

State Leaders Help Make Interstate Highway System a Reality

By John Horsley

While federal commitment to a system of interstate and defense highways was essential to the creation of the 1956 Interstate Highways Act, the grand plan would not have been possible were it not for the groundwork laid by state departments of transportation.

The American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO)—now called AASHTO—was founded in 1914. Over the next three decades, AASHO worked with the federal Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) to foster a more

professional approach to road building; agreeing on a common set of design guidelines, materials and routes.

The BPR, under the leadership of its director, Thomas MacDonald—“The Chief” as he was known—

began to work with the states on an unprecedented 41,000 mile network of roadways in the 1940s. MacDonald came to Washington from Iowa, where he was a member of the state’s highway commission and its principal engineer.

“A Significant Partnership”

A significant partnership between the states and the federal road agency happened with the establishment of the National Interregional Highway Committee in 1941 by President Franklin Roosevelt. This committee was led by MacDonald and BPR Deputy Commissioner Herbert S. Fairbank.

It included the following state officials: G. Donald Kennedy, state highway commissioner of Michigan; Bib Graves,

former governor of Alabama; Charles H. Purcell, state highway engineer for California; Frederic A. Delano, chairman of the National Resources Planning Board; Harlan Bartholomew, the renowned city planner of St. Louis City; and, Rexford Guy Tugwell, chairman of the New York City Planning Commission.

With the cooperation of the BPR and state highway departments, the committee presented to Congress in 1944 the *Interregional Highways* report, which called for a network of 33,900 miles of highways, with 5,000 urban auxiliary roads.

While the nation recovered from World War II, Congress again asked state highway departments to work with BPR to conduct a study on “Highway Needs of the National Defense.” The report identified the critical deficiencies of the interstate network and also placed a price tag on needed improvements at \$11.5 billion.

A series of hearings and studies over the next several years led to the enactment the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1954. Before this act passed, though, the nation’s governors in 1953 approved a policy position opposing further federal aid for highways and urged that the federal government stop taxing fuel and leave that source of revenue up to the states.



BPR’s Frank Turner (left), pictured with President Eisenhower, served as secretary of the Informal Advisory Committee, formed by Francis V. duPont.

Getting the Program Underway

With the retirement of the BPR’s MacDonald, Francis V. duPont, longtime chairman of the Delaware Highway Commission, undertook President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s “grand plan for a properly articulated highway system.”

To do this, duPont formed an Informal Advisory Committee made up largely of state highway leaders to help get the Interstate program underway. Committee members included: A.E. Johnson of Arkansas, chairman; George T. McCoy of California; Frank D. Merrill of New Hampshire; B.D. Tallamy of New York; and J.A. Anderson of Virginia. Francis C. Turner of the BPR served as



Francis V. duPont

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the committee's secretary.

The committee reached agreement on design standards and completion times, but more importantly it was decided the program should be undertaken by the state highway departments and BPR and that there would be no compromise on the issue of full control of access.

Although this group was informal and not an official AASHO committee, many of its recommendations were incorporated into the 1956 Act. Johnson, as AASHO president, outlined the recommendations to the organization's Committee on Administration at their Annual Meeting in Seattle.

Building Support

Senator Albert Gore, Sr., of Tennessee, chairman of the Senate Roads Subcommittee, introduced a bill to begin the implementation of the Interstate system with a total of \$7.75 billion over five years with a 90 percent federal share.



Sen. Albert Gore, Sr.

Similarly, in the House of Representatives, Maryland Congressman George Fallon introduced a measure to provide \$24 billion over 12 years.



Rep. George Fallon

Both pieces of legislation, as well as the Eisenhower Administration's bill, languished in Congress in 1955, but AASHO began to build support of the effort by appearing before Congress under the leadership of President George T. McCoy of California.

The Fallon bill more closely reflected the position of AASHO and association executives appearing before Congress—including McCoy—were: F.D. Merrill of New Hampshire; J.A. Volpe of Massachusetts; C.R. McMullan of South Carolina; R.R. Bartelsmeyer

What Might Have Been...

Before approving the Interstate shield (center), AASHO considered proposals, like the examples shown, from the states.

Photos courtesy of AASHTO

of Illinois; W.A. Bugge of Washington; M.U. Watrous of Colorado; J.A. Anderson of Virginia; G.S. Covert of Louisiana; M.J. Hoffmann of Minnesota; R.H. Baldock of Oregon; D.C. Greer of Texas; R.M. Whitton of Missouri; R.H. McCain of Maryland; P.H. Gates of Vermont; and E.W. Kilpatrick of New Jersey.

The following year, AASHO's successes paid off as President Whitton and members of the Executive Committee spent as much time as possible in Washington, D.C., to secure passage of the Act.

The House-Senate Conference agreed on a compromise on June 25 and it sailed through both chambers the next day. On June 29, President

Eisenhower signed the Act while he was recuperating at Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C.

Job Not Done...

AASHO's work was not finished, though. AASHO's Planning and Design Committee was working on developing and updating the geometric design standards for the new Interstate, less than a month after the Act became law.

At a meeting of state highway administrators in Chicago, the new standards were finally adopted. BPR Commissioner C.D. Curtiss accepted the standards on behalf of the Secretary of Commerce on July 17, 1956.

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