

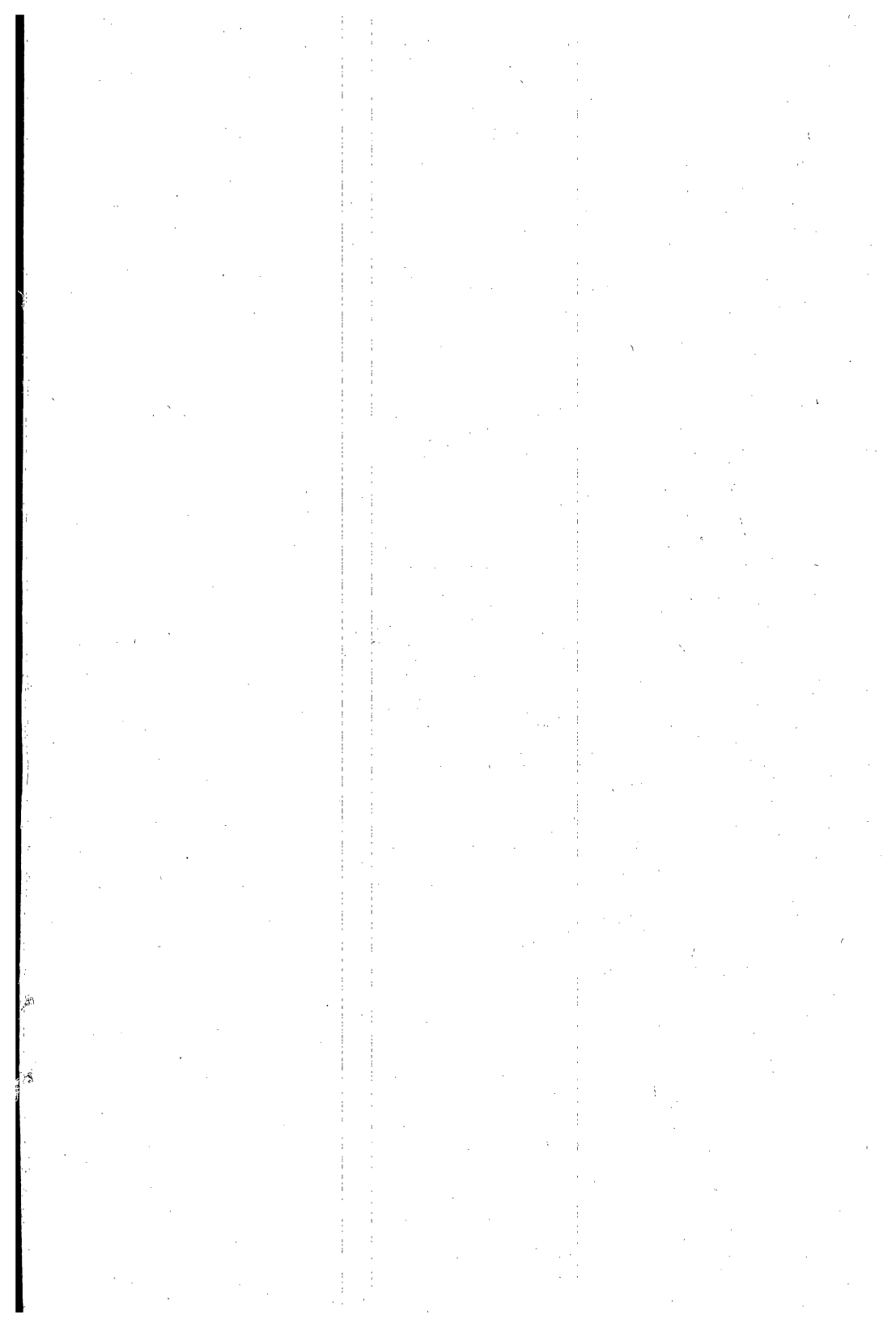
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State Government
and
Transportation

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by *Dwight R. G. Palmer*

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The New Jersey Highway Department in recent years, through its Railroad Transportation Division, has taken the lead in preserving and strengthening rail commuter service for the state's people. In this paper Dwight R. G. Palmer, State Highway Commissioner of New Jersey, draws on that experience and his familiarity with mass transit problems of urban areas across the country to suggest major elements required for solution of the problems. He underlines that the task calls for cooperative effort by all levels of government—federal, state and local. In particular he points to the crucial necessity of state governmental leadership and coordination of such effort, and to a need for states to share in the financing.



State Government and Transportation

by Dwight R. G. Palmer

AMERICA is a land of people on the move via autos, trucks, trains, speed boats, planes and now in capsules through outer space.

No longer are there the mass migrations to the western frontier of a century ago. Travel in past decades was reckoned by what people called "long distances." Today there are no "long distances" as applied to the travel time involved. More and more workers are going greater distances every day to reach their places of employment. This tremendous daily mass movement of people between their homes and their jobs, coupled with the steadily increasing use of already overburdened highways for movement of goods, is placing intolerable strains upon the existing transportation facilities in every urban area of the nation.

THE PROBLEMS GROW

The "flight to the suburbs" has become a staple feature of modern living, bringing with it tremendous demands upon the smaller municipalities for more schools, better police and fire protection, sewer facilities and streets. The financial problems posed by disproportionately large residential populations are causing many local tax officials to lose sleep.

The larger cities, faced with loss of retail consumer business to outlying shopping centers, are feverishly attempting to cope with the myriad difficulties of urban renewal. Inevitably, all such plans must provide easier access and adequate parking to lure customers back to the long established business districts.

When all of the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are fitted together, the picture is plain for everyone to see: our economy is suffering from "arteriosclerosis": hardening of the arteries of transportation. Unless facile circulation of people and goods through and within our centers of population is quickly restored, the result will be slow strangulation and drifting.

TEAM EFFORT REQUIRED

What is the role of government in this situation—what is its responsibility for providing a "cure?" The first thing that everyone—private citizens and public officials alike—should recognize is that the solution must be by team effort. No one group, no one level of government, can function effectively in this vital area by itself. Nor can the springing up of councils or committees, though of the best of intent, substitute for or supplant state government and its duly constituted agencies. The very nature of the problem points up the fact that the state must play the leading role. There is a strong trend towards:

1. Greater recognition that the federal government must provide increased aid to railroad transportation and that it should provide the machinery for coordinating with local redevelopment programs, to the extent desirable, all facets of transportation for which it renders aid.

2. Greater interest in the overall transportation problem on the part of many civic-minded local and regional "planning" groups, which seek to take an active part in the formulation of policy.

3. Increased public awareness, and in some cases resentment, of the fact that the vast national highway construction program, now gaining real momentum, undoubtedly will inconvenience a few for the benefit of the many, and that any overall mass transit program probably will display the same characteristics.

The federal government and the states have worked together during the past forty-six years to provide adequate highway transportation for the nation. But this teamwork has been possible only because all of the federal highway acts have placed the basic responsibility for location, design and construction of highways in the hands of the various state highway departments. The federal government retains the authority to withhold funds when it feels that a state decision is wasteful or contrary to the public interest or that the project is ill conceived or inadequately engineered.

A state always has the authority to build a highway on its own if the federal government withholds aid, and in very many instances states do go beyond the limits of available federal aid by using their own resources to ensure that new highways comply with certain safety and convenience needs of particular areas.

The problem of adjusting highway location

and design to the desires and plans of local governments, civic groups and John Q. Public is, of course, most intense in highly urbanized areas. It is a problem that highway departments not only try to work out but must work out for the benefit of all. A modern superhighway cutting through a congested residential or business area brings a host of problems in its wake. But these problems cannot be resolved on a local basis, by neighborhood vying against neighborhood and one municipality threatening to block all action unless its own particular demands are met. Nor can such situations be settled on a political basis. Highways last too long and serve too many people to be influenced by current local contests.

STATE RESPONSIBILITY IS BASIC

A states responsibility is to promote the welfare of the residents of all municipalities within its boundaries. By law, this responsibility is executed in the realm of highway transportation by the state highway department or an equivalent agency.

The experience in many states of seeing local groups trek to Washington to appeal a highway department's plan is no longer a novelty. Too often such groups reflect attitudes that may not be in harmony with the majority's views and needs. We have found Washington departments understanding and good listeners when visited by local groups. They have also urged such local groups to work out issues on the spot with the state highway departments rather than at the national level.

This procedure, of centering the responsibility upon the state government, has worked well as regards highways. It should be equally applicable to the field of intrastate railroad

transportation. In this area the problem of diminishing commuter passenger service is worrisome. It normally is particularly a local or regional problem. Where the crossing of state lines is involved, as in the vast New York and Philadelphia metropolitan regions, agencies already created by the states in combination with one another usually are available to assure that the jobs can be handled.

COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Increased federal aid to the railroads must come. But the decisions on how to fit this financial support into well-integrated transportation systems—incorporating the facilities of both rail and rubber—must be made by agencies responsible to the state governments.

In the same way, the federal government must provide the means by which the agencies, at all levels of government, responsible for urban renewal and redevelopment, can coordinate their efforts with those responsible for transportation. Here I would add insistence that state and local authorities accomplish their utmost under their own steam, rather than sit back and impose the entire problem on the federal government.

In short, the existing federal-state partnership in the effort to provide new and improved highway transportation should be preserved, and it should be extended to the effort of providing better mass transit facilities—on the same terms.

CRUX OF THE RAIL PROBLEM

Recognition that mass transit must be a major part of any solution to the traffic strangulation plaguing our urban areas has gained

ground rapidly in recent years. Municipalities and regions threatened with loss of the rail service they had taken for granted over a period of many decades suddenly have awakened to its value.

But the problem of how to curb the slow rot that had set in, how to modernize the existing rail facilities, and how to integrate them in a well-planned transportation system has seemed financially insurmountable. There has been no lack of complicated and expensive plans, advanced by "experts" and commuter groups; the only thing missing has been the money to pay for them.

NEW JERSEY'S EXPERIENCE

Experience in New Jersey has shown that a state agency, in this case the Railroad Transportation Division of the State Highway Department, can do the job if given adequate legislative support. The most essential rail commuter service has been preserved under a system of contracts with the carriers. Action taken in cooperation with the State of New York has cleared the path for rehabilitation and efficient operation of a vital interstate facility, the Hudson and Manhattan Railroad. Comprehensive plans have been developed for construction of new facilities to link all of the North Jersey commuter railroads, and thus provide proper transportation for the thousands of workers who travel between the two states every day. In South Jersey, action in cooperation with the State of Pennsylvania has likewise provided for expansion of rail commuter service in the Camden-Philadelphia metropolitan area. All of the progress so far has been without the assistance of federal funds and without imposing an added tax burden upon the people of the states at interest.

The key to success in the effort outlined above was, of course, "adequate legislative support." The railroad industry had for decades been regulated as a profit-making monopoly. The legislation which authorized passenger service contracts in New Jersey also turned much of this regulatory power over to the agency responsible for executing the contracts—the Highway Department. The Highway Department has also been designated as the prime mover in negotiations between states involving the transportation activities of bi-state agencies.

Without such authority, no state agency can do much more than merely advance its point of view. With it, the decisions which must precede action can be made.

THE STATES' SHARE IN FINANCING

To implement the Highway Department's transit plans for New Jersey, further legislative action will be required. While these plans are based on full utilization of existing facilities in the most economical manner possible, large expenditures ultimately will be necessary. Neither the federal government, nor the railroads themselves, nor interstate agencies financed by tolls, nor a combination of any of them can be depended upon to bear the entire burden of financing the needed improvements. This situation is not confined solely to New Jersey.

Here again, the state government comes to the fore. Past history has shown that local governments are unwilling to contribute ready cash for transportation facilities, particularly those which extend beyond municipal boundaries. It is evident that the states will have to assume a large part of the financial responsibility.

Thus it becomes the duty of the states' transportation agencies not only to develop plans for providing adequate rail transportation, but also to recommend the best way to finance these plans. In all likelihood, such recommendations will in the future contemplate contributions by both state and federal governments as well as by the carriers.

WORKING WITH LOCALITIES

In the background of this situation, we see renewed activity by many local and regional citizens' groups concerned with the details of urban renewal, transportation, and most of all, overall "planning." The interest of these groups, their studies and recommendations, are a welcome and worthwhile addition to the activities of the state agencies which have been given the responsibility for developing and executing transportation improvements.

Knowledge of what the local communities need and want, of how proposed highways and transit lines will fit into the local scheme of things, is essential to the state; it is being acquired by both parties jointly considering each area's needs. It forms the base for decisions by the executive as well as the legislative branches of the government.

Too often self-formed groups, rather than the people's duly elected representatives, seek to put themselves in the position of charting the course and making the decisions. This cannot be permitted, for such groups neither provide the funds nor are able to spend them. As the responsibility rests with the state governments, so must the authority.

KEY ASPECTS

State governments can provide the kind of

coordinated highway and rail transportation (particularly mass transit) that is so urgently needed by our urban areas. As we see it:

The railroad industry as a national institution should remain in the hands of private ownership and should be prevented from moving, by default, into the shifting quicksands of public ownership and operation.

States must recognize that railroads are no longer monopoly utilities and should adopt a modernized set of rules to recognize their situation.

The cost of providing rail transit service should be reduced through technological efforts.

Labor should make its contribution if for no other reason than to protect its employment opportunities.

The state transportation agency entrusted with the task of providing well coordinated transportation facilities for the public should avoid the complacent "hands off" attitude of the past, as well as the stringent regulation which comes with public operation.

It is the job of the state agency, and not always an easy one, to act as "mediator" among the various and sometimes conflicting interests of the transportation industry. Carriers of all types must be persuaded to work together. The convenience of the commuter who catches the 7:05 each morning must be maintained, as well as that of the commuter who relies on his private car.

The most positive thing the state can do is let the mass transit carriers know, in no uncertain terms, that they have not been abandoned. Let the railroads know that a state agency is vitally interested in helping them to get back

on the road to economic health, and that they are supported by legislative authority and appropriations, and you will witness a remarkable change in the current attitude of railroads and their willingness to help themselves. In New Jersey, the major commuter railroads have begun to think in terms of helping themselves, and have cooperated in preparation of the Highway Department's transit program.

Once this has been accomplished, the technicians can get down to work drafting the detailed plans. Commuter railroad stations should be shifted, if necessary, to serve the present centers of population, and suburban stations should be located where ample parking is available. Schedules should be revised to tie in with bus movements. Duplicate and unnecessary service should be eliminated by providing transfers between lines.

It has been said that the commuter passenger service business will never be a paying one. Whether this is true or not, only time can tell. Meantime, it is the function of the state government to help keep the transit lines alive by eliminating operating costs wherever possible without curtailing essential service. It is that simple.

Numerous new modes of transportation are currently offered as substitutes for existing travel facilities. All cost real money; they have yet to prove their effectiveness, and if adopted would mean scrapping all existing facilities and the securities behind them. Moreover, we must still determine if the public will return to mass transit. Let us, accordingly, "half sole and heel" what we have, and give it a try.

LEADER OF THE TEAM

What is the role of state government in solving the transportation problems of our urban areas? It is to be the leader of the team, the "quarterback." The solution is not beyond our reach, but we cannot reach it by grasping at butterflies. State government has a tremendous stake in providing safe, convenient and speedy transportation facilities. Without them, our economic life must wither away. More than that, state governments have the responsibility, the knowledge and the experience needed to build and maintain the essential arteries of commerce. No commissions, no council or committee, can substitute for the state in assuming the responsibility of enlightened public officials for the job at hand.



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