The Influence of Current Mode of Transportation on a County

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The other day I drove out of my driveway. As I drove into the highway I noted the homes that were visible, some 15 in number. Four of these homes were occupied by farmers. The other 11, all country houses, were occupied by men who commuted to town jobs. These 11 men, two of their wives, two of their daughters and a son, scattered to work in six different communities, the most distant being 35 miles away.

During the past week service men made their regular trips to my home. The fuel-oil man came from New Castle, the bottle-gas man drove down from Muncie, the bread-man came from Anderson and an egg-truck came over from Ohio. Recently the family buyer made several purchases, a pair of shoes in Indianapolis, a coat in Richmond, a sewing machine in Muncie, and a new kitchen sink in New Castle.

Thus I picture to you the influence of modern roads and modern transportation upon rural families. When I was a boy our mode of transportation was the buggy, or the bicycle, and our social, vocational and economic life was largely limited to the local village and its environment. Later we bought one of those gas-lighted automobiles with a top speed of 25 miles per hour and when the roads were dry we were able to drive down to New Castle to do our trading. However, when winter came, the old auto was hoisted upon blocks and we used the horse and buggy until late spring.

At first this change was slow and gradual but during the past few years this urbanization of our rural area has been accelerating at a fast pace. Only 15 years ago all the houses in sight of my home were occupied by farmers.

The rate and extent of this urbanization is illustrated by a survey made in a neighboring township. This township is several miles removed from the environment of a city and contains no industries and only small local stores.

Twenty-eight years ago 60 percent of the school children in this township were the sons and daughters of farmers. In 1940 36 percent
were farm children; in 1950 only 23 percent were from farms. Today, 20 percent of the high school children, 16 percent of the grade children, and 11 percent of the pre-school children are from farm families. Our survey indicates that commuters are under 40 years of age; whereas, the active farmers are 56; and the semi-retired farmers are eight years older. Most of the commuters are newcomers, having lived in the township less than eight years.

The extent of this commuting from rural homes to urban jobs is surprisingly large and the numbers are increasing at an accelerating pace. In the three villages in the township just discussed 65 percent of the men work out of the township; and, in the various sections of the township, from 25 to 75 percent of the houses are occupied by non-farmers.

Much of the commuting is to jobs out of the county. In another township there are 706 school children and 425 patron families. Sixty-eight percent of the parents work out of the county. A new school building will soon be needed and 80 percent of the parents creating the increasing school burden work out of the county. They work and trade outside the county and create school burdens within their home county and township.

Survey of Road Use

A survey that we made of the use of county and state highways by farmers and by commuters may also be of interest. On an area map we located the place of residence of each citizen of three of our rural townships. This included 433 farmers and 1,033 commuters. We located the place of work of each active man and the places to which each family traveled in their normal family and farm life. We did not include tours, long trips or unusual road uses but we did include all road uses connected with the normal vocational and family life of the families. In this fashion we estimated the use each family made each year of state and county paved and county gravel roads.

Summarizing the road uses made by all families living in these three rural townships, we found that 65 percent of the total mile-use made per year of county roads was made by and for the non-farming citizens. In the press, we have read considerable discussion about building farm-to-market highways. In my county it would seem that building “home to place of work” highways for commuting rural citizens is of equal importance. We found that 70 percent of road uses by farmers and 48 percent of road uses by non-farmers were of county roads. This should indicate the importance of county road funds.

We became interested in county bridges due to a new county bridge tax. We did not oppose the tax because we realized that our bridges
had to be repaired and replaced. However, we became interested in finding out whether a property tax was a just tax for bridge purposes.

We located a situation where 30 families had to use a bridge in their normal vocational and family life. Fifteen of these families were non-farmers with a total assessment of $18,000. Five were commuting part-time farmers with a total assessment of $15,000. The other ten were farmers with a total assessment of $120,000. We checked and estimated the net incomes of these 30 families. We found that each of these families had approximately the same net income. There was one difference, the farmers require a heavy property investment to produce their net income. The non-farmers' incomes were from urban jobs and were not dependent upon their own investments.

In estimating bridge uses we estimated through an actual study every bridge use made by and for each family, farmer and commuter. In total there were 21,000 uses in one year. We found that 55 percent of the uses were made by and for non-farmers, 21 percent by and for part-time farmers, and 24 percent by and for farmers. That is the ten farmers, because of their capital investment, had to pay 78 percent of the bridge tax paid by the 30 families and made only 24 percent of the uses made by the same families.

Inequalities in Taxation System

We must appreciate the fact that this urbanization of rural areas is a recent movement and that our taxation system was not built to provide for the same. However, we must recognize the fact that we can't expect farm properties to subsidize schools, bridges and other facilities for this growing non-farm rural population.

This rapid rural urbanization is creating serious problems for our large towns and for our cities. Due to excellent county and state highways our rural urbanization is accelerating at a rapid rate. As I indicated early, our rural people criss-cross in every direction to a number of towns and cities in their work, in their trade and in obtaining services. To these people no one town or city is of chief importance. For example, my county seat could shrink to a small village and this shrinkage would have little effect upon the family and vocational life of my neighborhood. However, the rural population is of great importance to my county seat. Some years ago location in a prosperous city was very important to a business or industry. This is no longer so important. A rural highway or a rural site may be of greater value to a store or to a factory than one within a city. Today the competition for business by stores and for their personnel by industry is no longer a
local affair. The competition is now between cities. The development of modern county and state highways is making the problem of survival for towns and cities a major problem.

Modern highways are also creating new and serious problems for farmers. In a normal city an average householder will, through property taxes, pay for about 30 percent of the property tax burden created by his family. The other 70 percent of the tax burdens created by the normal family are paid for by business, industries, railroads and utilities. In our rural townships we have no industries, only small stores and only a limited amount of railroads and utilities. In fact, in one of our townships less than eight percent of the taxes come from these sources.

Our growing rural non-farm population also pays only for about one-third of the tax burdens created by these non-farm families. The only dependable source of taxation to provide schools and other services and facilities for the growing non-farm population is farm properties, real and personal. As a result the farms of our average rural township pay about 50 percent of the tax burdens created by non-farmers. In an average township less than 30 percent of our active men are farmers, so you may realize that this burden is getting confiscatory. This non-farm population is growing and each new family means increased farm taxes.

Probably one of the most grievous burdens is the need for new schools. The farmers are growing older and the present educational facilities are ample for their future needs. This incoming commuting population is comprised of young families, for the most part, and nearly the entire need for additional educational facilities is being created by this group. In one of our rural townships there are 425 school patrons and only 39 are farmers. In this township a new school building is needed. We have been advised that we should have a county tax for schools. However, 80 percent of the above increased school need is being created by commuters who work and trade outside the county. We checked the property ownership of the persons creating a need for a new building. We found that a new building would cost each family creating the need less than $200 on the average. We found that it would cost each farmer over $1,200 and the farmers had no need for a new building. We also found that those creating the need had greater net incomes than did the farmers. It is our conclusion that farmers would be better off if new industries and new places of employment were kept at least 40 miles away from their farms. It would be to the interest of farmers to discourage all new industries not located in his own home township.
It is a peculiar situation. Good highways have without doubt improved the farmer’s farm and his family life but good highways are destroying agriculture due to our rural urbanization.

*County Planning Commissions*

While it is impossible to stop this rural urbanization, the County Commissioners have a medium through which they can direct the same. I refer to the State Planning Legislation. This legislation gives to the County Commissioners new authorities by the creation of a County Planning Commission which is responsible to the County Commissioners.

Through the Planning Commission the County Commissioners can direct and regulate all non-farm land uses within the unincorporated areas of the county. They can prevent those uses that injure land values, they can ignore those uses that will improve rural neighborhoods. Probably the most important factor is their ability to prevent slum developments and other uses that will create heavy tax burdens with inadequate tax returns.

One of their useful authorities is the authority to control outdoor advertising and other roadside uses, to control the location of structures, to specify entrances and to require the widening of highways adjacent to the proposed uses.

The most useful authority of a planning commission is the control of plats. A plat is not legal until it is approved by the commission. Our commission will not approve a plat until the streets are properly located and planned and until proper provisions are made for drainage and sanitation. The lots must meet our zoning specifications. We will not give final approval to a plat until the streets have been constructed in accordance with specifications specified by the County Commissioners, or until a bond has been posted covering their estimated cost.

This control has been most useful. Our commission inherited plats which are problem children. In some cases the plats have become shack towns due to small lots and to drainage and sanitation difficulties. In each case these plats have become a tax burden on the county and townships. In other cases the plats were developed without improvements and the county has had to provide streets and drainage. We now prevent the development of new burdens, for we will not approve any plat or any other land development which can’t pay its own way.

You will find a County Planning Commission a very useful organization. It is directly responsible to the Board of County Commissioners, who have final approval of many of the planning commission’s actions. Through the planning commission a county can control this “rural
urbanization." The cost need not be great. In my county the cost is
about 12 cents per capita.

We must realize that good highways are bringing about rural
urbanization. We can't prevent this trend, which is creating serious
problems for both urban and rural communities. It is a misfortune that
this trend has come upon us at such an accelerated pace, for we do not
have the experience and the legislation to cope with it properly. It
is fortunate that we do have the authority to set up planning commissions
which can direct this trend along constructive lines.