



Yates County Highway Department

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Superintendent's Profile
Box 43, 220 Central Avenue
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Att: Robert G. Dymont, Editor & Publisher

Re: Consolidation of Yates County Highway Departments.

Dear Sir:

In a recent interview with Jim Covell, Town of Torrey Highway Superintendent, you expressed an interest in a study, currently underway in Yates County, on the possible future consolidation of County and Town Highway Departments. Jim has asked me to provide you with information regarding this study, and the proposed structure and goals of the consolidation plan.

Background:

A recent poll conducted by the Gallup Organization in June of 1992, reveals that only 38% of the people have "a fair amount" of trust and confidence in the federal government. Only 46% have "a fair amount" of trust and confidence in state government, and 54% have "a fair amount" of trust and confidence in local government. Mr. Robert B. Hawkins, Jr., chairman of the Advisory Commission in Intergovernmental Relations, has said, "While there has been a disturbing decline in public trust and confidence in all of our governments, the government closest to the people still remains the government of popular choice." Citing taxpayers' rising exasperation over the multiple layers of government they are asked to support, Secretary of State Gail S. Shaffer, challenged officials from the state's counties and towns to begin considering plans to enact cost-effective consolidations. To meet this challenge, Ms. Shaffer advised borrowing from the Chinese, whose symbol for crisis is drawn by combining the sign for danger and opportunity. "The current economic crisis, may well provide an opportunity to make historic, precedent-setting contributions, to the way elected officials conduct the people's business in the 21st century" she said.

Yates County is a small, rural county located in the heart of the finger lakes, with a relatively high rate of unemployment and a large percentage of it's population on fixed income. In addition to a few small industries and the traditional support businesses of any community, Yates County relies heavily on agriculture and tourism to provide jobs for local residents. Many residents are forced to commute (out of the county) to find gainful employment and therefore, rely on a adequate transportation system for their income. With a population of approximately 22,000, (almost unchanged from the turn of the century), the increased cost of multi-layer regimes, has raised serious questions regarding the ability of a limited number of taxpayers, to afford both town and county government. It is the nature of bureaucratic institutions to encourage legislation to preserve and protect their immediate empires, and 214 years of lawmaking have produced an entrenched, multi-layered government structure, that characterizes New York State. Therefore, any efforts at consolidating two different levels of government, regardless of the potential savings in tax dollars, will be dependent on our ability to effect significant changes in the laws and regulations of New York State.

In 1984-85; Yates County, with the assistance of the Genesee Transportation Council, studied the possibility of consolidating town and county highway departments as a means of increasing efficiency and productivity, and decreasing rising costs. The study determined, significant savings could be realized by a consolidating the highway departments, while maintaining the same level of service, even within the existing rules, regulations and laws. The study approached the problem, (by accident or design), from the point of view of down-sizing or eliminating the town highway departments and expanding the county highway department. Or, put another way, by eliminating the government agency closest to the people, and encouraging growth in that agency furthest from the people. Outside of those immediately involved, and a few public officials, the study went unnoticed and unappreciated, primarily because it was considered politically and realistically unobtainable.

Since 1985, state mandated expenditures in the areas of education, health and human services, public safety, and every other aspect of local government have raised dramatically. In addition, federal and state funding programs have been cut radically or even eliminated, as state and federal officials campaigned on the premise of "no new taxes". Local officials, in an effort to reduce the impact of this loss of funding and increased mandated expenses, on property taxes, frantically searched for non-mandated areas of the budget to cut, and more often than not, these cuts were made in highway budgets.

Highway departments themselves, have not been immune from mandates and costly regulations. The failure of a Thruway bridge in Schoharie County, resulted in new bridge legislation, that placed an enormous burden on local highway departments. In Yates County, the funding for the new bridge program, came substantially from money needed to maintain and repair county roads. Regulatory agencies have developed a never ending stream of new and costly regulations, that are having a serious impact on county and town highway budgets. The New York State Department of Labor, OSHA, EPA, and DEC, to name a few of the most obvious, have inundated local highway departments with time consuming and often costly rules and regulations, while ignoring the impact on local budgets. Finally, while lack of work has kept costs, in the private sector of construction, at a reasonable level, regular cuts in county and town budgets have resulted in a failure to match even modest increases in the cost of materials, parts and new equipment. The consequences of these factors and many more, have been a steady decrease in the ability of local highway officials to fulfill their responsibility to construct, repair, improve and maintain our local transportation system.

In dealing with these problems on a day to day basis, it became intuitively obvious, that radical changes would have to be made, if we are to eliminate or even slow this alarming trend. I watched and listened with interest, to the rhetoric on "mandate relief, and cuts in entitlement programs, human services, education and defense". I have come to realize, that a much larger number of people were involved in defending existing, and forming new, regulations and mandates, than could ever be brought to the problem of mandate relief. In my opinion, roads and bridges will never successfully compete for limited tax dollars, with education, health care, human services, public safety and many of the other costly agencies and programs. In short, I believe that federal and state priorities, do not include local roads and bridges. We must therefore, look to ourselves, if we hope to accomplish effective cost cutting measures, and maintain a responsible level of maintenance at the local level. With these factors in mind, it was time to take another look at the question of consolidating county and town highway departments.

The Problem:

Yates County has a county highway department and nine separate, independent town highway departments, each with a superintendent, a varying number of employees, and an assortment of facilities and equipment. In any construction project, there are several factors that determine it's success or failure. The first is administration; this involves engineering, purchasing, record keeping, quality control, planning, evaluation and implementation. Second, there is labor; the availability of a reasonably capable work force, to carry out the project in a timely and workmanlike manner. Third, is equipment; the availability of dependable, efficient, well-maintained equipment, suitable for the intended project. Finally, there is materials; the ability to obtain the required materials in sufficient quantity and quality, to complete the project. With ten departments, each must have some form of an administrative staff, a workforce, a variety of equipment, a maintenance shop, storage facility for equipment, fuel storage and dispensing equipment, and the ability to receive, load, transport and place materials. As a result, the number of employees, and the quantity of equipment and materials, is not justified, by the quantity and quality of the work performed. Each department must (or should) have one or more loaders, a motor grader, several trucks, at least one piece of excavating equipment, a roller, and a vast assortment of tools, hardware, and small equipment, i.e., pumps, generators, saws, welders, etc.. At any given time, the vast majority of this equipment is idle and unproductive. If combined, the size of the workforce and the quantity of equipment, would match a construction company in the private sector, capable of performing multi-million dollar projects yearly. Even then, a great deal of redundant equipment would be eliminated, without reducing their capabilities.

Limited, often antiquated equipment, combined with a small, inadequate (in terms of numbers) work force, have contributed to an overall reduction in productivity and efficiency. Many Townships have already developed symbiotic relationships with other highway departments, to help overcome these deficiencies, and in most cases these work quite well. However, it is well to remember, that these relationships can disappear with a change in superintendents or board members. The County also has times when they lack sufficient manpower and/or equipment to complete projects in the most timely and efficient manner. It is ironic, that the County taken as a whole, has more equipment and more manpower than is needed, yet individual departments and crews often lack both, for specific projects.

The Solution:

I would seem self evident, that improved organizational and management techniques could solve most of these problems. The consolidation of County and Town Highway Departments, would place all the existing resources at the disposal of each project supervisor. Since the taxpayers seem to have more confidence in the governmental body over which they exercise the most control, it seems logical to look in that direction. There are however, certain functions, that are best handled at one, central location, and may require authority, expertise or facilities, not available on the Township level.

The basic structure of the consolidation would consist of a County Highway Department, that provides basic administration, such as;

1. Engineering
2. Purchasing
3. Scheduling & Coordination
4. Record keeping
5. Billing
6. Complaints
7. Permit applications
8. Sign inventory and regulation
9. Equipment maintenance
10. Snow Watch
11. Costs and quality control

and nine Town Highway Departments which would supply all labor and field supervision of the construction, improvement, repair and maintenance of all County and Town Roads.

For highway purposes only, Town boundaries would be eliminated, allowing workers and supervisors, from each township to work anywhere within the county, for betterment of the whole county transportation system.

Each year, the county superintendent would meet with the Town Superintendent and review the needs of each Township. They would then provide the Village Board, with a proposed list of capital projects for that Township, including estimated costs. These would include both County and Town roads, and the Board could choose one, all or none of the Town road projects. If a given board decided not to do any capital work for a year, it's work force would be utilized in other areas of the county. Routine maintenance work would continue throughout the year, equitably distributed among the townships. Ditching, shoulder cuts, driveway installations, brush & tree removal, etc., would be performed on an as-needed basis.