

Need for Continued Transportation Research Stressed by Thomas D. Larson, Retiring TRB Chairman

Long-range transportation research programs are needed now more than ever, said Thomas D. Larson, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, in his remarks at the Chairman's Luncheon at the 61st Annual Meeting of the Transportation Research Board in January. Before turning over the chairmanship of the Transportation Research Board to his successor, Darrell V Manning, Director of the Idaho Transportation Department, Larson spoke on the difficulties facing transportation research today. Excerpts from his remarks follow.

Our efforts in the furtherance of transportation research are continuing to diminish. Federal transport research and development is down more than 40 percent from its level (in constant dollars) eight years ago. The states are down a similar 40 percent in the same period. This decline cannot be explained by the fact that many other transportation expenditures have also declined. We are spending an ever-decreasing percentage of available transportation funds on research. And there is abundant evidence that we are spending significantly less of our funds on research than our colleagues in similar industries in the private sector.

Although I believe this to be true of all the modes, it is perhaps useful to use highway research as an example. Currently, the states and the federal government spend less than 0.2 percent of their highway dollars for research. Counties and cities spend an even lower percentage. Thus, we have a \$35 billion industry vital to the nation's economy, spending a fraction of the amount spent in equivalent private-sector industries. One must ask why this is so.

One answer might be that our problems are solved—and we do not need any more research. Even a cursory look at the highway industry will show the fallacy of this view. The industry is undergoing enormous changes as shifts are made from large to small vehicles, from planning to operations, and from construction to maintenance. The nation is almost certainly going to commit tens of billions of dollars in the coming decade to bridge rehabilitation, pavement management and upgrading, safety programs, and improvements of all kinds. These are all areas where there have been no efforts, to my knowledge, to assess our capability to perform these tasks and whether, by spending relatively modest additional sums for research, we might be able to save some of those billions and do the job better at the same time.

We have reached this point for a number of institutional reasons. First, we are a highly decentralized industry. Highway management is in the hands of the several hundred people who make up the top staffs of highway and transportation departments in each of the states, the Federal Highway Administration, and the larger counties and cities. No one

of these individuals, with the possible exception of those in the Federal Highway Administration, sees his or her responsibilities as sufficiently broad to be concerned with these problems from a national perspective. The federal government only funds about one out of every four dollars and sees its involvement diminishing, extending only to the Interstate and primary systems, and perhaps reluctantly to another category or so. The states are unwilling to have the federal government dictate to them on highway matters, and there is therefore almost no one who is thinking about the long-range strategic aspect of highway research.

Since 1974 the highway industry, as a result of diminishing fuel tax revenues and continued inflation, has had unusual financial problems. This has meant that highway management has been perhaps unduly preoccupied with finding ways to increase its revenues and to justify to legislative bodies its need for tax increases. Research operations deal with issues where payoffs can only be expected in future years and they, in many instances, have fallen easy prey to budget cuts.

I believe that highway management in too many cases has abdicated its management role when it comes to research, with the result that research has often not been attuned to policy. Those highway administrators still willing to underwrite research approve their research budgets annually, then fail to spend the additional time necessary to assure that the unit is producing products relevant to current policy and to future needs.

The result has often been a disillusionment on the part of highway management about the usefulness of the small amount of research that is under way. If this situation is allowed to continue, it could cause further erosion of our now diminished research base.

Taken as a group, the problems related to the decentralization of our industry, financial problems, and management neglect are serious enough to require a substantive response. One of the Transportation Research Board's purposes is to assess research needs. Through its extensive committee structure and other activities I believe that we do a good job at the rather narrowly focused microscopic level. As valuable as this is, there is also a need, largely unfulfilled, for a more macroscopic overview that looks at the status of research from a more strategic perspective. The Transportation Research Board is perhaps the one place where such problems can be dealt with where all major participants have a voice.

To further this end, the Transportation Research Board Executive Committee has authorized the appointment of a Task Force of high-level policy-oriented individuals to begin work on this problem. I am confident that this group can pave the way for a change of direction for research in our industry.