COUNTY AND STATE RURAL ROAD PROGRAM

by

James T. Sable
McCracken County Road Engineer

The law of the Commonwealth of Kentucky places the responsibility for the construction and maintenance of county roads squarely on the shoulders of the Fiscal Courts of the various Counties. The success or failure of a County Road Program, in any given County will be determined largely by the attitude of the Fiscal Court members toward this responsibility. If the responsibility is accepted seriously, and a well planned and organized effort is generated, and persistently executed, road improvement will follow. If the Fiscal Court takes an indifferent attitude the results will be the same that indifference always breeds.

It is true that the Counties in our State receive considerable assistance in road construction and maintenance from the State Department of Highways, but, as noted in the County-State Rural Highway Contracts, this assistance is given only on roads included in the contracts and is limited to the amount of work the State funds will cover. Once the allotted State funds are expended on a State Aid Project, State responsibility ceases and the County is on its own, money or no money.

All of our Counties have tremendous problems in trying to construct and maintain an adequate county road system. These problems and their origin vary from County to County, depending upon the size of the County, the terrain, tax resources and many other aggravating circumstances, including, I am reluctant to say, local and State political situations. However, even though these problems at times seem insurmountable, it is, in my opinion, the duty of both the State and County officials, who have asked for and received authority, to use this authority in an unceasing effort to obtain the improvements of our Rural Roads that are so badly needed.

As I have said, the type and magnitude of our Rural Road problems vary from County to County, and it would be foolish for me to try to tell you that I can prescribe the remedy for what ails any particular county, or group of Counties, but I would like to describe for you the system and policies that have been adopted and used, with revisions, by the McCracken County Fiscal Court for the past twenty-eight years. We have been told, at least by a few people, that our method of operation has achieved moderate success and it is my hope that I may be able to pass on to you some information that will aid in the solution of your road problems.

From the beginning of State Aid to Counties, our Court has used the Cooperative system. Through the years they have employed, full time, a registered Engineer who, working under policies established by the Court, has been charged with the duty of planning and directing all operations of the County...
Road Department. Under this system a considerable amount of authority, vested by law in the Fiscal Court, must be delegated to the County Engineer. He must have control of all Road Department employees, machinery, and other facilities at all times in order to carry on co-ordinated, and continuous day to day operations, and be in a position that permits proper handling of emergency and other unforeseen situations. This delegation of authority in no way removes control of the Road Department from the Fiscal Court. The Engineer is merely carrying out Fiscal Court policies, and the Court is always aware of what is going on by virtue of its review of the monthly invoices, bi-weekly pay rolls, special reports required from the Engineer, and close personal contact.

From our experience, we are positive that the State-County co-operative plan has worked well in our county; better than any other system that we have observed. Through the years we have built up our road equipment fleet until now we are able to carry out most any type of required work with our own men and equipment, asking the State for materials only. I would not suggest that the State approve the co-operative system unless the County concerned established a well organized Road Department, geared for year around operation under the direction of a well qualified man, preferably an Engineer. We have all seen too many demonstrations of unplanned, unorganized, hit or miss operations and the miserable results.

It is impossible for some counties, because of limited resources, to work under the co-operative plan, but it is not impossible for all of us, State and County personnel alike, to adopt a co-operative attitude and I can truthfully say we have always found our State Highway Department officials very anxious to extend and develop this attitude. I would suggest that all Fiscal Court members, and other County Road officials, strive to become well acquainted with State Highway officials. Get to know your District Engineer and his staff. If he doesn't call on you, call on him, and above all work closely with him in planning and operating a year around road program.

Success begins with planning. Traffic volume, location of places of public assembly such as churches and schools, inter-community travel and density of population have been the controlling factors in our long range planning. Roads having the higher traffic counts were and are given the high priority ratings for construction and improvement. Spending funds available for construction and improvement where the most people can be served has met with general approval and is a policy easily defended. Planning has been county wide with very little attention paid to districts as such, but, putting the road improvements where our plans indicated they should be has more or less automatically taken care of the various districts and we have heard very little of the cry, "They get more than we do". Since our roads are now all "black-topped" our planning now concentrates on improvements, such as widening, alignment and the elimination of sub-standard bridges.

Our planning has always included adequate maintenance. We think that if you cannot maintain the roads you have, there is no sense in building any more. Funds for adequate maintenance come first in our budget and any money remaining goes for improvement. We keep a record of all our major maintenance work on
each road in the County. This record dates back to the placing of a bitu-
minous type surface on each road and contains such information as when the
road was last ditched, sealed or re-surfaced. In compiling a list of roads
needing major maintenance attention we find this record more than helpful.
As a matter of fact, we can go through this list and predict, very accurately,
the maintenance requirements for at least three years into the future.

In closing, let me repeat, it is my considered opinion that if we people
charged with the duty of improving Rural Roads will plan, cooperate, and
pursue a determined year around effort in the use of facilities available
to us, we can realize creditable results.