

PROGRESS REPORT OF DIVISION III — ROADSIDE CONTROL

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IN 1933 the Highway Research Board, through its director, the late R. W. Crum, became interested in the increasing menace to the safety, comfort, and enjoyment of the American public traveling on the highways of this country, due to the presence of unsightly and dangerous outdoor advertising along the highways. At that time, Crum assigned W. Verne McCown to make a preliminary survey of the general situation. It was found to be most discouraging and depressing.

One result of this survey was the organization of a joint committee of the Highway Research Board and the American Association of State Highway Officials. Another direct result was the more thorough organization of the Highway Research Board program itself as related especially to the increasing technical problems of the road-sides. Several subcommittees were formed and began careful studies of such important difficult problems as the need for wider rights-of-way; streamlining the old stiff alignment and cross section which highway engineers had inherited from the railroads; problems of checking and control of erosion; turfing, seeding and mulching shoulders and slopes; disease and insect control; and many other problems of economics especially in connection with roadside maintenance and operations. During this series of studies of roadside problems, this committee gained and enjoyed the cooperation and confidence of highway engineers and officials throughout the country. But, unfortunately, I feel that, temporarily at least, we seem to have lost sight of one of the first reasons for the founding of this joint committee: namely, the elimination or control of objectionable, dangerous, unsightly outdoor advertising which is continuously menacing the safety and enjoyment of the rapidly increasing American public traveling on our highways.

Among other things, two careful research studies were made in Iowa and Michigan to determine the relationship of outdoor advertising to accidents and the safety of those traveling on the highways. Both of these seem to prove beyond much doubt that the growth of advertising and business adjacent to most American cities and towns is a menace to the safety of the traveling public. These studies are continuing. This past year a study has been started to determine what, if any, progress has been made since Crum's first study in 1934 in the elimination or control of this increasingly dangerous situation confronting the traveling public.

The decentralization of both industry and population in this country, from a defense standpoint in particular, has rapidly accelerated this dangerous and unfortunate situation. Therefore, as a start in the preparation of a final report next year, this division of the committee has initiated an effort to find out, if possible, the present trends and situation.

The situation is not quite as discouraging as we had feared. In fact, the response to a simple questionnaire, particularly from landscape engineers, state roadside councils, Federated Garden Clubs, and other civic organizations was almost 100 percent. One hundred replies were received from more than 40 states to the following seven questions:

1. Have outdoor advertising conditions in your state improved in recent years?
2. If not, what, if any, laws, rules or regulations have been enacted, or other means or measures taken in your state for the control or elimination of present conditions?

3. What means are proposed for future enactment?

4. What is, in your opinion, the chief cause of present conditions?

5. Do you think that country or regional zoning regulations would help to solve the problems of unsightly and dangerous outdoor advertising, rural slums, and ribbon development?

6. If not, what other means of control should be taken and by whom?

7. What groups or other agencies of government or private citizens should and could be most helpful?

Before attempting to analyze the great volume of replies from the 40 states, I wish to comment briefly on the recent publication of the AAA, "Roadside Protection". This seems to me to be the most complete and thorough treatment that this subject has yet received. It was particularly pleasing to see in the appendix of this publication several of the specific recommendations that were presented to this committee at its final meeting last year. However, much as I approve and appreciate this authoritative AAA publication, one statement in it needs further study and clarification by experience. That is on the effective results of "voluntary cooperation." Replies from throughout the country indicate that this method of approach has not been successful in other states, as it has been in the State of New York. However, further commendation should be given to an action program that the AAA publication has outlined, and the need for a continuing vigorous program of publication emphasized. This corresponds in part to the unanimous replies received from all the 40 states.

A most encouraging revelation brought out not only by our questionnaire but also by such authorities as David R. Levin and the AAA publication is the widespread belief that the aesthetic taste and sensibilities of the American traveling public is rather rapidly and constantly rising. This fact is evidenced by many recent court decisions and proves that things tolerated formerly are now no longer permitted to exist. This evidence should not have any deterrent effect on our struggle towards higher standards, but at least it gives assurance that there is to be no "tyranny of taste," as it has been dubbed by Levin. The safety and economy approach find ready response in the courts of the United States and improve roadside conditions throughout the nation more rapidly than the "horrors" emphasis on highway fatalities and vitiated unsightly roadsides. The safety approach always finds universal interest; that is and has been the motivation of most recent research. Results of several studies have indicated beyond much doubt that outdoor advertising is a distracting element; otherwise such advertising would be valueless. The economic value of such advertising should be proven by statistical research if possible but, of course, "dead men tell no tales" and those involved in traffic accidents are not going to admit that their attention was distracted or diverted from the road by advertising signs.

It is my personal belief that outdoor advertising seldom pays for the investment involved. In other words, the outdoor advertising industry has greatly oversold the market. While on the subject of economies, let us consider the question of conservation of materials, such as steel, lumber, paint and paper that could be used in the defense program or the building of homes for workers.

It should not be necessary to emphasize the aesthetic aspect but when the AAA publication says, on page 126, in Appendix D, "outdoor advertising should not be erected in scenic or protected areas as determined by the voluntary roadside improvement committees in their respective states," the whole question, in my mind, becomes one of the composition of the local committee -- whether it is of disinterested citizens not

motivated by commercial considerations but by considerations of the welfare of the community as a whole.

In fact, the composition of these committees should be carefully guarded. From the outdoor advertising point of view, when the word "scenic" is used, they think of the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone Park, the Great Smokies, and Glacier National Park all combined in one; they don't appreciate the universal rather natural pastoral landscapes so predominant throughout the nation.

Now, at long last, back to a final summary of the results of our questionnaire. Of the 40 states replying to Question 1, 30, or three quarters, said that roadside advertising conditions are worse than they ever were and are growing worse constantly. Among those who said improvement was noted, almost all were in regions where the most congestion exists -- in eastern states and perhaps in southern California. Another answer showing the greatest unanimity was the one on zoning which nearly all favored though they were not very specific in their suggestions as to how zoning should be done.

Another thought generally approved was that the public taste and education and a solid public opinion regarding the value of a natural wonderful landscape should be backed by vigilant, articulate groups to force action. All this is needed before effective results can be expected. There was no general agreement on just who or what organization should assume this task, except that women's clubs and garden clubs were most frequently named as being most effective. Some favored the chambers of commerce, businessmen's clubs and others.

From my personal observation and contacts, it is my feeling that the Non-Partisan League of Women Voters is the most unbiased, public-minded, articular group we have today in this country, at least in many states and communities. Where they have become interested in any public cause or problem, they have approached the task intelligently and with vigor and effectiveness.

Now let me outline in brief some of the things for our program next year.

This rough preliminary outline is submitted for your approval and alteration, as you see fit. But first let this committee frankly approve or disapprove the objectives and standards presented last year, or modify them to meet present thinking.

Another task might be the careful working out of a model bill or bills to be submitted to all state legislatures for adoption or amendments. In this bill should be provision for a well-financed and supported landscape division in each highway department, following up the splendid work of the CCC and WPA. The subcommittee working on this model bill should include, if possible, a lawyer or one familiar with legal language and legislative procedures.

We seem all agreed that the public tastes and standards are rising and improving and that a persistent educational campaign is needed on a long-term basis. This committee should set the base and standards of thought on this important subject by publishing our program and findings from a technical, professional and legalistic basis. In this we would be contributing our bit to the raising of public taste in the United States for the preservation of the great American landscape. It will be a long struggle but there is much encouraging evidence, so this preliminary report ends on an optimistic note. Our oponents may be selfish, and unscrupulous, and persistent, and their ways may be devious; let us follow their lead in persistence but never stoop to obscenity in dealing with the public where the great natural outdoors is concerned.

By doing a thorough job this year in studying analyses of progress to date, I

firmly believe that this section of the manual can be one of the most productive of lasting results. When this committee turns in the final report next year, I hope that the committee may carry on until the roadsides of the American highways are worthy of the great American landscape.