An Iowa Road Challenge

Iowa's road problems continued to mount as auto registrations and travel on Iowa's highways continued to climb following 1955. The changing pattern of the State's economic activity began to put new stresses on the primary highways and urban areas of Iowa. Despite the progress of the previous decade, secondary road problems were not solved in all areas of the Hawkeye State.

By 1958, the decline in the number of farms, increased bus transportation resulting from school reorganization, growth in travel on major state primary routes, and mounting traffic control problems in Iowa's principal cities pointed to the necessity of a highway study of the State's road systems. These facts were presented to the General Assembly.

In House Joint Resolution 12, the 58th General Assembly of Iowa authorized the creation of a Road Study Committee. Senator D. C. Nolan of Iowa City served as Chairman of the Iowa Highway Study Committee with Representative Merle Hagedorn of Clay County as Vice-Chairman. The Committee included four additional lawmakers and five citizens representing counties, cities, and State, thus adding balance to the group.

The Road Study Committee and the Iowa State Highway Commission entered into an agreement with two non-profit research agencies for technical services in carrying out the assignment of the committee. Selected were the Automotive Safety Foundation of Washington, D. C., for engineering or physical needs study, and the Public Administration Service of Chicago, Illinois, for the fiscal studies.

The study urged the adoption of a system of classification for Iowa's highways, roads, and city streets based on their function, construction standards required, and travel. The definition of system — the application of construction standards to the defined system, and a program to provide continuity of finance — was recommended as basic for the solution of Iowa's road problems.

Described as a "plan to pace highway development with economic growth" the study held out real possibilities as a sound basis for highway programing, construction, and financing. The study was based on engineering analysis of existing status of roads and streets compared to standards of design and maintenance required for future traffic. It resulted in projections of past trends to 1980 and these indicated a population gain of 400,000, all in cities, with a statewide total of 3,150,000 people. A 40 percent increase in the number of motor vehicles to 1,800,000 and a 70 percent increase in total travel to 20 billion vehicle miles annually were forecast to indicate the magnitude of the road challenge facing the State of Iowa.

The study showed that needs included 5,600 miles of rural two-lane state primary roads that would require construction or reconstruction between 1960 and 1980. In additon, 1,500 miles of multi-lane highways would be needed prior to 1980 of which all but 213 miles would be Interstate and other Iowa freeways. The rural freeways, including Interstate, would cost $167 million in this 1960 estimate which was about 55 percent of all basic construction on rural primary roads.

The study stated flatly that about one-third of the proposed rural Primary Road System was now intolerable with the cost to improve this backlog estimated in 1960 to be $373 million. The costs of improving primary system in municipalities was estimated at $144 million. Some 63 percent of all travel was on rural and urban state primary highways, 19 percent on other urban streets, and 18 percent on secondary roads. Backlog data for the other systems showed 70 percent of county trunk mileage as intolerable with a construction cost of $340 million while city arterial streets had 32 percent of the mileage intolerable at a cost of $126 million. Both rural and urban local roads and streets had high percents of intolerable mileage. The total program ran to almost $5.6 billion. Even this amount was considered by the project engineer for the Automotive Safety Foundation to be an absolute minimum. Little secret was made of the fact that $250 million of shoulder surfacing work was cut from the study report engineering needs before the final program was presented.

The single most important problem presented by the study was the problem of financing these minimum needs. Lack of sufficient funds to do the job and a method of financing to accomplish the program still plagued the legislature and the people.

The 59th General Assembly, in session in 1961, was faced with this problem but came to grips with reality as the members became embroiled in one of the basic problems confronting road needs — the redistribution of state road use tax funds between the governmental jurisdictions. Even though the basic problem was one of insufficient funds no legislative attempt was made in 1961 to solve this problem.

The effort made in the studies to determine an equitable distribution of road use tax funds between the governmental jurisdictions indicated the cities and towns were entitled to a larger share of road use tax funds as were the state primary roads. The cities accordingly organized to improve their situation and were given cooperation by the Chambers of Commerce. Park Rinard was employed to carry through their program — a "fight for fair fifteen." This slogan was the result of the recommendation of 15 percent of road use tax funds for cities and towns. The study had recommended a distribution of 55 percent to state primary roads and 30 percent to county secondary roads. In addition to these percentages, however, cities would require additional property taxes of $1.3 million annually and counties would require additional property taxes of $2.1 million annually plus an appropriation from the state general fund for secondary roads to accomplish their road programs. Property taxes were already at high levels and were unpopular as a revenue raising measure. Meanwhile, the pressing needs of education indicated demands from the general fund source would be heavy for the 1960-1970 decade and very probably the following decade in the studies twenty-year road program period.

The Iowa Good Roads Association favored continuance of the existing highway finance policy of the State which relied on road use tax fund sources and property taxes. It considered the general fund financing recommendations too remote and unrealistic in the light of the State's total financing needs. The Association recommended an increase in the gasoline tax of one cent in 1961 as one source of additional needed revenue and has stuck with this proposal. Other recommendations of the Association included increases in commercial vehicle and automobile registration fees. Perhaps recognition of political reality or a recognition that general fund financing was practicable and would become necessary in the future prompted the Good Roads Association to include a recommendation for an appropriation of $10 million annually from the state general fund. An alternative, the Association declared, would be an increase of two cents in the state gasoline tax. The Association's proposals certainly emphasized the shortage of funds and the magnitude of the problem.

In 1964 the Association alerted the General Assembly and the people to the growing backlog of state primary road work. It pointed out that the deficit (in excess of $20 million annually) was even greater for their proposed program than the Association had been indicating. This disconcerting fact started a reappraisal by the Good Roads Association. Mark Morris, consultant and research engineer, was added to the staff. The plan was to take the basic data of the studies, the experience of the previous four years, and to make new projections of income and expenditures required to accomplish the road program. The evidence continued to mount conclusively that the only answer was more money, and soon, if the Iowa road challenge was to be met.

Governor Harold E. Hughes recognized the seriousness of the challenge and emphasized the importance of providing additional funds for state primary roads by calling for a one cent increase in the gasoline tax in his 1965 inaugural address and in his budget message to the legislature.

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