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ON THE ROAD

By Norm Bowers, Local Road Engineer

The Buck Stops Here (but don't be short sighted)



The sign “The Buck Stops Here” was on President Truman’s desk in his White House office. The saying “the buck stops here” derives from the slang expression “pass the buck” which means passing the responsibility or the blame on to someone else.

I still get my hometown newspaper and this year the county road supervisor is being blamed by the citizens for the poor condition of the gravel roads. There have been numerous articles in the paper of citizens attending the county commission meetings and saying some pretty outrageous things about the supervisor. If the supervisor was as dumb as the citizens claim, he would have a hard time finding his way home from work. I guess it is human nature to blame someone, and the road supervisor is an easy target. However, it is unlikely the road supervisor is the problem and neither are the current commissioners. (Notice how I passed the buck.) The real problem may not have been apparent to citizens but road people have seen it coming for decades. The real problem is that in most counties’ road budgets have not kept up with cost increases, and as a result the condition of the county road infrastructure has been deteriorating gradually.

This year we have had a lot of soaking rains that have made a mess of our gravel roads. While some people would blame the weather, and the road supervisor, the underlying issue is that we haven’t been keeping up with replacing the surfacing that is lost due to traffic and weather. Surfacing wears down with traffic and blading and we lose the gravel in the form of road dust that blows on adjacent land. Gravel functions in two ways: it is structural as



FIGURE 1. Sign on President Truman’s desk.

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it has better bearing capacity than the underlying soil, and it is relatively impervious and it protects the underlying soil from moisture. If the gravel layer is too thin, a soaking rain will penetrate the gravel layer and that moisture weakens the soil. Then traffic cuts ruts in the road and we basically have a mud road with a little gravel for traction. Then to make a good road we have to reshape the road and add a lot of gravel.

Here is a road maintenance dilemma. It costs more to maintain a poor road than a good one. For instance, 500 tons of gravel to the mile may have prevented rutting, but once we lose the road it may take 1,500 tons to the mile to repair it. If we keep the roads mowed back so trees don't grow, it is a lot cheaper than removing hundreds of 6-inch trees when the road gets overgrown. We never save money by deferring maintenance, but too often that is what we have been trying to do.

Back to the "The Buck Stops here." At the county level the buck obviously stops at the county commission. Commissioners rightfully see themselves as guardians and overseers for the proper expenditures of the tax dollars. Infrastructure involves long term issues, so we need to think long term. Decisions need to be made based on long term cost effectiveness, but too often we only look at the short term. Looking at the short term is likely being cheap, and costing money in the long term. I could give many examples but the most obvious one is training. It is the commission's responsibility to see that county staff is properly trained so they can perform their jobs efficiently and effectively and in compliance with laws and regulations. Training doesn't cost much but the benefits can be huge. However, in many counties training is almost non-existent. Right or wrong we just keep doing things the same old way, because we think we don't have the time or



FIGURE 2. *County commissioners checking roads?*

budget for training. Citizens may complain that the blade operator doesn't know what he is doing, and maybe he doesn't. Has he ever been sent to training?

Unlike a business that could close next year, counties are going to be in business a long, long time. For that reason alone department directors and the county commissioners should be making decisions based on long-term implications. It is easy to think short term; it is harder to think long term. But being short sighted costs more in the long run and makes things worse for those who follow us. ■

If you like roads, and who doesn't, you may be interested in my twice monthly email on current road issues and road items of statewide interest. If you would like to receive these emails just send me an email request with position, and county or company at bowers@kansascounties.org.

COUNTY COMMENT

County Comment is published monthly as the official newsletter of the Kansas Association of Counties. Questions or comments are welcome and may be forwarded to [Dana Wethington, Editor](mailto:Dana.Wethington@kansascounties.org).

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