully, the State's highway program in future years can become far better integrated with local needs, desires and planning than has been possible in the past. It is imperative that the state become fully aware of community planning and its effect on possible road locations.

"It is my earnest desire, and I believe it will be the desire of governors to follow me, that the State Highway Commission work even more closely and harmoniously with communities throughout the entire State.

"I trust that you share with me approval of this State Highway Commission program for cooperation with your community. It is my hope that in the relatively near future you will be able to formulate your proposed comprehensive plan which may then become the basis for the development of a more formal agreement between

the State Highway Commission and your community, involving the establishment of an over-all road program.”

Disregarding the metropolitan areas of greater than 50,000 population, how many cities, towns and counties have formed some type of transportation planning group as a result of Governor Welsh's suggestion? The number that have asked for State Highway Planning Department participation are: Cass, Elkhart, Blackford, Henry and Wabash Counties. The following city-county coordination transportation planning groups meet with a State Highway Planning Department representative: Valparaiso and Porter County, Bloomington and Monroe County, Kokomo and Howard County, Lafayette and Tippecanoe County.

What has been accomplished pertaining to transportation? The writer's experience has been with county transportation committees only, but discussions with colleagues, in highway planning, have revealed a startling fact. As this time, it appears that not a single county-wide, or city-wide long-range street or road improvement program has been adopted or even prepared. The statement is not meant to be entirely critical and may be in error. Progress, however, has been made. When a group of citizens and diversified governmental offices are drawn together to consider community needs, some common ground must be determined. Common ground cannot be found until communications are free and easy between individuals and governmental units. Communication cannot be free and easy until the other person's problem and scope of activities and responsibilities are recognized. One of the first things to be gained from cooperation of interested people in a study of transportation needs is a broadening knowledge and concept of present traffic situations. Now there is a common ground; communication plus basic traffic data.

Long-Range Plans for Counties Urged

The long-range planning of county highway improvements has many advantages. One of the most important advantages to the county commissioner, as an individual, is the simplification of his job. If a long-range program is adopted by the county commissioners, making due allowance for emergencies and special unforeseen situations, it makes their administration of the highway department a great deal easier. It gives a ready answer to the sometimes justified and sometimes crank calls from individuals with pet projects. If the county commissioner can say that the county highway program has been laid out on a long-term basis to make the best use of the limited amount of money that is available and that those roads, because of use or condition, which show

the greatest need have the highest priority—then it is much easier for the county commissioner to say “no” now and still leave hope for next year or the year after. A sound highway plan will do a better job and let the commissioner give more attention to his hundreds of other responsibilities.

It is also pertinent to discuss the interpretation that so many county and city people made in regards to Governor Welsh’s suggestion that they develop, with improvement priorities, a 15-year road program. The Governor stated, further, “I suggest that your comprehensive road program should include not only those traffic arteries which the State constructs and maintains, *but purely local roads and bridges as well.* Although many communities and many counties have prepared and submitted to the State Highway Planning Division a recommended system of arterial streets and highways, not a single county, to my knowledge, has prepared a short- or long-range road improvement program, with a schedule of priorities, and informed the State Highway Commission that certain county roads and bridges would be upgraded during a two-year, five-year or 15-year period. However, improvement priorities involving only the State Highway Commission budget have been certified by local planners.

What does the State Highway Commission need, what do they hope to receive from the local level regarding transportation facilities? First consider, briefly, the State Highway Commission’s responsibilities, as established by an act of the General Assembly in 1957, and amended by the legislature in 1959. This act is entitled, “An Act Providing for Planning and Programming of the Construction of Highways Under the Jurisdiction of The State Highway Department of Indiana.” The act provides that:

“The State Highway Department of Indiana shall prepare, formally adopt and publish a long-range program of its future activities with regard to the construction of highways under its jurisdiction. The sufficiency rating principle shall be applied as far as it is practical, in determining the projects to be included in the long-range construction program and may be applied by districts. The long-range program shall contain an estimate of revenues which will become available during that period and a statement of intention with respect to the construction and other related work to be done insofar as it is possible to make such estimates. The Department shall cause a periodic reinspection of the system of roads under its jurisdiction to be made in order to revise its estimates of future needs to conform to the actual physical and service condition of the highways

from time to time. The long-range plan, in addition to the information specifically required by this section, may also contain such other information as will enable the public to have the most complete understanding of the needs of the State Highway system. Before June 30, 1960, and annually thereafter, the Department shall adopt from its long-range plan and publish a plan of construction to be accomplished within the following two fiscal years. This biennial plan shall consist of a list of projects listed in order of urgency."

What the highway department needs and hopes to receive from the local level is transportation data based and prepared, at least, with the intent of this act in mind. With knowledge of road and bridge improvement programming from the local level, the State Highway Department programming and scheduling will recognize, integrate and compliment local planning in all its many facets.

In large urban areas with high population density, the problem is very complex, usually encompassing several State routes and a large number of local arteries involving a maze of collector-distributor systems. This situation requires close cooperation between all agencies concerned, and is well defined in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1962.

Recommendations for Long-Range Plans

The advantages of planning have been recognized on the national and State level as evidenced by the legislation outlined. There was other legislation, not related directly to plan commissions, but rather to the operation of county highway departments. The operation of county highway departments received a great deal of attention from the Indiana Highway Study Committee which was created by the General Assembly to recommend action in the highway field to the 1963 Indiana Legislature. In this committee's report, it made four basic recommendations. Three of these referred to the need for improvements of long-range planning by county highway departments. In the formulation of road policy and road programs the committee recommends:

- (a) That the authority for county road policy, as presently constituted with the boards of county commissioners, is basically a sound and effective procedure for the administration of local road programs.
- (b) That *long-range county road programs* be developed to the end that continuity of road improvements produce integrated and efficient county road systems, satisfying the counties local highway transportation needs at the lowest cost.

- (c) That the boards of county commissioners avail themselves of the necessary technical staff (engineering and clerical) to gather basic planning information such as traffic, soils, design standards, and road costs, required in *the formulation of long-range road policy and programs*.
- (d) That the overall legal framework of county highway administration be adjusted to remove the restrictions that otherwise hinder the *effective formulation of long-range county road policy and programs*. The committee believes that providing the boards of county commissioners with a uniform, 4-year straight-term and with direct supervision of the road funds will greatly improve the formulation of county road policy and programs.

Summary

How can small towns and rural counties contribute to a state wide solution of future transportation needs? They should inform the Indiana State Highway Commission of their hopes and dreams for economic growth as to where they propose to promote local expansion. They should bring actuality to dreams with a priority transportation improvement program accepted locally and endorsed by local responsible officials. This is the certification needed by the State Highway Commission. The future is a mutual responsibility.