Harold L. Plummer, Chairman of the State Highway Commission of Wisconsin and native of that state, is a director of the American Road Builders Association and is a Regional Vice President.

He came to the field of highways with his appointment to the Wisconsin Commission in 1952 from a long background of administration in the military, in education and in banking. Mr. Plummer is a member of the American Society of Military Engineers.

In 1953 Wisconsin was using 10 engineers per million dollars of highway construction cost. Today its ratio is 4 engineers per million dollars.

The story how that was accomplished was reported at the American Road Builders Association national convention in Miami, Florida, in 1956. Mr. Plummer has outlined these procedures at a conference on engineering productivity at Chicago early in 1956 and later the same year presented the engineering productivity story to the southeastern region at Atlanta, Georgia. In March of 1957 he brought the Wisconsin story to the Western Conference at Los Angeles, California, and presented a similar program at Boston, Massachusetts, in September.

Mr. Plummer is Chairman of the Committee on Public Information, American Association of State Highway Officials.
I feel that I can today speak with some confidence on the subject of Public Relations in Highways, not alone from our Wisconsin experience but also from a recent survey of public relations attitudes and efforts among all the states. This nationwide PR survey was made by the American Association of State Highway Officials Committee on Public Information for our report before the Association’s annual conference in Chicago last November.

Even in my introductory paragraph I have already used two names for the subject we are discussing today—Public Relations and Public Information.

Public Relations is the older term. What we want is to mean is understanding, confidence, belief, and good will. But the public has been exposed to the words Public Relations for so long, and to so many tricks and stunts and campaigns and Madison Avenue maneuvering that the words have taken on a second meaning of trying to put something over. To use the term for activity that is paid for from public funds grates just a little on the taxpayer’s ear. He gets to wonder what trouble the department is into that it has to think about Public Relations.

And so the newer, more favored term, and one more honestly descriptive of the work, is Public Information. The term makes one think of service, and expect it. Public Relations seems to smack of the me attitude while Public Information shouts in terms of outward projection toward you. If I may be facetious and play on words, it is better Public Relations to call your effort Public Information. But now, having expressed my preference between the terms, and indicated which direction the terminology will probably take in the years ahead, nevertheless the majority of the states still use the older term Public Relations. Only last fall did the Executive Committee of AASHO change its old Committee on Public Relations to the Committee on Public Information.

Public Information work is simply determining what the people want to know, or should know about highways, deciding how to tell them, and then going ahead with it.

In practice, because this is a relatively new activity for highway administrators, there is a great deal of variation in what the different states do, and how they do it.

The AASHO study, completed last September, showed no organized public information work in nine departments, and the work just being organized in eight.

Staff for the work varies. Seven states have only one person handling public information. Average state runs from three to five, it goes up to 11 in Connecticut and Missouri, 16 in Michigan, 22 in Ohio, and 32 in Texas. Larger staffs usually mean that some other activity such as the staffing of welcoming stations at the state border are included.

The annual budget for Public Information activities is not very revealing as reported. The range is from $3,000 in a state where Public Information activities are par-time duties of the traffic department to $250,000 in a state where tourist promotion and the cost of the state highway map are charged as Public Information. Of the actual figures reported, states say they use $30,000 to $75,000 annually for Public Information activities. Half of the states have no separate Public Information budget as such, funds being available “as needed” from administrative or over-all budgets.
Generally, wherever there is a Public Information department it is headed by
a person with previous Public Information experience at professional level.

There is little uniformity among principal Public Information duties. They
range from routing tourists in one state to conducting public hearings in another.

Activity of highest participation is preparation of special news releases with
48 out of 51 doing it. This is a bigger return than there are states with organized
Public Information departments—which means that we all do Public Information
whether we are organized for it or not.

A surprising thing is the number of state highway departments that are in the
publishing business. Thirty-one states put out an employees’ magazine. Four of
these are either brand new or are being planned, with Louisiana, Maine, Nevada
and Utah the most recent to take on the activity. One of these has no Public
Information department and one has just organized, but the employee publication
is already a strong feature.

The popularized annual report is not so widespread as is the employee magazine.
Twenty-eight states aim for a readable, appealing annual report that the man
in the street can understand. The trend is definitely toward the popularized report.
Some states may require legislation to allow it, for one of the reports coming in
said that, in its state, such form of report would be illegal.

Poorest showing among all the generally considered essential functions was
Public Information instruction in employee training sessions. Only 16 states carry
on activity of this nature.

In this national survey, Kentucky stands with an excellent record of public
informational activities and results. But this is not surprising for Kentucky was one
of the earliest of states to recognize the importance of an informed public and to
do something about it. And, make no doubt of it, much of today’s informational
effort throughout the nation by all highway departments can go to the credit of
Kentucky’s D. H. Bray and Paul Owen. As chairman and secretary of the AASHO
committee for many years, these two men, virtually alone, kept alive the need for
full programs of organized highway informational services. They can be proud
today for the way all states are following their lead.

Ways and means of distributing public information are a matter of viewpoint
and a matter of imagination. Take the public hearing, for example, now required
for every new location that bypasses or goes through a community of the work is
to use federal aid funds. A number of states had not previously held public hear-
ings for highway locations and regarded the new requirement with apprehension.
That is not surprising—Wisconsin has held public hearings on highway relocations
for 41 years but it is only the last four or five years that we have recognized what
a ready-made eager audience for public information the public hearing provides.
Where else will you find a group that will give such minute attention in order to
pick up a few highway facts? Once we realized this in Wisconsin, we revised and
patterned our whole hearing procedure to take advantage of this hunger to hear
about highways.

Preparation before the hearing.

About three weeks before the hearing, the Commission prepares a notice of
public hearing describing the change proposed to be made, reporting time and
place of the hearing and extending invitation to all interested parties to attend and
express their views. It is published as an official notice in newspapers serving the
area. Copies of the notice are sent to affected county, town, village and city
officials. Descriptive material is also provided the papers for use as news items.

The place for the hearing is chosen to be as near the area of road change as
practical. Most are held at the county seats, in one of the courtrooms or other
spacious spot in the courthouse.

A hearing is usually attended by all three Commissioners. Any two comprise
a quorum. The State Highway Engineer attends, and so does the District Engi-
neer. The Commission’s legal counsel who is an assistant attorney general takes
part and a court reporter is engaged to take down everything that is said and to prepare an official transcript of what takes place.

Exhibits consist of an official map showing the proposed road, the old road, other highways, section lines, and municipal boundaries, if any, all to scale and of a substantial size so that it can readily be seen from all parts of the room. Supplementary exhibits include an aerial mosaic with the proposed line prominently shown, national and state maps showing the particular highway system involved, drawings showing types of construction proposed and their dimensions, photographs blown up to large scale showing constructed facilities of similar design at other places.

Procedure at hearing.

The three Commissioners, the State Highway Engineer, counsel and court reporter take positions in the front of the room. At the time stated in the notice, the Chairman calls for order. He identifies, informally, the subject of the hearing and introduces himself and the others sitting with him. He introduces, from the floor, the District Engineer of the area.

The Chairman then reads a prepared statement outlining the purpose of the hearing, the statutory directives, and explanatory matter relative to the highway its routing, and its coordination with the highway network and economy of the state.

The Chairman then calls upon the Commission Secretary to read the official notice of hearing.

The Chairman then calls upon the State Highway Engineer. The State Highway Engineer is the first witness. He, and all who follow him, are individually sworn in by the Chairman before they make their statements.

The testimony of the State Highway Engineer is a prepared statement analyzing the route according to topography, traffic patterns, economic factors, communities bypassed or any other considerations that led to the department's favoring of the identified route over others. The official map prepared for the hearing is entered into the testimony as an exhibit.

The Commission's counsel next invites any county officials who wish to make a statement, to do so. It does not matter whether the statement is for or against the proposal; county representatives are invited first to speak, then the larger municipalities, the villages, and the towns. School boards, fire districts, conservation personnel, drainage districts; any governmental agency is invited to express its views. These are followed by invitation to organizations of any kind; motor clubs, cooperatives, sportsmen's groups, church or chamber of commerce. Finally, individuals are invited; property owners, farmers, businessmen or any interest whatever. All who testify, however, are asked to come forward and be sworn in before they speak. Sworn testimony keeps the discussion to the point, adds dignity and sincerity to the testimony, and discourages those who like to talk to entertain themselves. The swearing-in process is highly valuable for the automatic discipline it provides. Few persons indeed will march to the front of the room with all eyes upon them, and be sworn in, without being pretty sure that what they are about to say is worth saying.

Once a witness is sworn in, he is allowed to talk as he wishes, both as to length and subject. Occasionally one will get off the subject and ramble on. The Chairman could interrupt to direct him to keep his remarks to the issue. This is never done, for even the most garrulous will run down after a few minutes but of such a one were openly reminded of a point of order some of the parties at interest might feel there was an attempt to control the direction of testimony and feel resentment toward the Commission. Rather than risk anything like that it is best to let the participants talk themselves out.

After the last witness has said all he wishes to, the Chairman calls again for anyone else who wishes to be heard. He is very deliberate about this so that no one need to feel that the proceedings are being rushed.

Sensing no further wish that anyone else wants to be heard, the Chairman
declares the formal portion of the hearing to be closed. The court reporter closes her book. The Chairman then announces that the Commission, the State Highway Engineer and such staff members as are present will answer questions from the floor. Display materials about the room are discussed and explained.

The Chairman of the Commission continues as moderator, answering the questions posed to him or, if they concern detailed locations or design, refers the questions to the State Highway Engineer or District Engineer. Here, as in the earlier more formal portion, the pace is deliberate and the answers are as precise as the progress of the planning can reveal. Questions are answered so long as the crowd generates them.

When no more questions are forthcoming the Chairman states that the Commission and its engineers will remain available for informal discussion with anyone who cares to stay. He then closes the meeting.

Usually most of those who came then go about their way but a goodly number gather in groups about the displays, or stop to talk with the Commissioners and engineers. This may last a half hour to an hour and a half.

In both the informal question-and-answer period after the hearing and in the discussion groups who remain after the meeting, usual questions are concerned with methods of appraisal, recognition of farming problems with odd-shaped fields, damages for severance, “How long before all this takes place?” and “How much warning will I have so that I can plan my operations?”

Value of advance information.

The State Highway Commission of Wisconsin has found that policy of complete openness of information reduces tension and apprehension, not only that of the property owners who will be affected but it also puts at ease the highway administrators who are to conduct the hearing.

What to reveal in advance of the hearing, at the hearing, or for that matter at any stage of the long highway process, is no problem. In Wisconsin we simply tell what we know. If a project is in the stage where we are deciding among several possible route locations we say so; when the general line is chosen we have maps available showing it, and as the plans progress and details are settled we find no reason to withhold those details. Once the general processes of selecting a route and developing it are known to the public, we find that persons are generally friendly to the project.

The Executive Committee of the AASHO is extremely concerned that the public hearing be handled in every state so that all of its potential for providing information and earning goodwill can be realized. To this end it has directed the Committee of Public Information to again canvass the states in a survey of the public hearing. We want to comb the procedures, we want to look into the factors that are troublesome and we want to bring into the light all practices that are bringing benefits.

Our same committee surveyed the states on the public hearing not over six months ago but then the object was to find out how the public information staff could assist in the hearing. The new survey is to reverse completely the purpose—this time we are going to look at the hearing itself as the public information tool.

And now, in concluding, perhaps you might be interested in our organization for Public Information in Wisconsin. The three Commissioners, the four Division Directors, and each of the nine District Engineers are highly conscious of their responsibility for creating and maintaining public good will. The formalized Public Information staff is a separate section in the Administrative Division. It is staffed by an engineer-writer, a journalist-photographer and a secretary.

The work of the section is to prepare and distribute highway news stories, make public appearances, provide information to visitors coming in with a general problem, prepare highway articles, assist in speech preparation, and answer letters of inquiry. Its staff consults with the Commission, its divisions and districts on public information matters. These are its general and continuing duties.
Additionally, we are always engaged in or planning highway conferences, staff meetings or special events of considerable variety. A 1958 Public Information program just approved by the Commission includes an all day training session for the entire staff in each of the districts, a stepped-up public speaking tempo, and a proposed three-day tour of the Interstate System within the state for press, radio and TV reporters.

We in Wisconsin, as you in Kentucky, realize that no one is strictly neutral about the way his highways are run. That's the way it should be, and that's the way we are kept on our toes. In Kentucky or Wisconsin, we can't expect all the public to always agree with us in all our highway activities but this we do know—the more public information we put out and the better we distribute it, the more faith the public has in the integrity and competence of its highway administrators.