

State Highway, Past, Present, Future

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INTRODUCTION

Sometimes when thinking about the direction in which we might be headed, it is logical to think first about where we came from and how we got here. I have had the opportunity recently to review some material presented at the 16th Annual Road School. The Section was titled "Some Impressions of a New Highway Commissioner," by Col. A. P. Melton, Member, ISHC, Gary.

I am going to quote some of Mr. Melton's reflections and please remember that these remarks were made at the Road School in 1930. "At the beginning every town wanted the state highway down the main street, but the trend is now changing and the Commission is being asked to go entirely around in some cases. I believe a ride through Lafayette on State Road 52 (following a street car) from the southeast part of the city to the river would cure anyone of advocating a through route on a main street. If not, just drive through Kokomo on Road 31 sometime when you are in a hurry. In this case you detour a mile off a straight line to get on this street, then back a mile to get off it, and while in town you are entertained seemingly by about 25 stop and go lights." Perhaps in the last 50 years people around Kokomo would say we have gone "full circle."

Still quoting Mr. Melton as he directs his attention to another concern, "Another matter of vital importance is the character of commercial vehicles using our state highways. With the coming of hard roads, we first had trucks, and now three-car freight trains of increasing width, length, and carrying capacity. It is not unreasonable to expect that the future will bring longer freight trains. It is said that three trucks bring their loads from Michigan to the Indiana state line and load their combined cargoes on two trucks to cross our accommodating state. We must have more stringent regulations of these freight trains and their loads, or our roads will soon be destroyed."

"Not only is the weight of these trucks objectionable, but the width of trucks and busses seems to increase as we increase the width of our roads; and it is rather natural for these immense commercial vehicles, whose interest it is to make time and give service, to hog the road and drive the lighter craft into the ditch more often than is necessary."

And still quoting Mr. Melton as he reflected on the concerns of 1930, "People have come to depend on the automobile in many ways, and the blocking of roads by extraordinary snows is a serious matter. These roads must be opened in a reasonable time." Now I am sure there is comfort in realizing that those responsible for highways in 1930 had their problems also. It may not be quite so comforting to be reminded that we today are still working with some of those very same problems that existed in 1930.

SERVICE FOR INDIANA CITIZENS

The State Highway Commission over these many years has been a service by the state government for the benefit and convenience of Indiana citizens. Linked with the other modes of travel it is logical to refer to transportation as "Indiana's most significant economic asset." The State Highway goals within this framework have centered around the development of a safer, quicker, and more convenient movement of people and goods within the context of individual freedom of choice. The love affair between the American family and its automobile has been, among other things, a freedom trip. Our whole lifestyle, where we live in relation to where we work, shop, go to school and church, go on vacation, and where our children find jobs and settle down, have all been influenced by the ease and convenience and, up to now, the minimal cost of our *freedom* of mobility.

As we planned over the years for new highways, almost without exception, our projections for numbers of vehicles have proven too low. Good roads have just invited and attracted more traffic. The early completion of most of our interstate highway system and the elimination of our so-called "killer highways" by major improvements to our primary system were our priorities during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This major construction undertaking overshadowed many of our preservation responsibilities and much maintenance work was postponed or pushed aside. The late 1970s saw the pendulum swinging to the other extreme and maintenance activities occupied most of our time and drained our funds. Our program for the early 1980s can be characterized as midway between these extremes, a balanced program and a middle of the road approach. New construction should be blended with a priority preservation program realizing that both are required if we are to adequately maintain a first-class state highway system.

UNKNOWNNS IN PLANNING FOR THE 1980s

Planning for the 1980s will be a challenge because there are many unknowns. Will federal highway appropriations be reduced as part of an anti-inflation program. Will federal highway dollars be withheld

from some of our urban counties because of air quality problems? Is it possible that some of our urban areas could be compelled to consider combinations of public transit improvement and possible restrictions on inner-city vehicular traffic? How will the escalation in gasoline prices affect our driving habits? Will alternate fuels be developed or will mass transit become the mode of the 1980s? The real question may well be: Will the private sector continue to set our transportation priorities as people exercise their individuality and their freedom of choice or will government, as it stubbornly adheres to its, in many cases, impractical environmental goals, set our transportation priorities by regulation and by regimentation? If the people were turned off by vehicle inspection, just wait until we start sniffing tail pipes.

Also as we begin the 1980s, we have a new funding statute with several new concepts along with new statute which combines many transportation agencies into two departments responsible directly to the governor. The effects of these changes are uncertain at this point, but I think the combination of the two will shift a significant part of state highway policy-making authority directly into the political arena. For example, take a proposal like a new access road for Patoka Reservoir — I would envision that the Governor's office and the legislature would both be directly involved in decisions which would approve or disapprove of state funding to match available federal funds for such a project.

But the uncertainties I've just mentioned do not mean that state highway will adopt an attitude of 'wait and see.' There are areas in our operations that need more emphasis and improvement and I will name three. We are having too many accidents on major improvement projects newly opened to traffic. The causes of these accidents are varied: the new facility may be unfamiliar and confusing to the driver, especially the driver who was familiar with the facility before it was improved; the eye-appeal of the facility may give the driver some false sense of safety and security; the new facility may be so well designed and constructed that excessive speed is common-place; and the signing and lighting of the improvement may not have been well coordinated with the construction phase. In many cases, the cause may vary from all of the above to none of the above. Engineering expertise may not be enough, we must also become psychologists, and our commitment must be to do everything we can to minimize the possibility of driver error. When it comes to safety, anything less than the ultimate is false economy.

TOTAL COMMITMENT FOR THE FUTURE

There is room for improvement in the financial management area that we provide local units of government on federal-aid projects. Reducing the amount of time required for processing consulting

agreements would be a logical starting point. But more perhaps than any one specific item, what is needed is a *total commitment* to do all we can to expedite these projects. Our mission in future years will require more of our time and expertise be devoted to the needs of local units of government.

We should assume more of a leadership role in the preservation of our land resources. The 1980s will demand that we be innovative in our approach and unconventional in our search for new ideas. To be quite candid, it pains me to view the new railroad overpass bridge and approaches south of here on state road 43 near Linden. The unproductive, odd-shaped remnants of land from that project detract from the improvement itself.

Let's consider a hypothetical situation, let's assume we have to replace a bridge. In order to get the elevation needed to pass the 100 year flood test, the slopes and grade require five acres of prime farmland or two-thirds of a family's front yard, which in turn destroys the esthetics of their home. The old bridge has never washed out, it's been there 50 years. Why not consider building the new bridge at the highest elevation possible without taking the prime farm land or the family's yard and using 100% state funds. Now this idea may be innovative, unconventional, illogical, unworkable, or crazy. But I do firmly believe that the wise use of our land resources will become more of a state and national priority. I think we are down to two choices—we can either adopt this premise voluntarily or we can wait and have it forced upon us.

But I can honestly conclude that our state highway organization approaches the 1980s with confidence and assurance. We are good and we are striving to be better. We have pride, our approach is professional and we look forward to the challenges ahead and the opportunities for service which those challenges will provide.