EACH COUNTY NEEDS A QUALIFIED COUNTY ROAD ENGINEER

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Three factors are important when the average fiscal court sits down to talk about an annual county road program: money, supervision and politics. The manner of dealing with these problems determines the results of every road program. How does the county road engineer figure in any part of this whole picture, except that of furnishing supervision? The purpose of this discussion is to evaluate his services to a county.

Where a county has a road engineer he should consult with the fiscal court when the road program is being planned in its initial stages. Because of his ability to determine the relative importance of roads, as regards their use by the traveling public and their benefit to those living on them, he can point out which roads deserve first consideration. Demands for road improvements on the part of the people always exceed the ability of the county to pay the costs of such. Some one who is properly informed must select those roads that merit preference over and above other roads, and this person should be the county road engineer.

Once a road plan for the current year is agreed upon by the fiscal court, the county road engineer should be able to inform the fiscal court of the approximate amount of money required by him to perform the program. Of course, no county ever has enough money to do more than a fractional part of what is clamored for by certain individuals. Finally, an allocation is set up in the budget of a definite sum for the road department. From then on, however, the county road engineer's function, from the money angle, has just begun. He must keep one eye glued on the budget throughout the year. His schedule must be so adjusted that the necessary construction and maintenance work can be done at the proper time and emergencies can be met at any time on the road system.

Counties that have road engineers can centralize their entire highway system under the constant supervision of one responsible person. In counties where the magistrates dominate the spending of the road fund, the money is divided equally according to districts without any thought of the overall system; and sometimes there are as many as
eight districts. Road work then proceeds in such county according to the haphazard whims of the respective magistrates and all outlay of money is usually dictated by politics. This practice is calculated to do nothing more than waste money.

From the point of view of the general administration of road work in any county, and this is one of the large responsibilities of county government, a trained, experienced road engineer is worth his weight in gold. I want to mention generally some benefits in this connection. As chief of the road department — he should have unrestricted power to hire and fire all personnel — he can direct the employees under him in uniform and systematic effort, since he knows his men and their abilities. He is in a position to give immediate attention to all complaints, thus promoting good public relations. His familiarity with the economical and practical use of equipment will enable him to steer the fiscal court away from the common mistakes of buying too much or too little, or the wrong kind. His judgment can likewise be relied upon to have money in the purchase of road materials and supplies, thus taking this phase of time-consuming activity away from the fiscal court.

Those of us who have spent a good many years in public office on the county level realize that you cannot divorce politics from roads. A county judge knows that his tenure of office is prolonged or shortened according to his accomplishments as regards roads. Although the county road engineer is prohibited by law from taking an active part in a political campaign, he can make such a record that those officials who employ him will have easy sailing if any of them should stand for re-election. A well-planned and well-executed road program, fairly distributed, is something the great majority of the people in the county will take notice of, with the result that those who perform this type of service will be continued in office. If, in addition to the ability to deliver the goods, and if the county road engineer is an excellent public relations man, the officials have in one person an ideal combination that is one of their best possible assets politically.

No longer are the duties of the county road engineer merely those of a supervisory nature. The position is one requiring technical training, planning ability and executive capacity. He should be qualified to make surveys, to design bridges, to estimate the cost of any road project, and to perform every kind of road work. He should be a graduate civil engineer, no less. And his pay should be commensurate with his education and experience; for he is an indispensable public servant.

As most counties receive from the state the bulk of their funds for expenditure on rural or secondary roads, the future development of
this type of road in practically all counties has become a responsibility of the Commonwealth. The state policy with reference to all roads is drifting at this time. The question ultimately to be decided is whether the state shall take over completely all of the roads and assume all responsibility for their construction and maintenance; or, shall an effort be made to build up, under state supervision, efficient county road departments? While there are arguments for both views, it seems to me that state funds must be supplemented by local funds if quite a number of counties are to receive maximum road benefits. In counties which have no money for road upkeep and likewise no personnel to perform the work, the state must of necessity assume all responsibility for rural highway development. Still, if a county is willing to allocate substantial sums of its own money, to augment the share received by it from the state, in order to build up a superior road system, this option should be reserved to it.

There is no better proof of the worth of any plan than its real accomplishments. It is noteworthy that those counties that have employed qualified road engineers over a period of years have good road systems. While these counties are pitifully few in this state, they stand out as shining examples of the progress that can be achieved under proper leadership. Conversely, it can be stated that the most backward counties have the poorest roads, and that roads which are impassable a large portion of the year keep these counties in a backward condition.

Unquestionably the point has been established that each county needs a qualified county road engineer. Most counties have one or more road foremen. That road foremen do not measure up to the high standards required to establish and maintain a modern county road system is indicated by the poor year-around condition of the secondary highways of these counties. Often the difference between success and failure hangs by a slender thread. If a bit more guidance could be given and an increase in funds could be added to those counties operating without the services of a trained and experienced county road engineer, it is conceivable that a bad or mediocre condition could be made much better.

Specifically, it is suggested that the state step in and employ the power already at its disposal to bring about certain desired changes. First, the state can prescribe uniform standards for county road engineers, insisting on the employment by counties of only trained and experienced men and withholding state aid until all state requirements are fully met. Next, money from the existing rural highway or secondary road fund can be employed to hire qualified road engineers in each county. A change in the law will be necessary for such to be done.
A proper balance should be maintained between the county and the state. Where the state, because of its great reservoir of money, assumes responsibility for all road upkeep, counties tend to lose interest in one more problem of government. The state can spur the county on, inspire local officials to execute a better road program, and cause the county to spend all the money it can raise in order to strive toward accomplishing a more perfect highway system. Only cooperation between the state and the county, in a financial as well as in a technical capacity, can bring into existence more and better roads in every county.