Roadside Services for the Tourist

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been driving on an interstate and had your son say “Daddy, I just gotta GO”—so you drive off, anticipating the same type of interchanges you've recently passed with an easy return, only to find out the access ramp in your direction is miles away and there are no directional signs on how to get back on from where you got off?

Have you and your co-pilot, knowing you have a critical turn to make at the next intersection, found out that you were in the wrong lane because there was no advance signing ahead of the curve immediately preceding the intersection?

Have you ever come to a portion of interstate which has a N-S route overlapping an E-W route for about three miles and, as you pass the first off-ramp to the north, you find the only sign ahead of you is the sign to the south when you are only interested in going east?

True, as a motorist you were able to eventually get back on course, and in some instances such as the overlapping interstate routes you really didn't need to worry because three miles down the road, where the overlap ended, there was adequate confirmation signing. But these things always distress me—they make me feel like a frustrated duck who can't get his down up.

As a matter of fact, since I knew I was going to talk on “Roadside Services for the Tourist” I have been making a special effort to criticize what exists. Frankly, I think a pretty good job is being done and I would give an “E” for effort to highway people generally. But giving an “E” for effort is quite different from giving an “A” for accomplishment. By that I mean I have the feeling that persons responsible for highways from the county roads to the interstate do make an honest effort to provide adequate roadside services, but in every class of roadway there is much room for improvement.

Before I get too far along, let me define roadside services as anything the tourist or traveler uses. In this connotation I include traffic signs, signals, pavement markings, channelization and design as well as “gas, food and lodgings.” I warn you, however, that I am over-
sensitive to the needs of motorists driving recreational vehicles since I am driving what is commonly referred to as a Rec-V.

For lack of a better name, I like to refer to my rig as a rolling home rather than recreational vehicle, since my wife and I will be living in it full-time for a year and traveling over 30,000 miles. It is a Winnebago, 27 feet long, eight feet wide and ten feet high. I emphasize the rolling home aspect as against the Rec-V concept because I think it is time we traffic engineers look ahead in this direction as well as the many other new directions that demand our attention.

However, I would like to come back to some of these new special problems of the rolling home, and for now return to the more general problem of roadside services as I think of them.

INTERSTATE ROADSIDE SERVICES SIGNING

Let me reflect on interstate roadside services signing. In the early stages of the interstate there were many of us that were apprehensive about locating the interstate a considerable distance from developed land areas and with right-of-ways such that advertising would be difficult if not impossible. Not only was the problem solved in a fairly satisfactory fashion by the adoption of roadside services signing standards, but the demand for such services brought them out from town to the isolated interchanges with private advertising in most instances that communicates with the motorist as readily or better than the interstate signs. There still is, nevertheless, much room for improvement in telling the motorist how far he must go for these services when they are not adjacent to the roadway. Supplemental signs reading, "Next Services (blank) Miles" will always be needed to supply a necessary message which private advertising cannot always provide—although the advertisers certainly try hard enough and often do a good job.

I do think, however that there is one media of communication that is still lacking in completeness but can easily be corrected, particularly when all exits are numbered and more particularly when exits are mile-post numbered. This media is the travel map provided by auto clubs or service stations from information developed by the Highway Department. Not only should the interchange numbers be shown on the maps, and in some cases they are, but the services to be found at the interchanges should likewise be shown by code on the same map. This then will provide the motorist a means of pre-planning his interstate or freeway ride. The pre-planning might take place before the trip starts, en route at a rest area if the driver is alone, or by his co-pilot while moving.
Now, speaking of rest areas, the same need exists as at interchanges to inform the motorists of services available in advance of rest areas. This is often done, but the practice is nowhere as consistent as roadside services signing at interchanges. It is important at rest areas, because the motorist will want to make a decision as to using the rest area without going off the main road. This is sometimes done while slowing down in the deceleration lane and then turning out at the last minute if the decision is to pass up the area. If it is done by driving into the rest area and leaving if the needed service is not provided then we, the designers, have merely added an unnecessary merging conflict to our roadway.

A more important decision to make however, regardless of facilities in the rest area, is: shall I use it to change drivers, eat lunch (even though it is earlier than I planned), or should I wait for the next rest area? In most cases you can’t really make a good decision because there seldom is a “NEXT REST AREA (blank) MILES” sign. I admit, though, I have seen a few of these signs at the exit of the area, rather than in advance where the decision should be made.

Where mile-stone posting of interchanges is helpful for the motorist to pre-plan operations, mile-stone posting also helps to plan unforeseen changes as they develop. For example, it is getting warm and you want to remove your jacket, or it is getting cold and you want to put on a jacket. Do you wait for a rest area, turn off at an interchange, or do you pull onto the shoulder to change? Your travel map with the coded mile-stone interchange numbers can just as easily contain coded mile-stone rest area numbers, which will better locate the area than a little red dot or triangle commonly used today.

Before I forget, I must take a small crack at the services sign “CAMPING.” It may really be helpful to turn the recreational vehicle in the right direction toward a camping area, but can’t the driver also be told how far he must go to get there? I have seen a few signs that do tell the distance, but not in advance of the off-ramp—the signs were at the end of the off-ramp where they could only be read after the decision had been made to leave the freeway. I’m really not sure if “CAMPING” signs are necessary, except to confirm a decision already made in pre-planning, but my feeling may be because of my limited and specialized experience. I do know they were comforting for me when I had previously decided upon a facility reached by use of the off-ramp. They were, however, disconcerting when I only wanted to eat lunch off the freeway, couldn’t find a rest area, and the ten-mile distance posted after I left the freeway caused me to turn
my big rig around on a very narrow country road leading to the camping area.

Thus far I've only talked about signs under the classification of roadside services. I'm well acquainted with the fact that traffic and highway engineers usually refer to signs as communications rather than services, but I'm still going to talk about signing. The reason for this attitude is that now that I'm a full-time motorist and retired I can afford to be like the people we build roads for. They don't distinguish these technical refinements—services to them means everything that makes a good or bad trip.

By way of leading up to the next point, I'm going to once more refer to mile-posting. It is a great service to transients when every overpass or underpass is posted with the name of the road crossing the freeway, but the majority of structures are not named. The naming of these structures is a tremendous help to the motorist in trying to get his bearings on a travel map, particularly in rural areas with widely spaced interchanges. What would be even more helpful would be to milepost the structure in addition to the crossroad name. This then leads me to the next point off the interchange or freeway and onto the street, expressway, county road, even some U.S. routes I might add.

Have you ever approached a divided crossroad with a two-inch lettered street name sign on the far side, while stopped in the left lane waiting to turn if it is the right street, and be holding up a string of local cars behind you while you try to read the name? Have you ever decided that the street names are so small you will stay in the right-hand lane and when you cross the correct street you'll go round the block to complete your left turn, only to find there is no block to go round—it's dead ended? Have you ever tried to read the street name cast vertically on a concrete post about three inches across, with most of the color washed away from the embossed letters? Well, I have experienced these conditions in my travels.

Now I have finally solved the problem. Fortunately I don't sit down low in a sporty car—in my motorhome I sit up high, about six and one-half to seven feet about the ground. So while I drive these challenging courses my co-pilot uses binoculars to read street names.

 Seriously, street name signs is the bit of signing in which I cannot give "E" for effort to the majority of highway administrators. When you get off the interestate or freeways, street name signs always seem the responsibility of the other fellow. True, U.S. and state routes outside of urban areas are not too bad, but within the urban areas the persons responsible for the roadway on which the motorist travels
should accept the responsibility for adequate signing of the street names for all cross streets. County roads are another matter, but certainly cross-road names should be visible in all directions on any road leading to a generator of transient traffic such as a campgrounds or motel. One single face sign cannot be seen in all directions. The responsibility is not to the transient as much as it is to the local resident. The transient, unable to make quick decisions as he travels on these roads, is a potential hazard to all others (and incidentally can be a nuisance if he has to knock on doors too often).

While we are off the subject of freeways an observation can be made that many of the roadside rest areas on U. S., state and county roads tend to be neglected, but I, as one, am appreciative of those that do exist. My one major complaint is that the advance ROADSIDE AREA or ROADSIDE TABLE sign on a two-lane road seldom says on which side of the road it is located. This makes a difference in how you drive as you approach the area, and often your actions affect the other motorists using the same road.

REST AREAS LEVEL WITH GOOD VANDAL "PROOF" FACILITIES

But enough about signing. I think that one of the most hazardous pieces of construction, although a display of honest effort, is where a roadside rest is provided about four to five feet below the shoulder, with access to and from the area more or less at the angle of the fill slope to the shoulder’s edge. Let me tell you, you don’t drive a motorhome, trailer or camper along the shoulder and then travel sidehill along the stabilized fill to the rest area more than once. The once was when the rig almost tipped over but didn’t; however, the milk spilled in the refrigerator, the sugar bowl toppled over and spread sugar through the dishes, the plastic shampoo bottle fell out of the bathroom cabinet and cracked (with dire results), and the holding tank splashed back into the shower where the powdered soap was stored.

No—you only do that once, in the interest of safety—next time you swing wide—perhaps across the centerline so you can go down the slope without rolling sideways. In all honesty, I realize many of these areas were provided before the popularity of the recreational vehicle and for an automobile which does not have such complicated problems. But the recreational vehicle is here to stay, and we must help the Rec-V driver with facilities that will not cause him to create trouble or hazards for motorists.

And while we are on the subject, let me suggest that when you send a maintenance crew out to set up a rest area without detailed
plans, please tell the foreman to make the final parking space level. Truckers, campers and motorists in general will think you are a pretty smart engineer. One can't always eat outdoors, and a level rig is much more comfortable than a tipped one—especially if you want to cook hamburgers.

Vandalism is, of course, a problem that cannot be ignored. I do think, however, that every rest area should have under heavy plexiglass a state map and local map available for the motorist. The amount of detail on a local map naturally would vary from area to area. Above all, where there is a welcome or information center giving maps to tourists, the least kind of service the Highway Department can perform is to see that the maps are to scale and properly drawn as to cardinal directions. As one approaches urban areas a phone is of particular value although in some locations we may have to wait for a vandal-proof phone.

Garbage cans, I believe, are an essential overhead of operating a roadway system. Sure, it is expensive and the public often takes unfair advantage, but which is better: to be taken advantage of; or to be an efficient engineer and have the area and roadside strewn with beer cans, coke bottles, papers—and then try to convince the Sierra Club and others that highways and freeways don't adversely affect the environment?

You can call these things services to the tourist, but I call them good business sense in operating a safe and efficient roadway network. It all helps to win friends and influence environmentalists.

PREPARE FOR MORE RECREATIONAL VEHICLES—ROLLING HOMES

Now I'd like to talk a bit about this growing breed of motorists commonly referred to as campers. Before I became one—and I resent being called a camper—I had heard from the state boys (I was a city man myself) that recreational routes were rapidly becoming special problems. In a sense I rather felt these state boys resented campers (except of course those who were campers themselves) because for a very few months of the year roads leading into recreational areas required high quality facilities which were only justified by heavy year-round volumes. Well, let's face it—if it was bad before it's going to be a lot worse, and it won't get better by itself—it needs our help.

The use of recreational vehicles is growing by leaps and bounds. While I cannot quote the percentage growth I had occasion to check an $11,000 rig purchased in 1969 and found that the depreciation had
not exceeded $600 per year. This is because of the growing demand for this type of vehicle. I purchased a “Directory of Campgrounds” in 1971 and again in 1972. The first was roughly 1½ inches thick, the second was 1¾ inches thick, an increase of about 30 percent indicating growth of services for campers.

With the increasing mobility of people today, the desire to not own something that will make it difficult to move on, with longer vacations, shorter work weeks, more three-day holidays, earlier retirement—the increase in recreational vehicle use is going to accelerate. In fact, for the balance of this talk, I’m going to call recreational vehicles, i.e. campers, travel trailers and motorhomes, by a group name of rolling homes rather than the popular group name of Rec-V. My reason is that in addition to the fast-growing use for recreational purposes I predict these vehicles will significantly increase in use as permanent and semi-permanent homes.

More retired people will turn to the opportunity to fly with the birds—north in the summer and south in the winter. And as the age of retirement is lowered acceleration of this use will develop. I have talked to young marrieds who are in college, or young construction engineers and personnel who are constantly on the move, who have turned to a permanent rolling home for a few or even many years. It would not even be impractical to own two rigs or a double bottom arrangement so the children could have rooms of their own.

I can visualize traveling salesmen turning to self-contained rigs permitting them to take their wives on the road so they could cover a larger territory and not run the risk of too long a separation. Of course there could be adverse family developments—too much togetherness?

I might digress here to warn all of you who I may have sweet-talked into considering this life—you must be 100 percent compatible with your wife because with full-time living in a rolling home there is no room to slam a door and let your wife sulk in the sewing room, or for you to console yourself in the basement shop.

But be that as it may, I visualize a significant increase in non-recreational use of these types of vehicles. The rolling home influence in the transportation business, I feel, is much the same as the motel influence of 25-30 years ago. The tourist court predecessor of the motel got its start by a demand of motorist bent on recreation. Most of the meager facilities were on recreational roads, open only in season and never in cities or towns. As the use of the automobile grew, the demand for motel facilities in urban areas grew, and with this demand grew the resistance not only by hotels and restaurants who considered
this new practice competition, but also the general public and citizens opposed the motel push. Today, however, young people can’t imagine a city or town without at least one good motel, and motels can even advertise that they are located several blocks from the busy street in a nice, quiet, residential neighborhood.

I said earlier I resent being called a camper and that I was classifying these types of vehicles as rolling homes. This is because I’m not camping, I’m living a mobile but routine life as I travel some 30,000 miles this year to visit members of the Institute of Traffic Engineers in some 55 metropolitan areas. I’m a business man; I don’t get paid but I’m a business man, working as hard or harder than I did when I lived in my “rooted” home in San Francisco. Incidentally, I’m traveling with my secretary who is also my wife. While we are enjoying ourselves and are not tired or worn out, we’re still looking forward, despite being retired, to our vacation in June.

Since I visualize the rolling home movement much the same as the motel development of years ago, I can see the same resistances to change, and the most resistance is in urban areas. I have been in some beautiful campgrounds, and some not so beautiful. In Pittsburgh I was set up in the state highway maintenance yard since there were no facilities in town, and even the maintenance yard was not close to downtown. In Louisville it was out in the state Fairgrounds; in Dayton it was the back of a motel in an adjoining village. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, the nearest camp available was 20 miles away in Kentucky, but we were able to hook up in the yard of a friendly traffic engineer who lived just outside of town. In town it was against the law to even park a vehicle on your own property.

These then are today’s problems for rolling homes, but in time they will be overcome. Proper zoning and building code regulations will be developed to protect the permanent local resident, yet accommodate the respectable rolling home and recreational transient. Tax adjustments will be devised that will allow full-time transients to contribute their share to the upkeep of the urban facilities which they enjoy in their travels.

ROLLING HOMES CREATE NEW PROBLEMS FOR TRAFFIC ENGINEERS

We in turn as highway and traffic professionals will be confronted with a number of new problems, and we may as well be thinking about them now. These rolling homes will become larger—at least the average length which is now about 20-24 feet will be increased to about 26-27
feet, and larger in the case of the travel trailers. So far I have not seen a double bottom or a motorhome towing a trailer, but I don't know of a law that would prevent it in those states which permit double bottom trucks. I have seen many large motorhomes towing equally large long boats—even in states that prohibit commercial double bottoms.

We will be called upon to be sure our roads are adequate at the points of ingress and egress to the parking areas. We will be asked to develop standards for judging the zoning regulations so that we do not have rigs waiting in the streets for admission to the grounds. We will outline the requirements to insure that there is adequate space for all vehicles and equipment off street. We will have to substantiate for zoning officials that the access streets can accommodate these large units, and that they can turn around if necessary because the area is filled up.

We will have to re-evaluate our standards for providing extra uphill lanes for slow-moving vehicles on recreational roads and install more wind-socks on roads where heavy, variable crosswinds vitally affect safe operation of high-mounted vehicles.

We will probably want to encourage and support driver licensing administrators to test the reaction time, visual ability and other driver characteristics to insure that those who drive these multi-ton, extra-wide, super-long, giant-high rolling homes and recreational vehicles have the ability to do so with safety to themselves and others on the road. It seems ridiculous when you consider that I have reached retirement age, and my wife not too far behind me, yet we can go down, rent one of these rigs and drive it out onto the street, highway and interstate without any experience and just with our regular driver's license. We will want to encourage rolling home and Rec-V drivers to understand and participate in the code of signals used by over-the-road truckers.

CLOSURE

Ladies and gentlemen of the highway profession, I salute you with an "E" for effort on roadside services, but give you only a "C+" for accomplishment; and I'll be thinking of you everytime my grandson says, "Grandpa—I gotta GO."