FOREWORD

The three papers that comprise this circular were presented at the Sixty-First Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board in January 1982. They document the pervasiveness of motorists' needs for information about travel-related services and facilities, and the extent to which existing or planned travel information systems are responding to these needs. Taken together, these papers suggest measures that can be taken to bring the level of information services into closer parity with the service levels achieved for the safety, economy and convenience of the highway system.

In this series of papers, Woodrow Rankin views motorist information in terms of its traffic engineering aspects and history. Dr. Ross Netherton evaluates motorist information needs, and reviews the policy that is reflected in Federal-aid highway law to assure the adequacy of motorist information systems and the options for implementing that policy. Edward Kussy considers these options in terms of the constitutional and other legal protection of the freedom of speech as they have most recently been applied to the regulation of billboards and solicitation of funds in highway safety rest areas.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SIGNING FOR MOTORIST SERVICES

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Systems of services for travelers were needed and were developed long before the motor vehicle era. Wayfarers on roads of the Roman Empire were supplied with information on three essential services: food, lodging, and if the traveler was riding, food (fuel) for the four-footed means of transport.

For centuries, on-premise signs were the usual method for letting the traveler know of available services. A prudent person, however, undoubtedly would have obtained from someone who had traveled the route as much information as possible on available services. This two-element system -- on-premise signs and advance information -- served travelers into the early 1900s, when travel of more than a day's duration was regarded as an expedition rather than a routine trip, despite the advent of the automobile.

The on-premise signing that early motorists depended upon was adequate for their needs because speeds were not much greater than those of the coach and wagon travelers that the signs had been intended for.

With the rapid development of an all-weather system of main rural roads, and the availability of low-cost, reliable automobiles after World War I, two significant changes were made in the motorist services information system. New service information needs arose, and new techniques were developed to meet them.

With all-weather roads and reliable cars, long-distance automobile vacations became part of the American way of life. In addition to information on the three basic services -- food, lodging, and fuel -- these long-distance recreational travelers wanted two new types of service signs:

- information on local attractions such as scenic and historical interest points, and
- information on local specialty goods and services such as craft items and food specialties.

With improved roads and better cars, rural driving speeds of 35-50 m.p.h. became the rule rather than the exception. Because of these higher speeds, motorists generally needed information about available services sooner than could be given with on-premise signs. Consequently, off-premise advertising signs, giving advance information on travel attractions, became common roadside sights. In some areas the numbers of these signs became excessive, resulting in what was called "billboard blight." The first state legislation to control roadside advertising was enacted in the early 1900s, soon after American motorists began hitting the road in increasing numbers each year.

From the 1920s until the mid-1960s, motorists depended upon a services information system primarily supplied by the private sector. Businesses and individuals erected on- and off-premise signs advertising motorist services, and motorists planning vacations could get advance information from private sector organizations, such as auto clubs, travel agencies, highway associations, and chambers of commerce. Some states and local governments maintained roadside tourist information centers. The payoff of well-conceived and managed information systems serving the motorist public was first recognized in America's resort regions and vacationlands. But as highway travel for business and recreation grew, roadside businesses extended their informational activities to all heavily traveled highway routes.

The pre-Interstate motorist services system evolved in response to two complementary needs. The long-distance traveler wanted to know the who, what, where and when for the services needed. Complementing this need, suppliers wanted travelers to know the same who, what, where and when regarding their services. The system was developed primarily by economic market factors, without coordination of effort or functional concept.

As long as the majority of long-distance travel was on highways without access control -- as it was until the mid-1960s -- this system worked reasonably well to meet the traveler's needs. A tourist home, gas station, motel, or diner at the side of the road was easily seen and recognized, particularly if it had an effective on-premise sign supplemented by an advance roadside sign.

Additionally, the market forces were sufficiently strong to encourage the designation of specific information on signs. The sensitivity of the system to specific information needs is illustrated by development in the early 1920s of product identification signs for gasoline and other petroleum products. At that time, a motorist could not be sure of the quality of petroleum products unless they were purchased from a well-known refiner. Therefore, long-distance travelers tried to purchase from outlets of major companies whenever possible. The companies, recognizing this desire, and realizing the competitive benefits by responding to it, started using easily recognized brand name identification on their advance signs and on-premise signs.

Fast food and national motel chains also benefitted directly from the growth of long-distance motoring, and they recognized the advertising benefits of specific information signing as their chains developed after 1945.

The service signing system of the pre-Interstate era had several deficiencies. In those places where the system over-advertised and contributed to roadside clutter, general product advertising was responsible for many billboards and other roadside signs. In addition, with few exceptions, the information system operated on a principle of "let the buyer beware." Motorists had to depend upon local and state laws for regulation of quality in food services, lodging, and local products. The system supplied little advance information on the time when the services were available. Motorists knew there was a restaurant or gasoline station ahead, but they had no way of knowing the hours of operation. Motorists of that day, however, may not have considered these information gaps as serious deficiencies. They did not expect, or recognize a need for, quality controlled services or guaranteed hours of service.

As segments of the Interstate system were opened to traffic after 1960, the earlier private sector roadside sign system became increasingly inadequate. In addition, billboard controls on the Interstate routes that emerged in the late 1960s threatened to isolate motorists from private sector service information. As a result, responsibility for initial motorist services information shifted from the private sector to public highway agencies. Most highway agencies considered that this responsibility was satisfied by posting "FOOD-FUEL-LODGING" signs at interchanges. Businesses supplying the services had to put up their own signs with information on who, what, and where after official signs had announced general availability of the services.

In the present period of transition from private to public sector responsibility for service signs, Interstate motorists often are not adequately informed on services availability, location and suppliers.

For example, the lack of signing of fuel brand names can be a problem where there is extensive use of credit cards. To minimize this inconvenience, the private sector has erected high-level on-premise brand name signs that may be seen and recognized at a great distance, and some states have added brand logo signs to on-highway service signing.

Currently, the official motorist service signing system, particularly on the Interstate system of highways, is significantly different from the system used prior to 1960. The pre-1960 system evolved over a number of years. It had many single-purpose components that were designed and installed unilaterally by individuals or organizations acting independently. Today's system, however, is designed in compliance with national standards, and it is installed and administered in most states by a single agency.

In comparing the capabilities of the two systems to provide the information needed, it can be seen that the current official system does not serve motorists as well as uncontrolled pre-1960 public-sector installations did in their time. The informational requirements of a motorist service signing system for controlled-access highways are substantially different and more demanding. It is important that the agencies responsible for today's information system recognize the deficiencies of their system rather than regard them as negative criticism. In developing improvements in the present system, the designer must accept the challenge to meet new needs arising from new ways of travel. Needs of both the users and the suppliers of travel services must be accommodated in the system that results. This accommodation should be the principal objective in revising the present system or planning a new one.