THE HIGHWAY CHAIRMAN
GETS SNOWBOUND TOO

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INTRODUCTION

We have had a couple of bad winters. During the blizzard of '78 the temptation was great to call in a snowplow and ride it to Lafayette to the TV station (Channel 18 there) and sit there and tell the public how well things were going. But there were several things that militated against that. One was the fire in my fireplace, the other was I really didn't think there was that much good news, and then I didn't have my gold and black stocking cap to wear to appear on TV.

So, I sat there and received telephone calls. And I don't imagine there's a single highway official who hasn't received those calls that are a little more frank and candid than one would prefer. One truck driver called and started out by calling me a S-O-B and got kind of nasty after that. But until the car in which your wife is riding slides into the ditch, you don't know about criticism. Among nations, I think it's called imposing sanctions.

TWO BAD WINTERS ADD TO HIGHWAY'S FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

We budgeted $6 million for snow removal and have spent something like $9½ million. I say something like—those are the figures, that's the direct cost. But who can evaluate the cost of snow removal? It's a cruel thing and I make no apologies for the amount we budgeted. It should have been more than adequate. But it places us farther behind the eight-ball. Then there is the chuckhole situation—it's just so overwhelming, one hardly knows where to start.

The money problem, of course, doesn't need a great deal of elaboration. But I would like to call attention to the fact that we are operating under substantially the same budget that we did ten years ago. And we now figure $400,000 per 4-lane mile of resurfacing. I think that pretty well tells the story.
EFFICIENCY MEASURES TAKEN

We've done a great deal to try to be more efficient, and use the dollars we have to their best advantage—maintenance management, segmental bridges, spot improvements, spot repairs instead of resurfacing—many things like that. But in spite of all, with our revenues, we're just in trouble. We're constantly haunted by the expectation that those revenues will drop with the energy shortage and the trend toward more efficient automobiles. We are dependent upon revenues from the gas tax. It doesn't fluctuate with the price of gas and it's created an almost intolerable situation. I hear the talk about the chuckholes and the deterioration of the roads, and I want to say to people, "So what's new? This is what the present employees and my predecessors have been telling you for ten years. The day of reckoning is at hand and we can't go on much longer. It's all coming true."

FINANCIAL AID FROM LEGISLATURE INSIGNIFICANT

Now, it's true that we did receive consideration by the legislature, and I don't want to minimize that. But it is small relative to what we need. We're not going to be able to do anything like the kind of job that we'd like to do. Now the report of the Transportation Advisory Commission (TAC), a highly respected group (much publicity was given that report): I remind all that our total available funds, including the general fund transfer, will be about 500 million dollars, or 100 million dollars short of what TAC said was needed minimally, $200 million short of what they said we really needed—that's 40 percent short of what they said we needed to do the job properly. So I don't think I need to belabor that. But it simply isn't fair, and it's a question that's going to have to be spoken to.

PUBLIC WANTS BRIDGES AND CHUCKHOLES FIXED NOW

We're in the middle with the public—their patience is decreasing, if anything. They want their chuckholes filled, they want their bridges fixed, and they're entitled to that. But they don't want the bridge closed while it's being fixed, and they want their chuckholes fixed first. We simply don't have enough to fix all the chuckholes. But the other side of the coin is that in spite of all of this, we will accelerate our bridge repair program and our resurfacing program.
HIGHWAY PERSONNEL COMMENDED

We have some great, great people working for the state highway. Seldom a day passes but what I'm grateful that the people who work there now, and have in the past, had the courage and the vision to push programs. Stop to think how easy it would have been for people years ago to back off some of these interstate problems—the Indianapolis outerloop where there was so much public opposition. Why didn't they come back to the office and say, "the hell with it?" They didn't do that, and as a result, we have one of the finest highway systems in the country. I'm grateful for it, and all state highway people should tell the public what kind of job we're really doing.

HIGHWAY COMMISSION PASSES STATE AUDIT

The legislature caused to be conducted a performance audit of us—a very objective, hard-nosed, searching look at our operations. They had some criticisms, of course—we do, too. But generally, they said we're doing a good job. I stress this because there are legislators who feel—not withstanding the obvious economics of the situation—it's very plain that we need more money. However, some of them say, "you don't deserve it." Well, the study which they had conducted says we do deserve it. Help us pass that word along. We'll continue to try, we'll bump along, and I will make a personal pledge in closing: if you don't bug me about our chuckholes, I won't bother you about yours.