

RESEARCH IN COUNTY AND LOCAL ROAD ADMINISTRATION

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The appearance of this paper on the program of the Highway Research Board signifies that an attempt is being made to shed new light on a somewhat neglected area of highway endeavor, and signifies also that we are beginning to establish a closer unity among our separate efforts.

If there are any Shakespeare scholars in this audience, they may recall some lines from a speech of the Duke of Exeter's in the first act of "King Henry the Fifth":

For government, though high, and low, and lower,
Put into parts, doth keep in one concert,
Congreeing in a full and natural close,
Like music.

I have torn these lines ruthlessly out of their context; but standing alone they can serve to symbolize our intent to create a new harmony in our own sphere--almost, if we have an ear, like music.

County and local road administrative units have been brought into the highway headlines within the past few years as a result of the emergence of a federal-aid program of secondary road improvement of rather substantial proportions. Actually, of course, they have been in the headlines of county-seat and other community newspapers for a long span of years. Many of us have learned many facts about the structure and quality of county and local highway administration, but largely without benefit of sharp tools of research.

For that reason, what is said here is somewhat tentative. The subcommittee charged with the development of a program of research in this field has no research of its own to report on. It does know of the existence of earlier studies of varied scope and quality. It is particularly aware of the value of work of researchers and theorists in the field of county and local government in general. What is offered now, in the compass of 20 minutes, is a hasty survey of the present situation

in county and local road administration, along with a glance at opportunities for productive research.

At the outset it is necessary to distinguish between two senses in which the term "administration" is used. It may refer broadly to the characteristic form or structure of highway organization. Or it may refer somewhat more narrowly to the day-to-day operations of the highway administrative agency. It may refer, that is, to the external framework established by law and custom, or to the internal machinery, operating with or without purposeful control, and with or without friction and the clashing of gears.

Our research in this field is directed ultimately towards agreement on some principles underlying the broad framework of the administrative structure. Yet this in itself implies the examination of practices relating to long-range planning, budgeting, purchasing, personnel management and the like.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF COUNTY AND LOCAL ROAD ADMINISTRATION

A brief characterization of county and local road administration might offer three general observations.

1. *It is exceedingly varied in pattern.* To begin with, use of the term "county and local" indicates that we are dealing with more than one kind of unit. The designation "local," I think we can agree, is a convenient way of lumping together the several varieties of sub-county rural highway administrative units, such as the New England towns, middle-western townships and various kinds of special districts. (It should be noted that the term "local" is also used loosely--and in this paper as well--for "county and local," in situations where its use can scarcely be avoided without awkwardness. This is not reprehensible if no confusion results.)

In the six New England states, the unit of local rural highway administration is the town, and in Pennsylvania it is the township. A few Pennsylvania counties are in charge of the operation of road systems; but with these exceptions, the county in Pennsylvania may be considered a vestigial unit, so far as highway administration is concerned.

Township government in the United States exists in--speaking very roughly--the northeastern one-quarter of the area of the country. Within this area, outside of New England and

Pennsylvania, the characteristic plan of local highway administration--with important exceptions--is a dual plan: the counties are in charge of systems of main county roads, or trunk lines, and the townships have responsibility for the remaining mileage of non-state roads. The main exceptions are the states of Iowa, Michigan and Indiana, which have placed former township roads under county jurisdiction. In Kansas, 34 out of a total of 105 counties have voluntarily adopted the county-unit plan. And here and there in the "township" states a county has virtually consolidated all local road work by "unofficial" action.

In the south and west generally, rural roads outside of state highway systems are under county jurisdiction. Sometimes the county road system is operated as a unit, and sometimes it is operated by precincts or commissioners' districts. Thus we may have three or four or five districts operating independently within a county--each with its own funds, equipment and organization.

To round out the picture, we should note the existence of special road districts of one kind or another, which are distinct from the commissioners' districts just referred to. And, of course, we should observe that local rural road administration has vanished in the states of North Carolina, Virginia (except for three counties), West Virginia and Delaware; and that in a few other states, certain counties have individually passed responsibility for local roads on to the state highway agency.

We see that the unit of local road administration varies in area from township size to an area as large as that of San Bernardino County, Calif., which occupies 20,131 square miles. The range of resources and expenditures is probably as wide. Resources of units of the same kind vary widely. A study of township road funds in eight states made in 1939 showed average annual incomes ranging from about \$500 to nearly \$8,000. And as a random example, town (township) highway money in Franklin County, N. Y., a non-urban upstate county, ranged between the round sums of \$5,000 and \$28,000 in 1934.

2. *County and local road administration is decidedly varied in quality.* It would be surprising if the efficiency of a county road department operating on a county-wide basis, with qualified engineering supervision, did not contrast strongly with that of a precinct organization under a layman's direction. There are marked differences among the states in the ex-

tent to which county and local road work has been placed under engineering control. In some states the county engineer or his equivalent is elected to office.

The length of time county and local highway administrative officials remain continuously in office varies widely. A check made in 1941 showed that in only 25 of the 92 counties in Indiana had the same man served continuously as county road supervisor throughout the preceding 4-year period. In 41 counties there had been two different supervisors, and in 22 counties there had been three. Four counties had actually had four different supervisors each--or a new one about every year! For a quick contrast, one needs only to step across the state line into Michigan. Early this year the County Road Association of Michigan reported on the years of highway experience of engineers or superintendents in charge of road work in the state's 83 counties. A total of 38 men had served 25 years or longer, and a total of 61 had served 20 years or more.

Rapid turnover of elected policy-making officials, it should be said, is less damaging; a change in the composition of a county board may indicate nothing more than that the people are participating directly in the formation of policies affecting community welfare.

3. Using the term "administration" very broadly, we might expect the essential nature of county and local highway administration to differ sharply in many respects from that of state highway administration. Two of these may be noted.

The first has to do with the character of such an agency as the board that forms policies governing county road work. Almost without exception, the board is a multiple-function agency. If it is responsible for basic local road policies, it may also be concerned with matters as varied as public health, public welfare, buildings and institutions, and land-use planning, along with the general county business. Thus the board is intimately related to the development and well-being of the entire community it represents.

The second is that in the professional staff of the local highway department, where a local highway department actually exists, the emphasis is on versatility rather than on specialization. This obviously results in both advantages and disadvantages to the local community.

SOME POSSIBILITIES FOR USEFUL RESEARCH

The purpose of a great deal of industrial research is to improve the products of industry. I think that a parallel aim should guide us in the work we are contemplating in the field of county and local road administration: to use the tools of study and analysis to help those who are in a position to correct the weaknesses. Who will use the conclusions of this study project to accomplish what end? That question should be asked of all our work at the very start.

I am going to suggest four avenues of research that might lead to very practical applications.

1. Research leading to a statement of the principles underlying efficient and responsible local road administration. We think that we know what some of these principles are. Most of us are willing to believe that a county-unit plan is superior to precinct operation, that local road work requires capable engineering and business management, and that there should be a definite division between the authority of the elected policy-making board and the responsibilities of the manager who reports to the board. But until we are in possession of some convincing comparative figures, our beliefs are only private opinions, no matter how close they may be to shrewd guesses; and we are in no position to ask legislators and community leaders and plain citizens to espouse them.

Two kinds of studies might serve us here. One would consist of comparative studies of the performance of local highway units operating under contrasting administrative plans. Differences in financial resources, availability of local materials, climate, topography, drainage problems and so on would, of course, have to be taken account of. The other would consist of historical studies of accomplishment in states that have instituted major changes in local road administration, such as the adoption of the county-unit plan in Iowa, Michigan and Indiana.

2. A review of the immediate obstacles standing in the way of establishing the conditions necessary or favorable to the existence of good county and local road administration--taking for granted, of course, that these conditions shall have been tentatively or finally agreed on. Such hindrance might range all the way from constitutional and other legal obstacles to political opportunism and public inertia. The importance of related studies of financial adequacy should be clear.

3. Studies of handicaps to township and precinct or district operations through inability to own machinery and to place work under adequate supervision. Since these handicaps seem very real to me, I should point out that some observers argue that country people get more, and not less, for their highway money when it is spent by a unit having the size and the resources of the average township. They offer two principal supporting reasons. One is that standards of improvement are pitched to the level of needs of the local community: if a 10-ft. surfaced width will serve, the road will be built that way. The other is that people in a township-size neighborhood keep a close check on expenditures and on what their officials are doing.

If the first contention reflects the principle of keeping government close to the people, the second doubtless exemplifies that of keeping people close to the government. Whatever the virtues and the deficiencies of any administrative theory or plan may be, our studies should bring them out.

4. A study of achievement under engineering supervision in selected counties having *minimum* resources. Sometimes citizens and local officials seem to think of local engineering management as a "luxury" that they can't afford, though they may be paving at every turn for poor management, poor judgement and the absence of even rudimentary planning. A look across the border into another state that isn't quite a foreign country might be an eye-opener. But the hard facts and figures would have to be spread on the record and made accessible.

The separate studies suggested here are obviously inter-related. They represent separate attacks on the recognized central problems.

SOME PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING ADMINISTRATIVE IMPROVEMENT

I am going to bring this paper to a close by stating a few principles that I think we are bound to acknowledge at the start of the exceedingly broad research we are proposing to undertake. They are varied in their application, as you will recognize. I think that they are all important.

1. Conduct of the operations of local government by professionally qualified specialists, responsible to the local community, is wholly compatible with the democratic spirit of

local rule. This principle may appear to be too obvious to require statement. But it is a regrettable fact that distrust of professionalism is frequently encouraged in supposed support of the principle of local rule. It is equally regrettable that the professional outlook frequently ignores or slights the principle of local rule in endeavoring to combat excesses in its application. This is something that we have to think about seriously if we are serious about our work.

2. Variety in forms of local road administration is no curse if basic good principles are adhered to.

3. Research in the field of county and local road administration must identify itself with and profit from studies of and movements directed towards improvement of local government generally. Each can fertilize and stimulate the other.

4. Our work will prosper as we see in it a basic contribution to the planning of better community living. Its larger meanings should not be overlooked in our preoccupation with yardsticks of efficiency--necessary as they are. The final measure of its value will be in human and social terms.

5. We must recognize that administrative improvement in local government is closely tied to adequate financial support. Over large rural areas in every state, adequate financial support for local government implies the extension of grants-in-aid by the state for various local governmental functions. The grant-in-aid device, I venture to say, is firmly entrenched in our American governmental system.

Many critics have pointed out that aids tend to perpetuate units of government that have outlived their usefulness, and thus hinder the advance of modernized administration. There is certainly some truth to this. It is equally true that the granting of aids is often contingent on the adoption of better ways of doing things. In our work we shall have ample opportunity to trace some of these chains of cause and consequence.

6. Local road administration will be given a vigorous impulse in the right direction by the further development of harmonious federal-state-local and state-local relationships. I could develop this proposition at length; but it is properly a matter for separate and detailed review. I think the signs are hopeful that we are moving towards the "one concert" that Shakespeare wrote into the Duke of Exeter's lines.

If I have one strong final recommendation applying to our projected research in the field of county and local road administration, it is that at every stage of our work we avail ourselves of the freest and fullest consultation with specialists in local government, and with county and local officials generally. In that way we will be harnessing ourselves most effectively to the tasks at hand.

This is the year 1946. Some may wonder how it was that we took so long to get started. That really doesn't matter. The work is still waiting for us. Looking back over the past 15 years or so, I see signs and even landmarks of improvement in the structure and processes of local road administration--improvement that has taken place without benefit of a great deal of investigation. From here on, research should carry us more swiftly.