

# Organization and Scope of Public Relations in State Highway Departments

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State highway departments are responsible for the development of highway systems adequate for serving the public and private transportation needs of the people. The discharge of these duties requires a relationship with the public which will permit advance planning, create the financial support necessary for maintenance, administration and new construction, and support the organization in its engineering decisions. Consequently, a public relations program is a vital management function.

This study explores the maturity of public relations in State highway departments, including such facets as the historic acceptance of the public relations responsibility; the utilization of professional communications specialist; the professional and personal qualifications of public relations directors; salaries paid to PR directors; PR staffs, including size, expenditures, scope of activities, and continuity of efforts; and status of the PR director in the organization.

•THE MOST IMPORTANT term in this report is "public relations." Some highway administrators may be offended by the use of the term "public relations" for what they prefer to call "public information." Several years ago, the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO) changed the name of its Committee on Public Relations and Publicity to Committee on Public Information. It was the sentiment of some members that public relations suggests too aggressive an activity for a public agency to engage in.

The investigator feels, on the contrary, that public relations is a more descriptive term for the programs conducted by the highway departments and that an exploration of the definition may produce closer agreement. He would, first of all, make the point that the practice of public relations, in spite of its detractors, is an honorable profession, and one which by and large enjoys a good reputation. (Having just come through a period of harsh criticism, highway administrations can understand how unjustly a whole profession can be maligned.)

In spite of the AASHO committee name change, papers on "public relations" are still given at AASHO meetings, highway leaders still call for enlightened "public relations" and many highway officials still label their own programs as "public relations" programs. So the term is still meaningful to many, if not most, highway officials. More important, however, is the fact that "public relations" more properly describes what state highway departments do than does "public information."

The most common definition of public relations, applied to a state highway department, would be those activities by which the department (a) provides for the expression of public opinion and adjusts its program in accordance with public requirements, and (b) interprets highway policies, accomplishments, and future needs to the public.

The fact is that state highway departments do provide this "two-way street." As public agencies they are obligated not only to provide public information, but to be governed by public demand. State highway departments do listen to the public; they do plan their programs with the public welfare in mind; they do adjust and modify their

original plans in response to public sentiments; they are governed by public opinion—directly through their own machinery and indirectly through the office of the governor and will of the legislature.

It is true that while in most state highway departments the flow of information out of the department is through the office of the public relations director, the flow of public opinion into the department is through many doors. In such cases there is no one public relations director. Public information director may be a more legitimate title. However, this study has sought to explore the broader public relations problems of the state highway departments.

The difference between public information and public relations is the difference between issuing news releases and holding public hearings. One seeks only to disseminate information so that people may be better informed. The other seeks to disseminate information and provides the machinery for the informed public to express its wishes. Any department which provides for a flow of information into as well as out of the organization is engaging in public relations. It is attempting to develop a constructive relationship with the public.

Another definition of public relations adds a third function to these two—the persuasion of the public to action or to a point of view. Some highway departments have adopted this philosophy. They believe that it is part of their job to build public support, not only through the dissemination of information, but also through promotion of a viewpoint (usually financial) which will advance the highway program. There is a fine line here, but a controversial one. One reflects an administrative responsibility; the other reflects a political responsibility. Probably all administrators feel that the public should be told what they will need in the way of future highways, for example, and what the cost will be. The politician feels that as a leader, he should develop a specific solution to such a political problem (and highway system development is a political problem, in the best sense of the word) and persuade the public to accept it.

In some highway departments, administrative and political responsibilities are closely allied. It is understandable that in an organization where top management has political responsibilities—namely, the promotion of certain specific solutions to the highway problem—its public relations program would be persuasive as well as informative. And the communication avenues utilized mainly by the "more administrative" department for informing the public would be utilized by the "more political" department for persuading the public. Perhaps, because they are in disagreement with this more aggressive concept of public relations calling for promotional activities, some highway officials prefer the term "public information." The fact remains that even the most conservative apparently feel a responsibility that meets both of the conditions of the common definition of public relations, i. e., not only to talk to people but also to respond to them. As public servants, highway administrators would be the last to limit their responsibilities to anything less.

#### ACCEPTANCE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

The great bulk of highway mileage in the United States falls under the jurisdiction of the 50 state highway departments. In any given state, the motoring and taxpaying public looks to the State highway department for the maintenance and improvement of its roads and streets. Highway administrators have historically accepted this prime responsibility without question. They have evaluated their highway needs and developed long-range plans to correct inadequacies. To what extent have highway departments accepted a correlated responsibility to account to the public for their activities?

For many years, highway engineers felt that their work should speak for itself and that publicity was a superfluous, even a suspicious, activity. The post-war period brought new emphasis to the need to establish relationships with the general public, to be concerned about "public relations." A great deal more money was needed than ever before to rebuild state highway networks, reorganizations were obviously in order, and a flood of new motorists was building up as the result of increases in population and automobile ownership and the growth of the trucking industry.

Before 1952, few state highway departments had the professional skill or the inclina-

tion, apparently, to conduct a public relations program. D. C. Bray, chairman of the AASHO Committee on Public Relations and Publicity found that only about 60 percent of the departments had someone in full-time public relations work, and these men were not experts. Fully a third were highway engineers, and almost all of the remainder had training only in the publications field. In evaluating the extent of public relations at that time, Bray said:

State highway departments do a fairly complete job of announcing highways soon to be placed under construction, but this is the only public relations activity that can be said to be carried on by all or a large portion of the departments. Many of the departments do very little to inform the public of the character and extent of highway needs and are not making a planned effort to gain public support for needed improvement programs....

Quite a few states assign funds to public information work annually in an amount equal to the cost of a good size culvert and only a few provide funds that would pay the cost of a mile of high-type surfacing.

The highway financing situation worsened yearly during the early 1950's and as it worsened, more highway officials recognized the need to carry their case to the general public.

William Bugge, director of the Washington Department of Highways, declared that the public relations of highway departments suffered from their reluctance to report to the public. However, he warned, "The fact is that highway engineers are public employees and the public will have what it wants out of us. The public is our body of customers." He urged the engineers to speak up in their plight. "Silence may be golden, but in this business the result may turn out to be something quite different." It had become the policy of the Washington organization, he said, to select engineers who, besides possessing technical qualifications demonstrated an ability to meet the public.

Passage of the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act largely solved the financing problem, but it did not lessen the need for the states to develop and maintain good relationships with the public. Obtaining acceptance of the concept of limited access was a major PR problem. Preparing the public for acquisition of wide stretches of right-of-way was another. The Federal act required the states to conduct literally thousands of public hearings and to obtain the approval of their location plans by dozens of local communities. All these requirements forced the highway departments into the spotlight of public attention, and usually at a disadvantage. As it developed, exaggerated claims of fraud, collusion and mismanagement in the highway program created another major PR problem.

It is to the credit of state highway administrators that they began to accept responsibility for good public relations as a pressing administrative responsibility. The size of PR staffs was increased. More specialists in the art of communication were retained. A survey in 1957 by AASHO revealed that 33 states then had PR sections.

The next five years saw rapid development in this field. A survey by the author in 1962 indicated that 47 states had retained a full-time PR director. In the other three states, some other administrative official had some responsibility for carrying out PR activities. Figure 1 succinctly indicates the establishment of PR units in state highway departments.

The trend to place this responsibility in the hands of professional PR men, that is, men trained in public relations work, rather than for newspaper work or some other one of the specialized areas of communication, has lagged somewhat behind. But that merely reflects a general public relations trend. There are still only a comparatively few men trained in the broader field of public relations, communication and public opinion.

Actually, it is apparent, from the variety of PR activities in which the normal highway department engages that these men are quite capable of adopting communication skills other than the one of their previous training. Today's highway department public relations director not only writes releases for the newspapers, but also develops radio

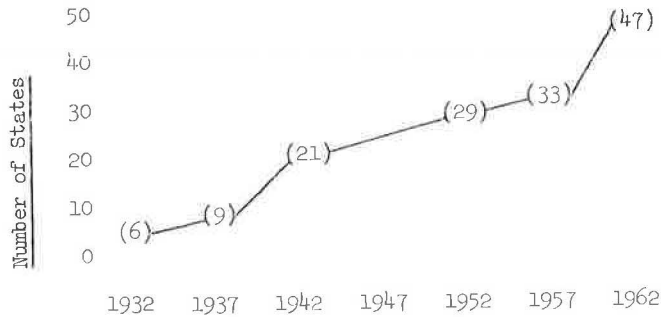


Figure 1.

and television programs, produces motion pictures, conducts essay contests, stages field tours, creates annual reports, compiles material for legislators, produces material for elementary schools, and conducts public hearings.

There is no question but what the public relations director of a state highway department has become a valuable man of many skills and much experience. Few organizations, private or public, require, in one man, the ability to tackle so many communication projects. This is the kind of professional growth which has taken place within the last five years.

Statistically, what do we know about today's state highway department PR director? Following are some of the findings of the author's survey in 1962.

#### Educational Qualifications and Experience

Thirty-three of the 47 PR directors have a college degree. Of these, six have earned Master of Arts degrees. Twelve of these college graduates hold their degrees in journalism or public relations. Of 39 reporting their previous experience, 31 came from mass media. The 23 who reported their tenure in that field gave a total of 240 years of such experience (for an average of 10.4 years each). Twenty directors reported some prior experience in public relations (an average of 8.6 years each). Five had no experience in communication.

#### Size of PR Staff

The 1957 AASHO survey indicated that the states had PR staffs ranging from one to seven, with the greatest number claiming three to five men and women. The total was 218. This number included graphic artists, newsclipping clerks, librarians, receptionists, layout specialists, stock clerks, mail clerks, model makers, depictees, messengers, uniformed patrol officers, audio-visual specialists, delineators, and map makers.

The 1962 AASHO survey found staffs ranging from 1 to 18, for a total of 267 men and women. The gain: 49 persons. The total number of 267 included 82 persons with college training in journalism, 100 with newspaper experience, 76 with other training in writing, and 67 photographers. The supporting personnel force included stenographers, messengers, mimeograph and addressograph operators, mail clerks, filing clerks, newsclipping clerks, receptionists, artists, librarians, layout specialists, map makers, model builders, scriptwriters, radio and television technicians, research and statistical analysts, switchboard operators, exhibit supervisors, and visual aid designers.

The author's survey in 1962 and 1963 sought to determine how many of these were professional men and women, i.e., directors, writers, and photographers, but not graphic artists, stenographers, file clerks, or other supporting personnel. Replies were as follows:

TABLE 1  
PROPORTION OF PR STAFF TO TOTAL  
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES IN  
DEPARTMENT<sup>a</sup>

State	Size of Staff	Ratio
Ala.	1	1:4,664
Alaska	2	1: 550
Ariz.	2	1:1,618
Ark.	-	-
Calif.	11	1:1,586
Colo.	2	1: 977
Conn.	8	1: 594
Del.	-	-
D. C.	-	-
Fla.	3	1:2,244
Ga.	1	1:6,665
Hawaii	1	1: 915
Idaho	2	1: 749
Ill.	2	1:4,174
Ind.	2	1:2,887
Iowa	2	1:1,627
Kan.	5	1: 799
Ky.	4	1:1,895
La.	2	1:3,611
Me.	2	1:1,511
Md.	2	1:1,922
Mass.	-	-
Mich.	4	1:1,296
Minn.	5	1: 813
Miss.	2	1:1,558
Mo.	4	1:1,541
Mont.	3	1: 658
Neb.	2	1:1,269
Nev.	2	1: 578
N. H.	2	1: 784
N. J.	7	1: 775
N. M.	1	1:2,235
N. Y.	3	1:5,181
N. C.	4	1:2,499
N. D.	-	-
Ohio	4	1:2,815
Okla.	3	1:1,169
Ore.	3	1:1,193
Pa.	-	-
R. I.	1	1:1,176
S. C.	3	1:1,538
S. D.	3	1: 602
Tenn.	1	1:5,952
Tex.	15	1:1,083
Utah	2	1: 944
Vt.	1	1:1,190
Va.	3	1:3,483
Wash.	2	1:2,013
W. Va.	4	1:1,615
Wis.	3	1: 726
Wyo.	2	1: 663

<sup>a</sup>Based on last available staff figure (there is likely to be considerable disparity in this table, inasmuch as some States reported photographers assigned to the PR staff, whereas in other States, they are assigned to some other department).

Size of Staff

1	7
2	17
3	9
4	6
5-6	2
>7	4

No. of States

The total number under this definition (in 45 departments) was 143 with an average three per state highway department.

Table 1 indicates how many professional men in each state are devoting their full time to some phase of public relations. It also shows the proportion of PR staff to total number of employees in the department. This proportion runs from 1:550 to 1:6,665. The average is one PR man to each 1,874 other employees.

Spreading PR Work Load

As noted previously, size of the staffs reported in the AASHO polls is not a completely valid indicator of how much manpower is actually applied to public relations. The 1957 survey indicated that large staffs usually mean that some other activity, such as safety or personnel training is being handled in the same department as public relations.

In other states, many more are engaged in public relations work than the size of the professional staff indicates. A number of departments hold the philosophy that public relations, as a practical matter, must be carried on by nonspecialists. This is particularly true in the field. In these states, the PR director does not try to carry the full burden. He conducts continuing in-service training programs and feeds material to the field offices to make this aspect of their work easier.

The district engineer, particularly, serves on the public relations "front." In some states, he makes his own editorial contacts, answers all press queries relating to work in his district, serves as spokesman for the department on policy matters, appears on radio and television programs, and conducts such other PR activities as he sees fit. Describing this delegation of public relations responsibility to the field, a California official recently said:

Our program is not handled by one department.... The key man in achieving our objective probably is the district engineer. He is 'Mr. Highways' in his area. It is he who deals with local governments and city and county engineers and planners. It is he who addresses service clubs and other organization. It is he who gets the complaints and the plaudits and answers questions.

In those California districts where the public relations work load has become too large for the district engineer or his administrative assistant to handle, a public information specialist is assigned to the field office. They do not work under the chief public information officer in Sacramento headquarters. They are supervised by the district engineer. At this time, the decentralized California public relations staff organization includes three public information officers and two assistant public information officers in Sacramento headquarters, four public information officers in Los Angeles, and one public information officer in each of two other districts. (In the other districts the district engineer still handles the public information operation.) This full-time 11-man force constitutes the largest staff of professional PR men in a state highway department, not engaging in tourist promotion. Even so, the department feels that it is conducting a rather conservative public relations program.

Other states lean heavily on their engineer field forces to maintain their public relations. According to the Texas Highway Department, this lack of enough professional PR men to go around is a blessing in disguise.

We operate just a little differently in Texas due to our own situation and the size of our state. Texas is 900 miles from tip to tip, and it is simply not practical for us to take part in activities on a local level, except in certain instances where our specialized knowledge is required. We have placed our emphasis instead on thoroughly selling our top administrators on the practical value of public relations, and in seeing that these ideas are carried down the line to our district engineers and their key employees. Over a period of years our district engineers have, as a whole, become aware of the value of good public relations and are quite capable of handling the normal situations which arise in their districts. We believe this is a healthy situation since it means we can conserve our own staff and services for operations on a state-wide level.

This decentralization also fosters a thorough understanding of public relations on the part of our district engineers, who understand what it can and also what it cannot do. As you know, most engineering administrators like to handle their own public relations until they get in trouble and then they call for the professionals. We have been able to avoid this attitude to a large degree because our district engineers have learned that public relations is preventive maintenance which must be practiced day to day, and is not something you merely call on in an emergency after the horse has been stolen.

### The PR Director's Salary

Forty-two states responded to this investigator's request (1960) for information on salaries. The range in base salaries was from \$6,000 to \$12,000 a year. The median salary was \$7,942 and the average salary was \$8,402. The complete range is given in Table 2, along with the range of salaries obtained from the 1962 AASHO survey. The average salary in 1962, indicated by the AASHO survey (using the high figure where a range was given) is \$9,465. Using the low figure where a range was given, the average is \$8,882. The median salary, using the high figure where a range was given, is \$9,100. The median salary, using the low figure where a range was given, is \$8,500. These figures are in vivid contrast to the national average range of \$15,000 to \$25,000 for public relations directors reported to the investigator by the Public Relations Society of America.

TABLE 2  
SALARY RANGE OF PUBLIC  
RELATIONS DIRECTORS

Salary Range (\$)	No. of States
(a) Investigators 1960 Survey	
6,000 - 7,000	10
7,000 - 8,000	11
8,000 - 9,000	6
9,000 - 10,000	7
10,000 - 11,000	3
11,000 - 12,000	5
(b) AASHO's 1962 Survey	
5,000 - 6,000	1
6,000 - 7,000	7
7,000 - 8,000	9
8,000 - 9,000	12
9,000 - 10,000	7
10,000 - 11,000	7
11,000 - 12,000	5
12,000 - 13,000	1
14,000 - 15,000	4

TABLE 3

SALARY RANGE OF ASSISTANT  
PUBLIC RELATIONS DIRECTORS

Salary Range (\$)	No. of States
3,000 - 4,000	1
4,000 - 5,000	4
5,000 - 6,000	5
6,000 - 7,000	13
7,000 - 8,000	11
8,000 - 9,000	1
9,000 - 10,000	1
10,000 - 11,000	1
12,000 - 13,000	3

"How many times has 'top management' changed in the period of your employment as director of public information? (By 'top management' we mean the overall policy-making commission or official, not the chief engineer or top administrative official, unless this man is also the top policy official.)" Replies were as follows:

No change	13 states	One change	4 states
Normal staggered change in commissioners as required by law	8 states	Two changes	6 states
		Three changes	7 states
		No information	2 states

Salary ranges of assistant public relations directors, as reported by 40 states, are given in Table 3. Table 4 gives a breakdown of the salary ranges found.

#### His Job Security

How long can the average public relations director expect to hold his job in the state highway department? The prevailing opinion is that personnel in state highway departments lead an uneasy existence and that political changes in administration are likely to force them out of work. It is commonly assumed that civil service eliminates such threats. With these assumptions in mind, a survey was made by the investigator to determine how many PR directors enjoy civil service standing.

Forty-one states replied to this query. In 24, it was found, the public relations director is appointed to his job. In 17, this is a civil service post, selection for which is made on the basis of a somewhat formal examination and appraisal of the candidate's qualifications.

A survey was made in 1963 to determine just how long state highway department public relations men have held their present position. Forty states replied to this question, with results as follows:

Years	No. of Directors
<1	2
1 - 3	13
4 - 6	11
7 - 9	8
10 - 12	2
13 - 15	2
>15	2

The national average was six years.

In another questionnaire sent to 40 states early in 1963, an attempt was made to determine how often the public information officer is subjected to changes as a threat to continuity. The question was asked:

TABLE 4  
RANGE OF SALARIES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS DIRECTORS

AASHO Survey of 1962 (\$)	Investigator's Survey of 1960 (\$)
15,600	12,000
15,000	11,964
12,600	11,878
11,800	11,645
11,501	11,200
11,280	10,240
11,180	10,140
11,000	10,140
10,744	10,000
10,635 - 11,935	10,000
10,500	9,840
10,380	9,600
10,000	9,500
9,948 - 12,096	9,444
9,875 - 12,839	9,144
9,600	8,664
9,500	8,658
9,500	8,400
9,400	8,100
9,240	8,004
9,000	8,000
8,700	7,884
8,568	7,800
8,500	7,800
8,500	7,764
8,376 - 9,984	7,680
8,316 - 10,608	7,500
8,220	7,440
7,920	7,392
7,800	7,200
7,800	7,200
7,800	6,900
7,600	6,750
7,560 - 9,600	6,600
7,536 - 9,756	6,300
7,488	6,300
7,392 - 9,012	6,156
7,228	6,120
7,200	6,034
7,124 - 9,100	6,020
6,900 - 9,120	6,000
6,900 - 7,800	
6,900	
6,780	
6,600 - 8,000	
6,600 - 8,000	
6,600	
6,577	
6,120 - 8,720	
5,148 - 6,630	

[These two columns do not represent the States in the same order and should not be read across.]



One would judge from this record that the longevity of the public relations director is not threatened by changes in top management.

Where do public relations directors "go from here?" The investigator knows of no instance during the two-year period since this study began of a public relations director being promoted to a higher management post. The probable reason is that in most cases the only higher jobs in the organization are those top-level or second-level management jobs for which some engineering background is a traditional requirement. However, 14 directors have left (or lost) their jobs with state highway departments during this period. A Federal agency personnel director with expert knowledge of state highway department personnel experiences was asked for his opinion of this rate of turnover. His response was that this is a "normal" turnover for this period.

#### SCOPE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS ACTIVITIES OF STATE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENTS

The investigator has conducted comprehensive surveys of state highway department PR activities in 1960 and again early in 1963. Findings of these surveys are as follows:

1. In most of the states, responsibility for press relations is a major function of the PR department; 42 states replying to this questionnaire reported that they write news releases, handle press conferences, develop feature articles and furnish other material to the press.

2. In 21 of the states, the public relations director does a certain amount of speech writing for other officials.

3. In 30 of the states, publication of a house organ is a PR unit function.

4. In 27 states, the PR director has some kind of responsibility for the annual report.

5. In 21 states, the PR department has produced a motion picture for general public showing.

6. In 21 states, the PR department is assigned some role in conducting public hearings.

7. It was difficult to determine just how widely radio and television are utilized by the highway departments. Scattered references to these media in papers and articles in the engineering press indicate increased use of radio and television, however. The North Carolina State Highway Commission has reported extensive coverage of hearings by radio and television representatives. On one occasion, a station with wide coverage broadcast the proceedings of a controversial public hearing for 12 hours continuously. The New Jersey State Highway Department reported that radio was used heavily during the 1961 Highway Week. One station conducted a "parade" of highway officials past its microphones, interviewing a total of 18 engineers and other administrators throughout the course of the day.

8. Some PR units have responsibility for distribution of road condition reports, roadside exhibits and rest areas, and tourist promotion.

9. One state, at least, develops educational materials for public schools. Iowa produces a special newsletter for the use of teachers and students which contains material on highway history, traffic safety, accomplishments of the highway department and future needs. Once a year, the department conducts an essay contest and gives public recognition to the student winners. A survey by the investigator in 1954 indicated that most highway departments, if not all, build exhibits for state and county fairs, for use at public hearings, and for display in lobbies of state government buildings. Some of these exhibits, particularly those prepared for state and county fairs, are quite elaborate and expose thousands of men, women and children to the message of the highway department.

In 1952, 1957, and 1962, the Public Information Committee of AASHO asked the states to list their public information activities. The survey by the AASHO Committee on Public Information yielded similar answers. The question was asked: "What single activity do you consider 'tops'?" Forty states reported they give most attention to the "continuing day-by-day service of providing accurate and timely information" to the news media. Other "most popular" activities listed were contacts with television sta-

tions, production of motion pictures, distribution of highway maps, personal contact with the press, public hearings, production of special publications, and observance of "National Highway Week." The full scope of activities and the number of states engaging in each were reported in the 1957 and 1962 AASHO polls. This information is given in Table 5.

Working with the press has historically been the most productive of the highway department's PR activities. Both the AASHO surveys and the investigator's indicate that the department leans heavily on the newspapers to help disseminate its PR story. The subject lends itself to ready acceptance by editors. The annual construction program, tax proposals to finance future projects, the condition of major routes during the summer "detour" months, measures to ease traffic congestion, and the proposed location of new freeways are just a few of the highway developments that rate front-page position. The departments have found that editors will search out the local angle in their news releases, develop their own human interest material, and frequently support the organization editorially. The fact that so many public information officers have worked as reporters also may explain their preference for this medium and their ability to work most effectively with it.

By and large, state highway departments rely on about as wide a range of media as other organizations. Beyond these channels to the public mind, however, they utilize some which are uniquely their own, or at least not common in other PR circles. These include the public hearing, dedication of new highways, construction project tours, and National Highway Week. These activities are relatively new, but they have been utilized so effectively by this specialized corps of PR men that the investigator has singled them out for greater attention.

TABLE 5  
SCOPE OF ACTIVITIES REPORTED BY STATE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENTS  
IN AASHO POLLS

Activity	No. of States Engaging in Each	
	1957	1962
Planning of activities to educate public	40	50
Feature stories	46	52
Regular news releases	40	51
Special news releases	48	49
Speeches for engineers	37	42
Open house activities	-	36
Informational meetings directed at improving public relations by employees	16	27
Bulletins on road conditions, contract lettings, construction detours, hearings, etc.	46	47
Radio spot news	32	43
Film strips and slides	-	37
Popularized annual report	28	27
Photographs for magazine and newspaper work	46	50
Arranging press interviews	44	44
Leaflets and brochures	37	44
Filling speaking engagements	-	36
Motion pictures	31	35
Television spots and features	35	40
Special work on public hearings	23	28
Employee publications	31	-

## EXPENDITURES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

How much money are public relations departments given to work with? It was difficult to obtain an answer to this question. In some states public relations activities are not budgeted separately at all; all departmental expenditures are merged under administration. In others, production costs are available, but not personnel costs, or personnel costs are available, but not production costs. Some personnel, such as photographers, draftsmen and mimeograph operators, although involved in public relations, are attached to other departments or work out of a pool.

By rechecking with many states on this point, it was possible to determine approximate expenditures for public information in 31 departments. The range was from \$5,000 to \$167,000, with an average of \$40,000. In 31 states, an attempt was made to relate public information expenditures to (a) total cost of administration, and (b) total disbursements for construction, maintenance, and administration. The ratio of the public information costs to total administration costs was an average of \$1 per \$129 of other administration costs, or 0.008 percent. The ratio of public information expenditures to total disbursements averaged 1:3,666. In other words, these state highway departments spent an average of \$1 for public information for every \$3,666 spent on construction, maintenance and administration. Thus, public information took 0.0003 percent of the highway dollar.

Do the public relations directors feel that their highway departments are spending enough money on public relations? Of 34 responding to this question, 21 answered in the affirmative; PR directors of the other 13 states would like to spend substantially more, from 25 to 300 percent more.

All of these data are drawn from the investigator's 1960 survey, undertaken for this study. Early in 1963, he sought to determine if expenditures for public relations had been increased during that period. Responses from 39 states polled indicated that:

1. Twelve states had increased their budgets in this two-year period—from a collective total of \$555,000 to \$641,000. The average increase was 15.5 percent.
2. Two states had "doubled" their expenditures, but gave no sum.
3. One state had boosted its budget by 50 percent, but gave no sum.
4. Eight states had not increased their expenditures.
5. Sixteen states had no information, mainly because this activity is not budgeted.

## CONTINUITY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS

It is generally accepted in the PR profession that one of the signs of the maturity of public relations in an organization is the continuity it has been able to achieve. Speaking of the importance of this element, Benjamin Fine, education editor of *The New York Times*, has said, "when an activity has no continuity, it runs the risk of losing impact, a status or quality that may have required years to achieve." John W. Gibbons, director of public relations, Automotive Safety Foundation, believes this warning applies particularly to state highway departments: "The public relations program should be firmly established as a function that carries over from administration to administration."

Continuity depends on several factors:

1. The development of a formal public relations policy—a determined statement of intent and objectives which will serve as a firm guide to all future activity.
2. The development of a long-range public relations action program to reach those specific objectives.
3. The longevity of top management responsible for maintaining PR policy.
4. The longevity of PR directors responsible for implementing the PR program.
5. The designation of public relations as a definite budgetary item that has come through the wringer of a fiscal evaluation.

In some of these aspects, state highway department public relations is still conceptually immature.

### Continuity Through PR Policies and Long-Range Programs

This study found little evidence of (a) policies regarding public relations as such, or (b) long-range PR programs to reach specific objectives. This does not deny that there is a great deal of day-to-day activity. It does mean that this activity, although it may be undertaken in good judgment, does not seem to be governed by a formal predetermined policy from top management, nor does it seem to follow a predetermined program of action. State highway administrators have not yet begun to give to public relations anywhere near the same thoughtfulness and planning which appears to be given to other aspects of engineering and management. For example, highway departments have become very adept at forecasting the traffic volumes and plotting their new construction needs 15 to 20 years in the future. They develop a long-range construction program to meet these anticipated needs. They determine their financial requirements years in advance. They develop a scheme of priorities to meet first needs first. No such effort is made to foresee future public opinion problems, to develop long-range measures to offset adverse opinion, to estimate the cost of maintaining (or rebuilding) public confidence, or to give priority to one type of public relations activity over another in the light of these problems.

This study hoped to determine, first of all, how many policy-making highway directors or commissions have developed what could be called the department's public relations policy. The author was successful in locating only a few such examples. Efforts were made, also, to determine if the departments' public information units are charged with responsibility for developing at least an annual program (based on a specific budget, as an example of intent). These efforts were largely unsuccessful.

Apparently, public information men in highway departments live one day at a time, making decisions as they go along and relying on their general sense of timeliness, relative importance and cost, to determine the wisdom of one activity or another. As one public information director told the investigator: "We drive by the seat of our pants."

The absence of long-range objectives and programs based on priorities may indicate that staff and budgetary limitations prohibit the planning of anything but the most immediate activities. The typical unit runs out of money and manpower before the day-by-day demands on it are met and long before its potential is explored. The development of a long-range program is merely an empty gesture in such circumstances. Consequently, only a handful of the 50 states are waging what might be called a program.

In the absence of a formal PR policy or program, some continuity of effort may be realized through the continuity of people responsible for this function. With this possibility in mind, the investigator attempted to determine (a) the continuity of top management itself in state highway departments, and (b) the continuity of staff personnel in the public relations unit. The possibility of developing a PR policy and maintaining a long-range PR program would depend somewhat on both. If the top management were stable enough to develop and advance a long-range PR program, a certain amount of turnover could be tolerated on the public relations staff level. Conversely, if there were continuity on the public relations staff level, some continuity of program could be expected. At least, the vital personal relationships with the communication media could be maintained. In states where changes are frequently made in both top management and PR staff, it is unlikely that a sound program of public information could be maintained. Both of these aspects of continuity are explored briefly here.

### Continuity Through Top Management

Policy formation in state highway departments is generally the responsibility of top management, which in these agencies generally takes one of two organizational forms: the single executive or the several-man commission.

The Highway Research Board has found that state highway department administrators or commissioners are elected in five states, appointed by the governor with legislative confirmation in 32 states, and appointed by the governor without legislative confirmation in 11 states.

In the 19 states where the department is administered by a single executive, this

chief administrator may serve a term of two, four, or five years, or a period which may be terminated at the pleasure of the governor. The tabulation is as follows:

<u>Length of Fixed Term of Office</u>	<u>No. of States</u>
Two years	3
Four years	9
Five years	1
May be terminated at pleasure of governor	6

In actual practice in six selected states (Connecticut, Illinois, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and New York), a total of 30 appointees to the top administrative post served a total of 227 years, for an average of 7.6 years. The average per state ranged from 5.7 years in New Jersey to 14.3 years in New Hampshire.

In the 29 states where the department is administered by a several-man commission, the term of office for commissioners runs from two to ten years, with the majority of them four years (in 10 states) and six years (in 12 states). In 28 of the states having boards of commissions of some kind, the terms of members are staggered. The objective of this practice is to build considerably more continuity into highway administration in these states. However, again, in spite of established terms, many commissioners do not serve their full term of office. In 14 selected states (Missouri, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Arizona, Iowa, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Oregon, and Kansas) only 290—or 54.4 percent of the 566 commissioners appointed—served their full terms. The average term of office held was 4.2 years.

#### Continuity Through Public Relations Staff

The longevity of public relations directors has already been examined. To summarize here, the average public relations director is under civil service protection in 17 states. The average PR official has been in his present job for six years. His position is not ordinarily threatened by changes in the policy-making top administrator or commission. It appears from these findings that the average public relations director is on the job long enough to establish rather firmly whatever public relations policy or long-range program is developed.

#### Continuity Through Budget

There is something about evaluating and formalizing an activity on a dollars-and-cents basis that tends to establish it. The investigator found in his survey that 28 states include public relations in their budgetary deliberations and allocate a firm sum for the conduct of that program. In the other states, this activity is treated as an administrative expense. The disadvantage is that the public relations director is placed in the position of having to prepare a case for every unforeseen opportunity. He can make no advance plans with the assurance that financing will be available. Such uncertainty weakens the continuity of public relations programming.

#### DOES STATE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT PR DIRECTOR INFLUENCE POLICY?

One of the basic definitions of public relations is that it functions as a two-way street. This definition assumes, first, the development of operating policies and activities that will win public support, and second, the publicizing of those policies and activities, to gain public recognition of the organization's good works. A more formal definition which says much the same thing is:

Public relations is the continuing process by which management endeavors to obtain the goodwill and understanding of its customers, its employees, and the public at large; (first) inwardly and through self-analysis, and (second) outwardly through all means of expression.

Some public relations men visualize themselves in this dual role (a) as a molder of top-level policy, and (b) as a molder of public opinion. There is general agreement on the second role. Most PR practitioners accept their duty of disseminating information—preferably slanted—about their organization, elaborating on the importance of the organization to the national economy and community life, and interpreting organization policy and activities in the most favorable light.

It is on the first point that a diversity of opinion exists. To exert such influence on operating policy would require, first of all, a rather elevated position in the organization, one in which the PR director would have the ear of top management. It would also require a reputation as being an expert on public opinion. Conceivably, in a high position of influence, and as an authority in matters of public opinion, the public relations director could exert an influence on company policy decisions.

The variety of opinion on this score is infinite. Some believe that the PR man is not equipped by training or education to assume such a lofty role. Some say the PR director should be merely a symbolic reminder to management that such an element as public opinion exists and warrants consideration in policy formation. There are others who go to the extreme and insist that public relations is the new "social conscience" and that the director of public relations should be the mentor and the instructor of top management in things of the spirit. The exercise of his wisdom and his influence on policy formation, these people believe, is the most important function of the PR director.

John P. Symes, director of industrial and public relations for Johns-Manville, takes this view in "Practical Public Relations." Mr. Symes said:

Public relations has two phases, then. It has first a management responsibility to see to it that basic policies are sound, and that these policies are carried out from day to day. No program can succeed unless the public relations man has both the authority and the energy to see that the company's policies are sound both in practice and expression. Its second phase is the constant development of ways and means to translate these policies and actions into simple, understandable expressions which will serve to create in the public mind a true and accurate impression of industry's vital role in the everyday lives of all of us.

To be effective, your public relations organization must start at the top. The chief public relations officer of every company should be the president, the managing director, or the chairman of the board, whichever is responsible for the creation of policies.

J. Handly Wright, a public relations consultant, asserted in an article in the July 1952 issue of the "Public Relations Journal" that the public relations director should initiate policy and then sell it to the top management. He listed several benefits from such procedure.

Third, the act of explaining or selling the plan to top executives provides a priceless opportunity to exchange thoughts on the fundamentals of public relations. The discussion which may be held with the executive committee or board of directors, and the final presentation of your plan with appropriate charts and graphs provides an opportunity unobtainable any other way to concentrate topside thinking on your operations. As a corollary to this, the approval of such a plan by the board or executive committee provides you with all the authority you need to pursue your operations under this blanket endorsement and removes the necessity of going back to the board for approval of every single step.

He then explains how the public relations department, with this authority can take its plans down the line to the department heads and key officials.

Herbert Baus, in "Public Relations at Work," lists the PR man, the "weathervane of public opinion," first among those who are responsible for policy development:

The making of the policy and the changing of it is the combined work of the public relations counsel, the top management, the board of directors, the research people, unsolicited reports, activities of every person in the organization, and information from any source that delivers it.

Management executes policy, which in the final analysis defines the blueprint of the public relations program.... Today management more and more engages public relations counsel, outside or staff, as the weathervane of public opinion to help maintain a healthy control and direction of policy, its application and its adaptation to changing conditions.

Another author declares the public relations director "always acts only as an advisor." He makes the point that public relations men "must recognize that theirs is the subtle task of planting ideas which management will eventually proudly espouse as its own." This author says also, "He (the public relations director) must work with other departments and help to make workable policy decisions."

Some highway administrators have expressed this view. Ellis Armstrong, former chief administrator of the Utah State Highway Department, and former U. S. Commissioner of Public Roads, said:

Just as the public relations counsel is a professional advisor to the president and Board of Directors of a corporation, so the public information officer of a state highway department is a professional advisor to the top officials of his agency.

A highway administrator can avoid (trouble) by consulting his information officer early on policies that affect the public.

A few years ago the Automotive Safety Foundation, in a management study of the Pennsylvania Department of Highways, considered this problem. Among other things, ASF recommended that a "public information" unit be established directly under the supervision of top management. According to ASF officials, this would be the most effective position for public relations in any state.

This study sought to determine how closely the public information director of a state highway department conforms, in theory and in practice, to this general concept held by the public relations profession. To determine if these men wield an influence on highway commission policy was an important objective of the research problem. The task required ascertaining:

1. Who makes policy in state highway departments;
2. Where, on this organization chart, the public relations director is placed in relation to the policy-makers; and
3. Whether he is called on to advise the commission on operating policy, regardless of his position in the administrative scheme.

#### Who Makes Departmental Policy?

There is no one standard form of administrative organization among the state highway departments. The Highway Research Board reports that a department may be directed by (a) a single executive, (b) a single executive with an advisory commission, (c) a single executive and a coordinate commission, (d) a limited-control commission, or (e) an administrative commission. The Board has classified each state by its particular administrative organization and identified the chief administrative officer. In another survey, completed in 1959, this same organization collected organization charts for each state highway department (1). These two studies together indicate at what level operating policy is formed in each state highway department and at what level it is administered.

#### PR Director in Organization Chart

The investigator relied heavily on these studies to help determine the position of the PR director in relation to the policy-making commission or official. He also ap-

proached, by various questionnaires and correspondence, the public relations directors, their immediate superiors, and independent organizations which have made management studies for highway department studies for highway departments.

It was necessary to resolve a number of inconsistencies. For example, 13 of the organization charts (1) did not include any mention of public information officers and it was necessary to ask each of the public relations directors of these organizations for his idea of where this unit fits. The chief administrator was approached, too. In a number of cases, it was difficult to ascertain the lines of authority.

One of the questions asked on the initial questionnaire was: "To whom does the public information director report?" Replies from 49 states, much additional correspondence, and a number of personal interviews have produced the following conclusions:

1. Thirty public relations directors work directly under the supervision of the official or officials who are responsible for development of policy.
2. Thirteen work under a chief administrative official who is not responsible for policy.
3. Six work under a division or bureau chief, two, three, or four levels removed from policy development.

In numerous cases the highway department is managed by a single executive or a commission chairman who is responsible for both policy determination and administration. In the 30 states where the PR director works under the supervision of this individual, it was difficult to ascertain if he is placed in this position to make a contribution to policy or for effectiveness of administration.

The investigator has interviewed a number of public relations directors on this point. It appears that when the average PR man reports that he advises his commission, he means that he advises it on matters relating to his department or to policy governing press relations. He speaks as a department head, not as an interpreter of public opinion. When the average PR director reports that he attends all commission meetings, he means that he does so, not necessarily as the representative of the people of the state, but as a representative of a department which must be informed on commission actions so that it may better represent the department's interests to the press. He attends not to bring something to the meeting, but to take something from it.

In the state highway department situation, the advice of the public relations director may be superfluous. Perhaps this is a case in which top management is exposed to public opinion oftener and more continuously than the public relations director. The highway commission is a politically sensitive organization, either directly involved in justifying itself politically, or at best, just one step removed from the political arena. No department, to the investigator's knowledge, is so insulated from public opinion that it can plot an arbitrary course. The public highways are public business. They are not the business of an agency so independent that it can plan and construct without regard to anyone except its own staff engineers.

Highway commissioners and administrators listen to chambers of commerce. They listen to testimony at public hearings. They listen to questions posed by reporters and television interviewers. They listen to queries posed by luncheon audiences. They listen to farm groups, motorists, truckers, contractors, county commissioners, mayors, and garden clubs. In fact, they listen to any aggrieved individual who has the courage to climb the capitol steps. This is the practical reason highway departments do not hire public relations directors to serve as staff experts on public opinion. Not only are they not usually exposed to public opinion as often as top management, but they are not particularly trained to interpret it.

There are exceptions. However, the dualism of public relations is not centered (in a state highway department) solely in the person of the public relations director. Here, for better or for worse, public relations is a shared responsibility.

The policy makers of the department—whether they be the members of a commission or the chief engineer—represent the public viewpoint in their policy deliberations. The administration implements these decisions in terms of planning and programming. The



public relations director interprets the organization—its policies, its objectives and its accomplishments—to the general public in such a way as to indicate the organization is acting in response to their interests.

His special contribution to the organization is his skill in disseminating meaningful information, and so helping to build public understanding and public confidence in the highway department.

#### Full Authority for Public Relations Programming

Another point must be made. Replies from both top administrators and PR directors indicate that the public information director is given responsibility for conducting PR activities with the authority he needs and apparently without too much direction. He formulates a press relations policy which may be imposed on the entire department. His recommendations for publicizing the objectives and accomplishments of the department and obtaining better public understanding are respected.

To an increasing extent, highway administrators realize their most persistent management problems are not those of personnel, purchasing, engineering or planning, but of public opinion. They respect the influence of the mass media and recognize that dealing with these media requires an expertness as specialized as designing bridges. These attitudes have been instrumental in leading many highway administrators to give their public relations directors a position in the organization from which they can work most effectively.

It is the investigator's conclusion that the dualism of public relations is not centered in the state highway department in the person of the public relations director. Only one branch of the "two-way street" to which public relations is likened, runs through the highway department PR office. This official is not considered the "social conscience of the commission." He serves that other vital aspect of public relations—the interpretation to the public of the organization's work on its behalf. His status depends not only on how seriously the administration takes its public relations, but also on the skill and imagination with which the PR director has played his vital role in this management function.

#### SOME IMPRESSIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR

The underlying objective of this study has been to determine, with as much validity as is possible, the status or the maturity of public relations as a function of state highway department administration.

All of the areas explored by the investigator yield some indications of "the state of the art"—the historic acceptance of the responsibility by top management, the current attitudes of highway officials toward public opinion, the recruitment of professional public relations directors and their qualifications, the status of these men in the organization chart, the size of public relations staffs, the amount of expenditures, the development of unique PR activities for gaging or influencing public opinion, the budgeting of public relations activities, and the existence of long-range programs.

As might be expected, only a few generalizations can be made. In others, there is no pattern. Some departments are far advanced; others lag.

Although it would be unwise to draw many generalizations from this study, the investigator would like to reveal several of the rather firm impressions his research has given him. He has been impressed by the attitude of contemporary highway administrators toward public relations. Top management seems to subscribe, with genuine sincerity, to several basic PR principles:

1. The belief that performance is the first prerequisite and that public relations activities cannot make up for any lack of conscientious, capable service in discharging the planning and engineering responsibilities of the organization;

2. The belief that the people whom an agency serves have "a right to know" and that given the facts they will make the right decisions—in highway matters, as in any other political problem;

3. The belief that the agency cannot act arbitrarily, but must make provision for

the expression of public opinion and must maintain a willingness to modify original plans to fit public desires; and

4. The belief that an organization must present a personality of complete integrity in dealing with the public, and that press relations must be constructed on rules that foster a relationship of mutual confidence.

The importance of such attitudes is simply that without them almost no progress could be made toward greater public relations maturity, and with them greater progress seems almost assured.

The investigator has been impressed, too, with the professional proficiency of some of the PR men now directing the public relations activities of the departments. The aggressiveness that goes into exploitation of National Highway Week, the candor which attends public hearings, and the imagination that characterizes highway dedications and press tours, are all indications of the capability of these men. Given money and opportunity, they have, as many administrators are quick to proclaim, produced more goodwill for the department than was previously thought possible.

There is another side of the picture. In a few states, public relations is still not considered important enough to warrant the recruitment of a full-time PR director. In many states, this activity receives far too small a portion of administration monies. Some states are dealing largely with the newspapers and are not developing enough contacts or program materials for radio and television. Motion pictures, probably the most powerful and popular media, are not widely utilized. Only a handful of states produce external house organs; not many have developed the annual report into an effective public relations tool. The investigator knows of no highway department in which the PR director has time to establish and build the vital, productive personal contacts required with media people.

Much more serious is the impression that one or two men can carry the public relations burden of the organization. Highway administrators have difficulty visualizing the work load of a PR department and the opportunities which could be seized if they had a proper complement of experts working for them. For some states, with two men at the professional level, the department probably should have six; states that seem satisfied with four should have ten.

The inadequacy of the public relations operation has been noted by consulting firms evaluating highway administrations. In several states where it has made such studies, the Automotive Safety Foundation, for example, has recommended substantially increasing the resources applied to this function. ASF's public relations director and a veteran in professional public relations circles, John W. Gibbons, believes that administrators have not yet set their sights high enough in this respect. He told an audience of western highway officials recently, "The number of qualified men and women now employed in public information work by state highway departments is, in my judgment, completely inadequate."

He pointed out that the needs and opportunities for public relations in the least populous state in the union may be infinitely greater than in some private enterprises which may have a staff of 12. "How many trained public relations practitioners are assigned full time to this work in your department? Is it 20, 40, 75? Or is it only a handful?"

Mr. Gibbons described, by way of contrast, the productivity of highway traffic safety agencies. The latest summary (for 1960), he said, showed that these state agencies produced 632 special publications, made a total of 190,000 speeches, conducted 140,000 film showings, created 226 motion pictures and slide films, distributed 17 million driver manuals, and scored column inches in newspapers and audience impressions on radio and television which were "astronomical."

A mental obstacle to a full-fledged public relations program, Mr. Gibbons felt, is the attitude that PR is something that can be accomplished by the courteous conduct of employees in the field and telephone receptionists in the headquarters office. Such a "passive policy" overlooks the fact that there is no comparison between the number of constructive impressions a professional public relations man can create through the mass media and the extremely few opportunities open to the average employee.

This investigator is inclined to feel that Mr. Gibbon's observations are valid. He

would add two more to the general judgment that too little money and too few men are assigned to this function of management:

1. There seems to be an almost total lack of advance planning and programing of public relations activities. The limitations of manpower and money may, as previously suggested, make it impossible to think beyond the problems of the hour. But, the lack is striking in the light of the great amount of research a state undertakes to determine other future needs.

2. There is an almost total absence of research in this area of highway administration. This investigator has been unable to locate one formal research project designed to increase the effectiveness of public relations techniques. Numerous papers have been given at annual meetings of AASHO, including the surveys of activities undertaken periodically, but apparently no funds have been allocated by any of the highway organizations for studies. The subject is covered only infrequently at meetings of the Highway Research Board. And the U. S. Bureau of Public Roads which supports millions of dollars worth of research in economics, engineering, and administration, has not yet seriously explored this aspect of administration.

The cardinal rule of healthy public relations is "performance first." No public relations man would question the wisdom of spending millions of dollars on research which will permit highway engineers to build better roads. However, as chief highway administrators have repeatedly said, one of the major problems of the department today is the problem of public relations. Widespread misunderstanding about factors such as highway costs, highway needs, and highway benefits, the operations of the department, the equality of highway taxes, and the economic and social effects of highway location probably produce more tension for the typical highway administrator than any one or a dozen technical problems. How much easier, how much more pleasant would be the work of the highway administrator if he knew for a certainty that the people of the state understood what he is trying to accomplish, were sympathetic to his problems, and were willing to give him the financial means for serving them better!

These are the natural by-products of a public relations program. They can be achieved, slowly but steadily, as highway administrators and their public relations specialists learn how to strengthen the bonds of goodwill between their organizations and their publics. The field for research is wide open.

At least three areas come immediately to mind as logical hunting grounds for the answers so urgently needed—the area of public opinion, the area of internal organization, and the area of public relations techniques. Specifically, such questions as:

1. What do people really think about their highway department? Is it possible that its reputation is better, or worse, than management imagines? Do people consider it effective, thoughtful and considerate, or arbitrary and overbearing in its decisions and negotiations? To what extent is public knowledge of highway matters adequate? What impressions need correction?

2. How many professional communications specialists are needed to conduct a public information program? How much money? Should these men work out of headquarters or field offices? How much of the load can resident and division engineers carry without reducing their effectiveness as engineers? What assistance can be expected from highway organizations and citizens' advisory committees?

3. Considering that money and manpower will always be limited, what are the most effective PR tools a department can utilize to widen the channels of communication between it and the public? What priorities should be assigned to press relations, public speaking engagements, National Highway Week, public hearings, annual reports, and external house organs? Is too much or too little effort and management time spent on dedications, for example, considering the return in public understanding and goodwill? Are motion pictures worth the cost?

The list could be lengthened almost indefinitely, for not only is the subject many faceted, but the body of present knowledge is skeletal.

The need is not for grand expeditions which lead only to academic conclusions, but

for individual studies which will produce enlightening answers--answers which will increase the effectiveness of the two-, four-, and six-man information staffs of typical highway departments and which will enable them to squeeze \$200,000 worth of goodwill out of a \$100,000 public relations budget.

Only through such intensive study and application, can state highway departments expect to enjoy the public confidence and acclamation which makes public service so personally and professionally satisfying.

#### REFERENCE

1. State Highway Organization Charts, 1959 Revision. Highway Research Board Special Rept. 53 (1960).