I have looked forward to this meeting ever since I came to Frankfort. As you know, I have been serving as Deputy Commissioner for Rural Roads only a little more than three months. Before that I was County Judge - in Menifee County - for more than nine years. My third term was approximately two years old when Governor Ford offered me this assignment.

After that much time in the courthouse, I believe I know something about the trials and tribulations of a county judge. I may not have all the answers - of that fact I am very sure - but at one time or another I have heard all the questions.

I didn't have to come to Frankfort to learn there is a gap between taxes and road funds available and the services that are expected and demanded.

Until you have heard a taxpayer who lives a mile and a half up a rocky hollow from a paved road explain in detail and at length how his $12 a year in property taxes entitles him to blacktop, a school bus, mail route, and police protection twenty-four hours per day, how one-half of the $12 is wasted and the other half pocketed by county officials, also how he voted for you and how many votes he influenced, you just don't know what county government is all about in rural Kentucky.

However, more importantly, let me talk to you briefly about the County Road Aid Program and the relationship it establishes between the Department of Highways and the fiscal courts of the Commonwealth. Between us share responsibility for the operation and the success or failure of this important program.

The County Road Aid Program begins with the Fiscal Court. When he confers with the Court each year, the Department's representative - our District Engineer or his staff - records the kind of program the Court desires - and the projects it proposes to include. Whatever happens after that, the basis of the County Road Aid Program lies in the Court's original proposal.

For that reason, I say, the Court simply must present a responsible program, one that identifies priorities among county roads.

Let's talk about allotments first.

The County Road Aid Program is based on an appropriation from the General Road Fund. It is fixed by the recommendation of the Governor and the action of the General Assembly.

It does not escalate with the economy - or the sale of motor fuel. Over the years - 36 years of its existence - it has risen from an annual appropriation of $2 million to the present level, $13 million. However, except when the appropriation is raised, the capabilities of the program generally shrink, rather than expand.

We will - in all likelihood - accomplish less with our $13 million next year than we will with this year's $13 million. Wages will rise. Material costs will go up. The program will be less productive in terms of maintenance, surfacing, etc.

Recognizing this, it would be foolish to add to the mission and responsibilities of the County Road Aid Fund. Indeed, wherever it is practical, we should try to cut back on our commitments. We should reduce our aim to realistic objectives.

In some counties last year, County Road Aid Funds were spread as thinly as less than $300 per mile. Three hundred dollars just doesn't buy necessary replacement stone for one mile. This rate of expenditure cannot hope to provide a reasonable level of service. Indeed, in my opinion, it insures that much of this limited amount will be wasted.

Our first objective - the Court's and the Department's - should be adequate maintenance for the roads we program. We should begin by determining how many dollars per mile this requires.

Having an allotment per mile it is then simple enough to determine how many miles can be included in the program.

We deceive no one except ourselves - certainly not our constituents by listing excessive mileage, then pretending - because it is named in the County Road Aid Program - it is adequately maintained.

Our current programs name some roads only a jeep can travel. We list roads so swampy that our own trucks bog down. Others are too narrow for maintenance vehicles to pass other traffic.

We open up our own credibility gap when we tell rural Kentuckians that these roads are maintained in the County Road Aid Program. They are not maintained adequately and cannot be.

When we limit the mileage, we then require ourselves to make choices, to set priorities. Shall we briefly discuss priorities.

Governor Ford made his objectives plain when he identified himself - as a candidate - with the
"people," the people's needs, the people's interests.

The roads you select for maintenance in the County Road Aid Program ought to be roads that serve "people."

And if this is to be our goal - serving people - we may not be able to pay as much attention to property - and geography - as we would like. If we must choose between a road having an average daily traffic of 50, or even 25, vehicles and another that serves a single large farm, I think the right choice is obvious.

It is a mistake to distribute County Road Aid Funds among the various magisterial districts in equal proportions. I understand this is done by some Courts.

Even if these districts met the one man - one vote test, there is no reason to believe their traffic demands would be equal.

Gentlemen, in the long run, nothing will help you more in determining priorities than simple traffic counts. If we spend our money where traffic is heaviest, we can expect to serve - and please - a greater percentage of our constituents. By attempting to cover too much ground, we may succeed only in forfeiting their confidence.

I know that not every county in the Commonwealth has the same road problems. Mileage varies. The degree of road development varies. Resources of county governments vary. Obviously, no single version of the County Road Aid Program can deal successfully with all 120 counties.

For this reason, the General Assembly very wisely has directed us to deal with each one individually, taking their Court's recommendations and developing an agreement - which may be unique - for that county.

Taking their variety into account, I would like to suggest some guidelines for the consideration of the officials in each of our 120 county seats.

I think your maintenance responsibilities should come at the top of the list. The County Road Aid Program should not undertake road construction until all maintenance needs have been met. From my observations - and reports I have received - few counties in the Commonwealth could qualify for County Road Aid construction projects when this test is applied.

On my own responsibility I have established some policies which will apply to both rural road programs - County Road Aid and Rural Secondary:

Any resurfacing we do will require adequate material for each particular road's needs. Obviously, it is impossible to lay down a precise rule since the condition of the base and existing surface may vary substantially. In general, I believe resurfacing ought to be at least one inch thick.

I have also announced that initial blacktopping will require at least three inches of bituminous material on two inches of compacted base.

We are not going to "paint" any traffic-bound roads black. In the recent past we have seen too many so-called blacktopped roads that did not survive their first winter. I have been told one maintenance engineer asked for instructions on how to mow a blacktopped road. He had some so thin that grass was growing through the surface.

We will also require that initial blacktopping be applied only to roads at least fourteen feet wide.

Mountain terrain may require a few exceptions. As a native of a mountain county, I know situations where there are natural barriers that make this requirement impractical. But - in general - we will look for fourteen feet before we blacktop.

Construction - initial construction or reconstruction - should provide no less than sixteen feet of surface width. I am as strong for dollar stretching as any man, but I will not stretch for length at the expense of width.

Everyone of us could use a great deal more money than we have for our county roads. But our programs must be based on what we have, not what we wish we had. And only by limiting our objectives can we hope to provide the people of your county and mine with some decent county roads.

If we are willing to limit our activities to a reasonable mileage, we may find that we can actually reduce maintenance costs after upgrading it with sound drainage, an adequate base and a good surface. Then, it may be possible to add to this mileage.

As an old county judge I know this kind of self-denial is not easy. When Aunt Sally comes storming in from the head of the hollow to demand that something be done about the old creek bed she uses for a road, it is a great comfort to be able to tell her that you have told the Department of Highways to put it on the County Road Aid Program. It does not do the road any good - and it does not do Aunt Sally any good - but it will shut her up for the moment.

I suppose every county judge - at least all of them in Eastern Kentucky - have done this at one time or another. But our people - and our own integrity - are best served by recognizing the limitations of the County Road Aid Program, selecting priorities and then standing firm when Aunt Sally comes to the courthouse.
As Harry Truman once said, "If you can't stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen." And he never learned that in Washington. He reached that conclusion when he was county judge of Jackson County back in Independence, Missouri.