

OREGON'S TRAVEL INFORMATION COUNCIL

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Oregon's Travel Information Council was created by the State legislature in 1971 to administer the State's roadside sign control program. This program was enacted to comply with the Congressional policy and minimum standards set forth in the Highway Beautification Act of 1965; but the Oregon law was more restrictive than the Federal law in a number of respects, and has been administered with a somewhat different philosophy. Under its 1971 law, Oregon contemplated that its nonconforming signs would be removed as rapidly as possible, and the function of providing travel information would be performed by a system of official informational signs and related facilities. The Travel Information Council, appointed by the Governor, was made responsible both for taking down the nonconforming signs and for erecting the new official information signs.

To date we have had some success in getting the billboards down, although at times it seems so small it cannot be measured. And we have had some success in developing other systems of communication. But in both areas of activity there have seemed to be more than a fair share of insurmountable obstacles.

In Oregon we have taken the position that the billboards will not come down until other systems of information are available. Working on this premise we have developed a system of logo boards, and we are advised by the Federal government that those which we have put up are in fact the first ones installed on a permanent basis in the United States. These boards follow the Federal standards, and have been erected at various interchanges along I-5, which runs through Oregon from Washington to California. Logo boards are also contemplated for the interchanges on I-80N which runs from Portland to the Idaho border.

The problems of putting up the signs have been a good deal more difficult than the problem of getting the cooperation of the oil companies. When a previous speaker referred to being caught between the oil companies on one hand and the conservationists on the other, I reflected that that has not been the case in Oregon. The oil companies have given great support to our program, and their traffic counts and studies have shown that the logo boards on the highways have increased their business at each location where these boards have been installed.

As you know, there are space limitations on the placement of these logo boards under the Federal Highway Administration's regulations. We have run into particularly difficult problems with the Federal government because of these space limitations. As one approaches Portland from the south, the interchanges become quite close together. Because of this we have been denied the right to put up logo boards at a number of interchanges. We have endeavored to work out compromises with FHWA, but so far have been unable to do so. We asked that Oregon be declared an experimental state so that the existing rules, which were drafted at the end of the Johnson administration could, in fact, be tested in the field. This has been denied. This puts a great hardship on the traveler who, as he has come north from California, has come to know that there are gas and other service facilities at the interchanges where he has seen the logo boards. As he comes to a place where, because of space limitations, there are no logo boards, obviously he will assume there are no facilities there. As yet we have been unable to resolve this issue.

We have gasoline logo boards up now. We have not yet erected any restaurant or motel logos although those industries have signed up in our program. We are working out with a designer a system of symbols which we hope will be as effective as those developed in Vermont.

As to the limitations of putting the number of businesses at any one interchange on the freeway itself, we have been blessed in Oregon because there are only four interchanges which have more than 6 gas stations. It is possible, of course, that competition will eventually bring this down to four, and we will not have to face the problem of omitting any. Our initial solution to this problem of numbers, however, has been to erect directional signs at the top of the ramp, so that those gas stations which do not have their logo on the roadside logo board will be identified to the motorist as he moves up the exit ramp. There has been some enthusiasm on the part of the service industry for this; but there also has been a good deal of apathy, too. I do not know

whether this will be the best answer we can come up with, but at least we are trying to solve this problem in a way that will help the motorist and the industry.

On the freeway system throughout Oregon, there are rest areas approximately every 50 miles. The Oregon Travel Information Act of 1971 provides that sign plazas shall be erected in these areas. We have carried on extensive hearings with volunteers from the various industries which might be represented in such sign plazas, primarily motels and hotels, restaurants, and automobile repair services. The gasoline companies seem disinterested in advertising in the rest areas. We have not yet established any sign plazas nor have we really formulated any final designs for them. We have been working with industrial designers and communications specialists. In my own view, these sign plazas will approach something like we have in airports, or the type of facility that has been installed near Aspen, Colorado. However, there are many new electronic and semi-electronic devices which make this field of development a very rapidly changing one. We are anxious to see how equipment designers can adapt these to the type of facility that is suitable for providing information.

One of the things which Oregon law provides, and which has been implemented to some extent, is a free reservation system. This has come rather easily, because the State itself has park camps, and because of the pressure of tourists from California and Oregon these camps have been overcrowded. Two years ago the highway department set up a system of reservations, and in order to carry this out it put a toll-free communication system into the State Highway Building in Salem. Any person with a camper or trailer could call there and make a reservation for a particular camp. This would secure him a place to stay. Growing out of this experience, we are trying to work out with the hotel-motel industry a method whereby we can use the funds of the Travel Information Council and a fee paid by the hotel or motel for the service it receives to develop a system which will allow any person to call toll-free from any rest area or telephone booth and make a reservation.

The average traveler in Oregon comes from California, goes up through Washington, into British Columbia, and then comes back on the east side of the mountains. Washington and British Columbia have expressed great interest in working out a regional communication system. We realize that problems of working with another State and Province are formidable. Possible, however, we have learned something from our experience with motorists, industry and the Federal government, so we can work it out. It would be very nice to be able to call ahead free instead of continuing our present haphazard system. If you are anything like I am, you have to cope with these problems when your children are restless, your wife is sore, and it's getting late. So you tend to drive faster instead of pulling off and making a call.

One of the things that has grown out of the concept of sign plazas in Oregon is truck parks. Throughout Oregon, and I guess throughout the rest of the United States, is a growing industry serving truck traffic at special truck stops. On I-5 going north and south through Oregon, the truckers are great users of the rest areas, and we have sections set apart from passenger car parking areas just for the trucks. The big truck companies, the truck stop industry, and the independent truckers all are very anxious to cooperate in a system which would give information which is in the interest of the truckers -- where they are, how far it is to a truck stop, what services the truck stop offers, how to get repair services for the various types of rigs. There has been a great deal of enthusiasm shown for solving this problem, and we have retained a designer to work out the graphic presentation of the information to be provided for the truck drivers.

Growing out of the Travel Information Act of 1971 is a provision that the high-rise, "banjo-type" signs, which grew up on the Interstate System at its interchanges to advertise particular brands of gas or other services would have to be brought down to 45 feet maximum after five years from the time that a gas station or other facility made application for a logo board. This part of the law, as with much of our law, was drafted with very little experience on which to rely. Here we made no provision for the amortization of the tremendous investment that exists in these signs, or the competitive advantage one company may have over another by their use. The legislature has indicated that this section of the law will be changed, and we hope a new section will be added in its place to provide that no new high-rise signs will be built. Those which are up will stay up until the last at a particular interchange is amortized; and then they will all come down together. At this time the law provides a 45 foot maximum height; the embattled conservationists said it should be 35 feet as the sign manufacturers say it should be 65 feet; some of the oil companies don't care; and some say, "let us wait and see." What will come out of the legislature therefore is not clear.

Another feature of our law has resulted in state-wide zoning for on-premise signs. This was brought about at the initiative of the electrical sign manufacturing industry in Oregon, which came to us and asked that some sort of control system be set up. Since then we have had a year and a half of hearings and conferences exchanging information with the people who actually use the signs and the sign manufacturers. We now have a state-wide zoning law that will control the erection of any type of on-premise sign in the future. The law gives "grandfather rights" to signs which now are up and those signs may remain nonconforming for 10 years. At the end of that time they have to come down or made to conform. I think this will be particularly beneficial to Oregon because along our coast we, like other States, have experienced the pressure of development, and our beautiful seashore has been cluttered with all sorts of terrible signs.

We have been in contact with the radio broadcasters association in Oregon, and are trying to work out a system such as they have in Nebraska. It is sometime off in the future, as far as realization is concerned, although we are given hope merely by this conference today. Our highway administrator so far has opposed use of signs which give the call letters of a radio station. Possibly, however, we have had too much of an inferiority complex about this in the past, and Nebraska's example will give us new hope.

In connection with other types of telecommunications, Pacific Northwest Bell Telephone Company has agreed that if we will provide aid stations all along the highway-- say, every two miles -- the company will provide telephone facilities. This possibility grew out of a telephone rate case before the State public utilities commission a few years ago. At this time an objection was made to the telephone company's application for a rate increase because, it was said, the company was not doing enough to promote safety along the highways. This seemed to appeal to the commission -- possibly because one of its members had recently been stranded with a flat tire in a remote highway location. In any event, through a cooperative arrangement between the telephone company, the highway department and the Travel Information Council, it appears there is the possibility of developing a state-wide communication and aid system.

The Travel Information Council is authorized to enter into cooperative agreements with various cities so we can put sign plazas immediately outside the city limits, and provide information for the cities in this way. Little has yet been done to implement this plan, however. Oregon has only one major city, Portland, but it seems to have become a very complicated business to give motorists coming from the south the information that they may wish about Portland. Some people have said the easiest way to deal with this is to give approaching travelers a copy of the Portland telephone book. That is one extreme view. At the other extreme, we have been approached by a computer company which would like to install an information system so a motorist can feed into the computer his desires as to where he wants to stay, and it will feed back to him the specific answer he needs. Personally, I think the first solution is a little too simple, and the second is far too elaborate for us in Oregon. But I am equally sure the problem of providing essential information about cities can be solved, and will be a very beneficial addition to our system.

I have found that the effort to develop a new system of travel information is a frustrating business, but also a very exciting and satisfying one. It involves developing a type of service for the motorist which has become absolutely necessary for travel on express-type highways, and has important economic consequences for the business community that serves these highways. But, more than that, I see, as Nebraska does, the possibility of introducing travelers to the many recreational facilities that our State offers, and to the smaller communities that lie out of sight of the highway. Travel becomes much more meaningful when the motorist has this information. And I have thought -- it is just possible that if Nebraska had had its system working a hundred years ago when the settlers were moving West along the Oregon Trail, I might not be speaking to you today as an Oregonian. My ancestors might just have liked Nebraska so well that they would have stayed there.



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