

ABSTRACT

Iowa's public road system of 112,000 miles is one of the largest and the best in the nation. It represents a considerable financial investment of taxpayer revenues over the years. And, it requires a sustained investment to preserve an economical level of transport service into the future.

In 1982, a Governor's Blue Ribbon Transportation Task Force evaluated the effectiveness of Iowa's entire transportation system. Four important Task Force recommendations dealt with public road administrative issues in Iowa. These issues were related to:

1. design criteria and levels of maintenance;
2. consistency in the use of standards among jurisdictions;
3. consolidation of maintenance operations at one jurisdictional level; and
4. jurisdictional authority for roads.

The issues formed the background for Research Project HR-265.

Objectives

Research Project, HR-265, an "Engineering Study for the Evaluation of Public Road Administration and Maintenance Alternatives," was undertaken to provide the jurisdictional agencies with an independent, quantitative assessment of the issues. Specific objectives for HR-265 were to evaluate the economic and other impacts associated with:

1. the development of consistent and uniform design, maintenance and construction standards for use by public road agencies;
2. the consolidation of public road construction and maintenance operations, and
3. the transfer of public roads between various jurisdictions.

Uniform Standards

The Iowa Department of Transportation, the counties and the larger cities have adopted uniform design guidelines that generally conform to those of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. The findings of HR-265 indicate that there is not a great cost savings potential in simply lowering these design guidelines. The issue is more complex and involves the inclusion of all highway transport costs, not only the governments' investment costs. When all costs are considered, the findings indicate that most road and street improvements

made in accordance with current guidelines actually reduce total highway transport costs. This is true because the savings occur in highway user costs which typically represent more than 80 percent of the total highway transport costs.

In fact, the timely implementation of improvements, particularly those designed to protect and restore existing roads and streets, can significantly reduce user costs and consequently total highway transport costs in Iowa. HR-265 elaborates the various improvement types and their cost savings potential under varying traffic and other conditions.

Consolidation of Operations

Since 1919, Iowa's public roads and streets have been administered by the state, counties and cities. The responsibility for construction and maintenance of the 112,000 miles of public roads and streets has remained relatively stable except for an increase in the state primary system from 6,500 miles to 10,105 miles. HR-265 staff investigated several major consolidation alternatives and found that the consolidation of construction and maintenance operations does not offer substantial cost savings or improved operations. The staff found that:

1. there is little or no duplication of services among jurisdictions;
2. there would be increased costs related to the transition itself, as well as, inefficient resource utilization during the transition to consolidation; and
3. apparent cost savings to one jurisdiction appear as increased costs to the jurisdiction receiving the additional responsibilities -- a cost transfer not a savings.

The legal mechanisms already exist to accommodate the performance of services by entities outside the responsible jurisdictional agency. This can be accomplished as required on a case-by-case basis through either 28-E agreements between government agencies or private contracting.

Extensive general consolidation of operations does not offer a potential for cost savings. However, there is room for improvement in the delivery of maintenance services at the operational levels of all jurisdictions. This can result in some cost savings, and most likely will result in improved productivity or output.

The adoption and use by the local jurisdictions of formalized maintenance guidelines to develop annual maintenance budgets and execute work programs will result in more effective maintenance operations through increased uniformity in the levels of maintenance service and more efficient utilization of personnel, equipment and materials.

Jurisdictional Authority

Closely linked to the consolidation issue is the issue of the jurisdictional authority for roads. As with consolidation, the transfer of the jurisdictional authority for roads should be the result of the adoption of a plan for delivering public services that demonstrates:

1. cost savings,
2. improved service levels, and/or
3. more equitable and practical public road financing.

In accordance with these three measures, changes in the current jurisdictional authority for roads are not warranted.

Specifically, the proposal to transfer county farm-to-market roads to the state would be the first step in establishing a centralized consolidated authority for all public roads in Iowa. As this occurred, the citizens would be one level of government further from the governmental agency responsible for performing the work. County maintenance organizations would be left with unacceptably low paved road mileages and the resulting inefficient use of paved road maintenance resources.

Experience in other states, demonstrates that it is the local road systems and programs that ultimately suffer the most when available revenues are inadequate and the rural road mileage is entirely under State control. Furthermore, it is recognized that legislative bodies are not receptive to the substitution of motor vehicle user funding for losses of non-user (local) funding. The net effect is a decline in total highway revenue. Revenues from local sources would not be available under the current Iowa Code to fund a state administered road program that included former local road mileage. Revenues from motor vehicle users probably could not be increased sufficiently to fund a road program that included these additional local secondary miles.

In summary, the premise that costs savings in Iowa's government road and street investment programs will compensate for a shortfall in existing and future program investment is unfounded. A policy of freezing the governments' investment in roads, based on this premise, risks increasing highway transport costs. Programs and projects designed to restore and protect the current road and street infrastructure offer the greatest potential for reduced highway transport costs in Iowa.