CAN WE AFFORD TO SLOW DOWN THE GREATEST CONSTRUCTION JOB IN HISTORY?

Thirty-seven months ago this nation began to construct the greatest highway system in the world — a project that will affect directly the lives of more Americans than anything our nation has built.

It is the nation's first long-ranged planned highway program — scheduled for completion in 1972.

Now this bold, imaginative program is in jeopardy of a costly slowdown. For a nation with over 68 million motor vehicles, such a disruption will cost far more than keeping it on schedule.

What are we building?

We are building hundreds of thousands of miles of modern highways. The most dramatic part of the program is a massive 41,000-mile system of Freeways — a network of super-highways connecting every state, practically every city of 50,000 or more. This is the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

Are we on schedule?

Yes, at the end of three years we are right on schedule. Interstate System construction is 107 per cent of its scheduled rate. Contracts have been completed on 4,050 miles and are under way on 5,229 miles. Contracts on primary, secondary and urban roads have been completed on 73,709 miles and are under way on 30,249 miles. All this has been done in three years.

Why the slowdown?

Lack of Federal funds. For Interstate System construction the Federal Government is putting up 90 per cent of the costs, the states 10 per cent. Other highways in the program are being built on a 50-50 basis.

Federal money comes from a highway trust fund, maintained by Federal highway user taxes. The highways are being built on a pay-as-you-build basis.

But the fund, because of last year's increased program and other factors, is depleted. Money for further construction should have been apportioned to the states by July 1. It has not.

Because of the financial problem, 25 states have been forced to stop awarding new contracts for Interstate construction and 16 soon will follow. The program is grinding to a halt just as it swung into high gear.

How much is it costing you?

Talking in terms of "billions of dollars" can be misleading. You have been getting all this new construction — plus maintenance of all our 3,300,000 existing miles of roads and streets—for just one penny for each mile you drive your car. It's the smallest cost of operating an automobile.

Today the average cost of owning and operating a car is 9½ cents a mile. Seven cents pays for the depreciation and upkeep of the car. One and a half cents pays for your fuel costs, not including taxes. And only the remaining penny goes to building and maintaining highways.

And modern highways pay you that penny back immediately. For it has been found that driving on Freeways designed like those of the Interstate System lowers your operating costs to 8½ cents a mile — a saving of one cent, or more than 10 per cent.

Nation saves $2.1 billion

Altogether the Interstate System will save the nation $2.1 billion each year . . . $550 million in vehicle operating costs; $725 million in accident costs; $825 million in time savings for commercial vehicles.

But more than money is involved. Modern, limited access highways reduce accidents by two-thirds. The completed Interstate System will save 4,000 lives each year and prevent one million accidents. Delay of this program for just one year will cost the nation 5,700 lives during the period of 1960 to 1970, according to the National Safety Council.

In good faith

In 1956 when the program started, the act authorized a definite annual Federal expenditure for 13 years to see it through to completion. The nation's roadbuilders geared up for the tremendous job ahead. State Highway Departments were enlarged, hired thousands of engineers and technical personnel. Contractors around the nation tooled up, purchased equipment. Industry expanded its facilities to meet the challenge. For the Interstate System construction alone requires each year 49 million tons of steel. 1.4 billion barrels of cement, 13 billion gallons of petroleum products, five million gallons of paint.

The program was accepted in good faith by those who had the responsibility of seeing it through to completion.

A slowdown could hurt contractors, work considerable hardship in industry, reduce the highly technical organizations developed by the states, and throw hundreds of thousands out of work.

What is the solution?

None of this need happen. There are at least three ways to keep the program on schedule — borrowing from general funds, bond financing, and raising the Federal gasoline taxes.

The soundest of these seems to be the recommended increase in gasoline taxes. It will meet the immediate fiscal need. It will keep the program on a pay-as-you-build basis. It will be noninflationary. And, most important, it will cost the average motorist less than one mill for each mile he drives. Having the world's finest highway system at his disposal will remain the smallest cost of operating a car.

There's a lot at stake. Our economic growth. Your personal safety and your comfort. Even our nation's defense.

Slowing down the greatest construction job in history will be an expensive economy.

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