

The Adobe Tower
by Jerry Hall and Loretta Hall

Firsts in '44

In January 1944, anticipating a successful end to World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt sent Congress the *Interregional Highways* report that had been completed three years earlier. Developing the recommended 39,000-mile national road network would stimulate the economy, create jobs, and facilitate coast-to-coast and border-to-border transportation.

Congress considered the proposal for nearly a year, finally incorporating many of the report's recommendations in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944. The Act, which Roosevelt signed on December 20, was remarkable in several ways.

Since implementing the Federal Highway Act of 1921, the feds had been funding half the cost of building a system of non-urban roads that could be used for interstate travel. Each state designated up to 3 percent of its primary roads and up to 4 percent of its secondary roads to receive these funds. The 1944 Act revised and expanded this concept. Now, the 7 percent of state-selected roads were combined into the new designation of Federal-Aid Primary routes. Of the \$500 million authorized over a three-year period, Congress earmarked \$225 million for these Primary routes.

The 1944 Act created a second designation, the Federal-Aid Secondary system, consisting of farm-to-market roads and feeder roads such as rural mail routes and school bus routes. These routes would receive 30 percent of the federal assistance (\$150 million). Selection and prioritization of these Secondary roads was the responsibility of counties, drawing them for the first time into the federal-state highway partnership. States responded in various ways. Some merely consulted with their counties to select routes, with the state highway departments doing the planning and construction of the routes. Others delegated the planning, design, and construction of selected roads to the counties, with the state highway department performing a supervisory role.

The 1944 Act also authorized federal aid specifically for urban highways. It set aside \$125 million (25 percent of the three-year federal authorization) for extending Primary routes through cities with populations of at least 5,000. The three designations (Primary, Secondary, and Urban extensions) became known as the ABC programs.

Besides creating three categories for federally subsidized highways, the 1944 Act also authorized, for the first time, designation of a "National System of Interstate Highways." No federal money was earmarked for this system; these highways were to be part of the Primary system. Up to 40,000 miles of Interstate highways were to be selected by the Public Roads Administration (PRA, an interim name for the Bureau of Public Roads) in cooperation with the state highway departments. The system was intended to provide direct routes among state capitols, major cities, important industrial centers, and significant connections to Canadian and Mexican roads. Specifically, the routes were to be selected according to the following weighted criteria: importance for national defense (30 percent), integration with the overall system (30 percent), population served (20 percent), and meeting the economic needs of industry and

agriculture (20 percent).

Devising formulas was not unusual for Congress. They had resorted to a similar tactic in 1921 to reach a compromise among constituencies competing for federal aid for highways. After months of debate in 1944, Congress retained the existing apportionment formula for the new Primary roads. Each state would receive a portion of the total federal authorization based on three equally weighted factors: state population, land area, and postal route mileage. Apportionment for the Secondary system restricted the first factor to the state's *rural* population. For the Urban extensions, urban population was the only apportionment factor.

The 1944 Act incorporated and refined some national highway programs implemented during the 1930s as emergency measures directed more at creating jobs than developing a broad transportation policy. Federal funding for secondary feeder routes and for urban roads are two examples. Another is allowing the use of federal funds for up to one-third of the cost of acquiring right-of-way for federal-aid roads.

One important result of the 1944 report and the Federal-Aid Highway Act was the development of a landmark technique for urban transportation planning. In order to select the best routes for Urban Primary highways, planners had to understand city traffic patterns and needs on a broader scope than merely counting volumes on existing streets. To gather the necessary information, the PRA developed the home-interview origin-destination survey. Household members were asked, for a given day, to describe not only the origins and destinations of every trip taken, but also each trip's purpose and the mode of transportation used. The survey procedure and analysis methods were detailed in the *Manual of Procedures for Home Interview Traffic Studies*, which the PRA published in 1944.

Once the 1944 legislation was finalized, the federal government promptly went to work with the states and major cities to enact its provisions. Progress on the Interstate system was slow because there was no financial incentive for states to focus resources on those routes. During the subsequent five years, nationwide vehicle registrations increased by 45 percent. Yet, even though the feds were willing to provide half the funds for ABC roads, the states struggled to contribute their matching portion. In fact, unspent federal funds accumulated to the point that Congress suspended the appropriations for 1949. By the time Congress decided in 1952 to designate funds specifically for the Interstate system, legislators saw no point in authorizing more than the token amount of \$25 million.

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This is the sixth in a series of articles tracing the development of the Interstate Highway System.