

Jeff David: Where the politics meet the road

The resignation of Louisiana Department of Transportation Secretary William Ankner may be applauded by some, but the state has lost a well-qualified and serious professional who simply got caught up in the century-old fight between politics and engineering in public road building. Politics won.

Since long before history began to record the activity of man, our species has used common pathways to move about from one point on the earth to another. The first road to be deciphered from ancient writings was in Egypt, built to facilitate the construction of the Great Pyramid. But roads really began to flourish as mankind organized armies, large groups of men who needed to move about quickly.

Several different empires built roads in the Middle East and in China, and established routes connecting the two civilizations. But the greatest road builders of all time were unquestionably the Romans. At the peak of the Roman Empire around 300 AD, the Romans maintained 53,000 miles of roads stretching from England to the Mediterranean. By comparison, the modern American interstate highway system covers only about 45,000 miles.

The Roman road was built with a common and oft-repeated standard methodology. The bed would be dug out 3 to 5 feet, followed by four distinct layers. First, a bedding of sand or mortar; then a layer of rows of large flat stones; a thin layer of gravel mixed with lime; and finally a thin surface of flint-like lava. The average road was 12 to 24 feet wide. This Roman road building technique remained the primary method of building roads in Europe and North Africa up until modern technology was developed in the late 18th and early 19th century. Many Roman roads are still in use today, a testament to the ingenuity of that civilization.

In America, when the central government was formed among the colonies by the United States Constitution one provision mandated Congress to "build post houses and post roads." The growth of the railroads during the 1800s depressed demand for roads in both England and the U.S., but by 1891 New Jersey became the first state to form a State Highway Department. Massachusetts followed suit in 1892, and by the mid 1920s, every state had adopted some kind of highway building program.

Uncle Sam had been involved in building his post houses and post roads throughout the 1800s, but it was in 1912 that Congress first moved aggressively into the road building business. The Granddaddy of U.S. highway policy was a Senator from Alabama named John H. Bankhead, among other things the father of famous actress Tallulah Bankhead. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Post House and Post Roads, he pushed through in 1912 a \$500,000 appropriation that resulted in 425 miles of improved roads in 17 states. Four years later, Bankhead steered into law the first Federal Highway Act, which has been the basis for a continuing federal aid road building program ever since.

In 1921, the Louisiana Legislature established the Highway Commission, which quickly became the subject of accusations of impropriety. During the famed 1940 reform legislative session following the jailing of Gov. Richard Leche and the President of LSU for taking kickbacks on construction contracts, the Department of Highways was established by law and a director was designated as the head of the department. The director was, and is, appointed by the governor.

In the six decades that followed before the appointment of Bill Ankner to the position, the usual pattern was for the governor to make a political appointment as DOT head. The department was already endowed with engineers, but the budget for road building had to be lobbied first to the governor and then to the Legislature. Occasionally, an engineer like Ankner has been appointed to the position, but in the office next door, there would be a politically savvy assistant to deal with the elected officials.

Over time, both the federal highway policy and the Louisiana state highway policy developed into a hybrid of compromise between legislators who wanted roads built in their district, and engineers in the bureaucracy who wanted roads built where they were needed the most from a professional point of view. That hybrid system of distributing road funds in Louisiana and the United States has resulted in a patchwork quilt of roads, some of which make sense and some of which do not.

Ankner was brought in from out of state by Bobby Jindal as a professional engineer who was going to break through the politics and run the department on a professional basis. That approach was met with immediate and predictable friction from a score of legislators, all of whom had worked hard to gain a position of influence over road policy. In the end, the friction between engineer and politician became too hot for Ankner, and he resigned in disgust.

Louisiana has lost an excellent road engineer. But the system will not change. Politics will always be a major factor in road building. Those who cannot accept that inevitable end are better off gone.

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