

Elbert County Roads: Part 2 of 3 - Assessing the Condition of Our Roads

We Can't Do Everything - So Where Should We Focus?

Submitted for Publication: Prairie Times, June 2017 Edition

This is the second piece of a three part series on our county roads. Last month's letter focused on the amount of revenue that our county has to devote to roads compared to our neighbors. This month we address the actions we are taking to determine what our total county-wide requirements are. In July, we will lay out our plans to prioritize and seek funding for our needs over the coming years.

In the May edition, we discussed the fact that even though our county places a very high priority on funding road maintenance, the results are clearly not what we want for our citizens. In fact, though across Colorado, counties on average allocate 11% of their budget to roads, Elbert County devotes 24% of our overall budget to this purpose. Unfortunately, because our revenue levels are low, this high share of the budget still leaves us spending less than one-fifth of what our neighbor to the west spends per road mile. Though Douglas County only spends 11% of their budget on roads, this equates to nearly \$28,000 per mile. Comparatively, we spend about 24% of our budget and this provides only about \$5000 per mile. The result is obvious to everyone that drives on our roads.

So, we know that we have limited resources. But, how limited? In 2017, we will collect approximately \$6.9 million through the Road and Bridge mill levy, the one-percent Sales and Use Tax, Highway Users Tax Fund (Gas Tax) and other collections. This seems like *enough to address ANY road issue that we have*. Likely it is.

Unfortunately, it's not enough to address EVERY road issue that we have.

So what do we tackle first? Before we can prioritize, we have to know our requirements. We have to systematically assess both the conditions and the traffic load on all of our Elbert County roadways.

The information for this assessment will be drawn from many sources. The basis of this effort is the current Western Elbert County Transportation Plan. Though produced in 2008, the study looked out 30 years, and is still very valid. Our intent is to fund an update to this study in next year's budget and this time include the entire county.

In the interim, we are finalizing a pavement condition study based on ASTM (American Society for Testing and Materials) standards. The first such county study was conducted in 2010. This year, our consulting engineers, Enertia Consulting, is working to complete a second assessments of all our paved roads. These two reviews, seven years apart, will provide a comprehensive look at how our pavement maintenance program is working and where deterioration indicates we should prioritize future work.

At a cost of nearly \$600 thousand per mile, preserving our past investments in pavement is clearly important. But, it's obvious to all of us that we are still primarily a dirt road county. We'd like to say we are a primarily a "gravel road county", but this is not the case - the quality of local gravel is poor and the cost to truck in good gravel is extremely high - and plainly these roads need maintenance and improvement too.

As the county has grown, traffic counts have increased to the point that many of our roads cannot support the traffic load they now experience. Most are built of native soil with very little augmentation.

Add moisture and traffic to roads that are largely sand and clay and the result is the annual "mud season" that we all despise.

So how do we address the mud, the ruts, and the washboards? Where traffic count supports the need for paving, that is the direction we need to go. Unfortunately, the 2008 study indicates that requirement is approximately 138 miles of additional pavement at a cost of nearly \$84 million. So, "pave it all" isn't a solution. But, "pave some more" likely is. The result of the 2008 plan wasn't just a better understanding of our needs but, a basis to request grants. To date, that plan has been used to justify well over \$4 million in grant dollars.

So, back to our unpaved roads. Unlike pavement, there is no ASTM standard for classifying the conditions of gravel roads. Currently, the county determines where to focus its efforts primarily based on the cost per mile to maintain individual roads. Obviously this cost rises where combinations of high-traffic, poor soils, and bad drainage exist, but it really doesn't quantify the specific issues that need to be addressed. There will always be roads that cost more to maintain than others, so this current method doesn't let us know when we're done or what is "good enough".

Over the next month, in partnership with our consulting engineers, we will be developing a clear assessment method to classify our unpaved roads in a manner that is similar to that of our paved roads. This will allow us to develop programs for maintenance and to better allocate dollars to reduce the need for costly emergency/safety-related repairs.

We recognize that our roads need to be improved. They affect our quality life, the cost of maintaining our vehicles, the ability of our medical, fire and law enforcement to respond in emergencies, and the general safety of the traveling public. Frankly, there is no easy or quick answer. But, we are committed to fully quantifying the issues, developing plans, and seeking the resources to address them efficiently.

Finally, we must take a moment to recognize the employees in our Road & Bridge Department. Theirs is a never ending task. They will be the first to tell you that they want good - safe and smooth- roads for their neighbors to travel. They work diligently to do the best in the environment we have and, collectively they do their jobs well in some of the worst conditions that Mother Nature throws at them. Blizzard, drought, or heavy rain - it's all we seem to experience and none of those conditions are ideal for maintaining roads such as ours.

Until progress can be made, we will address immediate safety issues as they are recognized and we ask that you continue to contact us with your concerns. If you live on unpaved roads, we urge you to watch the forecasts and plan, prepare, and respond to potential rain and mud as you would a winter blizzard. If you feel the roads are unsafe, don't drive unless you have to, and/or plan extra travel time to get to your destination.

In next month's edition, we plan to lay out our plan to assess the conditions of our unpaved roads and the basis of our long-term planning for overall improvements in road maintenance and repair.

Chris Richardson, Commissioner District 1
Danny Willcox, Commissioner District 2
Grant Thayer, Commissioner District 3