Community Response to Highway Improvement*

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Highway improvements may furnish the external stimulus essential for economic development in an area, but the immediacy of the response and the extent of economic growth also depend on the capacity for change existing within the community.

The Connecticut Turnpike had a favorable impact on the economic development of many towns in eastern Connecticut. Other communities in the same area were left relatively untouched. An attempt is made to illustrate the influence of human factors and social conditions on economic development with particular reference to the effect of a textile mill economy.

The textile mill has extended its influence into the latter half of the 20th century and left: (a) a labor force that does not readily improve its skills, (b) communities that tend to resist change and (c) a crisis approach to social action.

•HIGHWAYS AND highway improvements have always been instruments of social change. The social and economic consequences of earlier highways are well known. Patterns of land use were rewoven, the boundaries of trade centers were extended, villages appeared and disappeared, new resources were tapped and the value of existing resources was magnified. The parts of the nation were welded together and to some extent its destiny was shaped with each road-building program.

Until recently, highway planning has been concerned with existing or anticipated needs. Highways were considered the effects of social change, not its cause. If a new road happened to bring benefits to an area, this was considered an unexpected bonus. And if a highway improvement brought economic hardship, this was dismissed in the name of overall progress.

Not long ago scientists began to bring into focus the indirect benefits and disadvantages of highway improvements. The notion that highways can generate traffic as well as accommodate it and that they can be powerful forces for economic change logically followed. Congress and various state legislatures began to discuss highways in terms of this new dimension. The possibility of reversing economic trends in Appalachia by means of a highway system is a good illustration.

However, highways can furnish only the external stimulus for change. The response made to this stimulus depends on the capacity for change existing in the areas to be served. The presence of other resources, the availability of community leaders, and a plan for action are needed components for social action. Depending on the availability of these other elements, a new road can be either a minor irritant or a positive force for change. The ingredients for community development go far beyond adequate or even superior transportation.

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THE CONNECTICUT TURNPIKE—A CASE IN POINT

The Connecticut Turnpike was extended into eastern Connecticut for the avowed purpose of stimulating the economy of that area. The issue was clearly drawn. Protagonists for the new road stated that it would bring economic prosperity to a depressed section of Connecticut. Those who opposed the road argued that highways should follow, not precede, economic development. The highway was authorized and later a research project was instituted by the University of Connecticut in cooperation with the Connecticut State Highway Department and the U. S. Bureau of Public Roads to measure the impact of the new facility on the economy of the region.

The Turnpike has already had a favorable impact on eastern Connecticut. Manufacturing employment and wage rates have risen. Real estate values have increased markedly, especially in the vicinity of the interchanges. The volume of retail sales, a barometer of economic advance, has climbed more rapidly there than in the state as a whole. The tourist business, including summer homes and overnight accommodations, has grown. There has been an in-migration of population. Local governments are providing more and better services.

Part of this improvement can be traced to the Connecticut Turnpike. Perhaps the most important contribution of the Turnpike has been to infuse eastern Connecticut with a spirit of optimism. After several decades of marking time, the region has begun to prosper.

The effect of the Turnpike on the individual communities in eastern Connecticut was not uniform. Some of the towns were quick to take advantage of the opportunities made available by the new highway. Others responded more slowly, and some did not respond at all. For example, retail sales as measured by tax receipts increased 54 percent between 1954 and 1962 in the area served by the Connecticut Turnpike. Four of the towns registered large gains (300 percent or more), but three had increases of less than 25 percent and two others actually had a decline in retail sales.

Although manufacturing employment rose 42 percent for the Turnpike area as a whole between 1954 and 1963, nine towns showed a decline in the number of manufacturing employees. Real estate values rose in all of the towns, but in some the rate of annual appreciation was much higher than that in others. A similar situation prevailed with respect to summer homes. Between 1957 and 1962 their number and assessed value in a few of the 24 towns near the Connecticut Turnpike rose sharply. In others, very little activity was reported. Population growth and local governmental services developed unevenly among the towns.

Why did some communities in eastern Connecticut respond to the opportunities offered by the Connecticut Turnpike and why did other towns appear to be unaffected? A number of reasons have been suggested.

Location in relation to the Connecticut Turnpike probably was not involved. All of the Turnpike towns by definition were within 5 miles of the Connecticut Turnpike, and the large number of exits and entrances to the highway has brought the Turnpike close to all of these towns. The supply of labor is not concentrated in any area. New manufacturing companies which came to eastern Connecticut have recruited labor in many different towns. Existing commuting patterns suggest a mobile labor force and shifting labor market areas. The presence of raw materials has not been an important ingredient in site location in Connecticut for 200 years. Almost all manufacturing in the state requires imports of raw materials. Available factory space may have had a discernible effect on the location of manufacturing firms in some towns and not in others, but most of the evidence suggests that vacant buildings have not been much of a magnet.

The extent of economic development in each of the Turnpike towns probably has been influenced by a variety of human factors and social conditions. These, in turn, can be understood only in their historical perspective. This history of eastern Connecticut is largely the history of the textile mills which, until the middle of the 20th century, dominated not only the economy, but also much of the fabric of social life. Most of the mills had departed by the time the Connecticut Turnpike was built, but their influence persisted, and it has adversely affected the capacity of the population to respond to change.

The physical and economic environment of eastern Connecticut was ideally suited to textile mills in the first years of the 19th century. An abundant water supply marked by sharp drops in levels provided the water power essential for the early mills. A labor force consisting of men, women, and children was available and growing. The rocky hillside farms could not compete with western agriculture, and many families turned to mill employment. At the same time investment capital, accumulated from nearby shipbuilding yards and centers of commerce, became available. Cheap cotton from the South and the nation's desire to be freed from the shackles of England completed the picture.

The Yankee entrepreneur provided the ingenuity and the managerial ability as well as the capital. He assumed a paternalistic attitude toward the laborers who worked in his factories. Within the mill the assigned role and status of the worker was one of subordination characterized by the acknowledgment that the Yankee manager knew what was best. The dependence and inertia of the workers extended outside the factory walls. Mill owners dictated the housing, the schools and other local services to be provided, the tax rate, and most other matters of community importance.

Immediately after the Civil War, a severe scarcity of labor prevailed in the textile industry. Mill owners began to look around to find a supply of labor to meet their needs. The immigrants from western Europe did not meet the requirements, but the French Canadian population to the north seemed to have the ideal characteristics (1): "They are considered very desirable 'help' by the employers, in as much as they are generally docile...do not object to long hours, nor disapprove of their children working in the mills."

From the start it was a happy decision. The attitude of the French Canadian immigrant meshed neatly with Yankee values. The Canadian farms on which they lived before coming to eastern Connecticut were family economic units. Everyone worked, and this work ethic remained intact when it was transferred to an industrial situation. Parents expected their children to enter the mills as part of the family effort. The wages, as low as they were, meant more money in the pocket than their farms in Canada had been able to provide.

The workers were industrious but lacked occupational versatility and the incentive for upward mobility. Strong family ties and devotion to their church gave them satisfactions which complemented the more materialistic goals of the Yankee ruling class.

Frugality, long a tradition of the native-born mill owners, was also inherent in the peasant farming operations of the French Canadians. Closely allied to personal frugality was distrust of public expenditures. The paternalistic mill owner provided public services on the level he wanted, and these seemed to meet the requirements of his labor force without necessitating any effort on their part.

Rivers initially determined the dispersion of the mills, but the expansion of the mills and later the railroads spawned the growth of many small densely populated mill villages which tended to become self-contained entities. Geographical isolation was accompanied by mental and social isolation favored by mill operators and immigrants alike. A form of self-imposed segretation developed and reinforced itself with each generation. Segregation of already cohesive groups into their own settlements was dysfunctional to the assimilation process.

The basic conservatism of the workers, reinforced by their peasant background, their strong family and religious ties and the attitudes of their employers, was given an additional impetus by the nature of the work itself. Textile operations are essentially machine-paced activities. A worker's speed is geared to the machines he tends. There is little or no incentive or even opportunity to learn new skills or to improve the skills already known. This tends to freeze the textile worker in his job and to complicate the retraining task. Components of the achievement ethic, such as ingenuity, the need for education, the desire to get ahead and community responsibility, were not encouraged by the everyday routine of mill workers.

When the Connecticut Turnpike was built, an opportunity was presented to replace the fading textile industry with a diversified manufacturing complex and to rebuild the system of community services to conform to modern standards. In part, this has been achieved. But change comes slowly in a situation where the human resources them-

selves must be rebuilt. The textile mill has extended its influence into the second half of the 20th century. Its presence is felt in three ways.

A Labor Force Unwilling to Improve Its Limited Skills

Workers in eastern Connecticut are heavily concentrated in the blue collar classification, and a relatively large proportion of them are unskilled. Many others are equipped with skills that are largely obsolete. Textile mill owners tended to discourage both industrial and occupational diversification. A plentiful supply of cheap labor was their goal. The workers were content with this arrangement and placed a low value on acquiring either an education or a variety of skills. The transition from a kind of peasant agriculture to a machine-paced occupation was the extent of their willingness to change.

The closing of the textile mills left large segments of these workers without employment and without skills needed for reemployment. They were reluctant to learn new skills, and many lacked the education necessary for retraining. Former textile workers are less likely to migrate, and, in addition, tend to resist nontextile employment (2).

The educational attainment of workers in some of the Turnpike towns is relatively low. In Connecticut, 43.8 percent of the persons 25 and over have at least a high school education. In ten of the Turnpike towns less than 35 percent of the population have high school diplomas, and in seven of the towns less than 30 percent finished high school. In some of the towns from 8 to 10 percent of persons 25 and over have had less than 5 years of schooling.

Younger people in the community are securing more education than their parents, and since they have not been exposed firsthand to the textile mill psychology, many of them understand the importance of getting an education and acquiring diversified skills. The community at large has experienced difficulty in maintaining a higher quality educational program to meet these expectations. Low incomes suggest low taxes, and when this is coupled with an indifference to the need for education, support for the school system is lacking. Dependency ratios are high in the area which has more than its share of both children and older persons. The budgets for education in some of the Turnpike towns are exceedingly low. In Connecticut the net current expenses per pupil were $422 in 1961-1962. Eight of the Turnpike towns had per pupil expenses of less than $350. Teachers' salaries remain low and educational facilities are inadequate in these towns.

A few of the parents send their children to private schools. A system of parochial schools exists in several of the towns. Migration patterns show that many of the more ambitious and college-trained young people leave the area. The younger people who remain are often frustrated by the attitude of the older residents. The task of attracting new industries and upgrading community services becomes difficult in the face of such apathy.

Communities Tending to Resist Change

Active civic concern for pressing community problems, such as the need for planning and zoning, the need for new roads and adequate road maintenance, industrial development, recreation, and the persistent need for an improved educational system, is held back because of a strong traditional orientation against change.

The departure of the textile mills after their domination of local affairs for so many years had placed a burden on the leadership structure. Paternalism did not encourage participation. When both the administration of local affairs and policy making were in the same hands, there was scant opportunity for new leadership.

The low educational level of a substantial part of the population has tended to retard the rise of local initiative. There is a lack of apprehension of vital community issues and a general reluctance to become acquainted with local problems or to realize that local action may be a solution. The inadequately informed public is sometimes further hampered by a lack of communication between local officials and the citizens.

The high degree of social cohesion existing within relatively small segregated settlements (villages) has inhibited action on the town level and has almost completely stymied regional activities. The population is family and village oriented; the town and the region are of secondary importance. Structural problems within local governments are another product of a village-oriented community. The overlapping of boroughs, towns, fire districts, school districts, and other governmental units presents knotty problems of taxation, administration, and authority. The machinery of government is not geared for prompt action or change.

Finally, outsiders who promote zoning, industrial development, and regional planning are often held in low esteem. Newcomers to the area are reluctant to take an active part in community affairs because of the resentment they might incur. Progress in community improvement under these conditions seems glacially slow.

A Crisis Approach to Social Action

The public's inattentiveness to local issues and its general reluctance to support any change in the status quo have stifled community action but have not obliterated it. Many town officials, as the mill owners before them, recognize the latent power of an aroused citizenry. They consider the voters apathetic but not anesthetized. Town meetings are usually poorly attended, but now and then the population is goaded into action by the magnitude of the problem.

This approach to action has led community leaders to use the deferment technique. New proposals are not presented on their merit for local action because they probably will be defeated, and prestige will be lost. Instead they are deferred until widespread support arises out of dispair. In too many instances this has resulted in action that came too late to be of positive advantage. Complete collapse may be avoided in this way, but it does not promote steady progress.

The Connecticut Turnpike suggested the possiblity of positive action, and some communities in eastern Connecticut were quick to take advantage of it. Others have preferred to wait to see what will happen. During the delay, problems in some towns may accumulate to such an extent that a crisis situation will exist. Only then will these towns begin to realize the full potential of the Turnpike.

It becomes apparent that the long domination of textile mills in eastern Connecticut has served as a barrier to community development. The paternalism of mill owners, the apathy of workers and the ecological distributions of mill villages have created a set of community values that in some instances have delayed community response to highway improvements.

Communities cannot expect to benefit from highway programs if they do not have or cannot acquire the other ingredients essential to economic growth. A new highway may be a necessary condition for economic development, but it is not a sufficient condition.

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