

# THE CAMPFIRE



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The campfire is interwoven into the fabric of America. Around it gathered the early explorers, the trappers, the fur traders and the soldiers. Today it connotes companionship, relaxation, and recreation in the out-of-doors. This monthly bulletin provides a figurative campfire about which we may exchange ideas that seem to us worth expressing and sharing.

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## PARKWAYS--A NEW PHILOSOPHY

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We have watched for nearly forty years the fitting of parkways and freeways into the urban and suburban plan like a miracle-revitalizing traffic flow, bringing a stamp of order and beauty to congested environments. We have seen the parkway, freeway, expressway, or thruway strike across the New England States, New York, parts of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Michigan, California, Oregon, and others, meeting demands of heavy regional travel.

We have watched highway engineers through 48 States, encouraged by the Bureau of Public Roads, borrowing progressive ideas from these examples and applying them to trouble spots in the Nation's network of highways.

Despite signs of progress, there has been no full appreciation of the value of these advanced theories, no general adoption even where traffic conditions are critical. Instead, we continue in busy places to build on narrow rights of way six lanes of concrete, for example, and to watch a year later how four lanes remain to be traveled in considerable jeopardy between lines of vehicles parked or maneuvering before burgeoning roadside establishments. Each year more highways, but lately improved, sink into early obsolescence. It would be misleading simply to say that planners have been slow to learn, for the demonstrations of sound planning are now too many and too generally admired. More accurately, we face the famil-



iar difficulty of selling the public what is for their own good, values as distinguished from costs--this during a time when highway budgets are beleaguered from every side. Investment in parkways or freeways is long-term investment and wise investment. Any lesser plan for the urban environment is waste. It remains for the planning professions to impress these facts on the civic intelligence.

We have known that the insulated highway works wonders in the congested areas, yet we have only begun to adopt it for use in the American countryside. The estate of happiness while motoring for business or pleasure between centers of population or parks, forests, lakes, and beaches is at least intermittent with a sense of discomfort and danger. Multifarious things exploit the roadside and trouble the way, though the avowed function of the tax-built thorough-fare is to provide for safe and pleasant travel.

Our troubles stem from a too-narrow definition of the highway in the courts of law, and they root deeper than that in our American sense of property rights--a jealous ideal we all share. It was the parkway that first gave us the complete motorway and opened our eyes. It was accomplished under park law, not highway law. Since then, we have striven to broaden the language about highways, to incorporate something of those virtuous and resourceful powers which could insure the future of our highways against decay. Ethically, there can be no question. Consider how we spend on the motor vehicle several times each year what we spend to educate our children. Consider then that our terrific investment in highways has little surety. The risk is great in the face of continuously growing traffic and the growing business potential of the roadside.

One example of the new and complete parkway used as a means of conservation and recreation in the rural region is the Blue Ridge Parkway, 500 miles through the mountains of Virginia and North Carolina between Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks. Now two-thirds complete, this pioneer project was designed expressly for the vacation motorist. The roadway itself is mostly two lanes wide, a modern version of mountain road. It is the broad ribbon of parkway land, 850 feet wide on the average, which guarantees its worth in the field of conservation. The right of way expands in places to embrace a wild area of several thousand acres, a mountain or group of mountains, the fringes of which are developed for recreation and various services for the traveler. Again the parkway reaches out and gathers in a pioneer cabin or a grist mill. Sheep graze in Sweet Annie's Hollow; corn grows in the highland valleys. Thus in the Blue Ridge, the versatile concept we call parkway became a way to exhibit and to preserve the varied geographical features of a native American landscape.

There may be relatively few parts of our country where new scenic parkways of such dimension as the Blue Ridge would be justified. There are, however, many vulnerable spots in our highway system where insulated roadways are clearly justified. No one



knows, for example, the resort areas or the county, state, and national parks but knows the shabby developments for tourists which line the approaches to many of them.

Every sort of thing is there save the accommodation the traveler really seeks--a quiet retreat from traffic. Speculation is high; business risky; the visitor seldom returns, for he can find these prosaic things on the edges of his home town. How much better for the traveler and for the stability of the travel business itself if access to new parks, forests, or recreational dam sites were planned as parkways. They need not be lengthy, for a zone exists around each where you sense its influence, where you seek a base from which to make sorties to the beach or into the forest. It is this zone that is critical. It may not reach 10 miles beyond the boundary. Concessions for travel accommodations can be operated by private enterprise but given a parklike setting. Most important, perhaps, parkway approaches can absorb some of the pressure for over-development of the natural areas themselves of which we are most solicitous.

A preview of a plan for a Mississippi River Parkway may illustrate that certain broad right-of-way concepts can be applied to the ordinary highways with economy. Currently the Bureau of Public Roads and the Park Service are studying feasible routes for a several-purpose motor-road from the source of the Mississippi River at Lake Itasca in Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico--2552 miles through the prodigious mid-continent. Determination as to whether it will be built and delineation of its character will be up to others, but the survey has been shaping its proposals along interesting lines.

The parkway would be administered by already constituted state highway departments and financed as a part of the Federal-Aid Highway System. It would incorporate existing river highways as much as 60 percent of the distance. These highways would be converted to parkway and would be interconnected by sections of new construction by by-passing congested areas, building continuity of direction, heightening tourist appeal. Parkway objectives would be accomplished first through limited access highway laws. Preservation of natural areas, historic sites, and wildlife would be worked into the picture. Then the states would buy representative scenes of history and natural beauty. Next, they would purchase, also in fee simple, such lands as are often best in public ownership because they are sub-marginal--the wildwoods, bluff faces, swamp lands, islands, and any superfluous woodlots of farmers. Third and last, but not least important in our noble trinity (because Grant Wood landscapes are so large a part of the Mississippi Valley), we propose to control, by simplified easements, the vast mileages of open farm field--the pasture, the wheat, the corn, the cotton, and the sugar picture. The legal method would be similar to the purchase of highway development rights, an approach being tried on a temporary basis in Ohio, Michigan, and Maryland. The simplified easement on a permanent basis would divest the farmer only of his right to convert bordering farm lands to residential or commercial uses, but in no way



hinder his pursuit of farming. The public would have no right to enter and the device would result in large savings over outright purchase, retire less farm land from the tax rolls, and fix the pastoral scenery to the parkway without danger of despoilment.

The highway department would need legislative authority to purchase lands or easements to a width which admittedly exceeds the space required for actual roadway construction now or later. Where these broader rights do not exist and cannot be secured, there is still another approach--by way of park law. In park law there is ample precedent and public understanding.

The elimination of trucks from the Mississippi River Parkway is seen as a desirable objective, not immediately attainable but susceptible of immediate planning for; gradual accomplishment. Few of the river roads carry any substantial volume of through trucks as it is. The commercial pattern is more criss-cross than up and down the River, partly because the River itself is a freight way. Improvement of truck routes in paralleling position where necessary and concurrently with development of the passenger parkway need not mean unwarranted duplication. It only requires patience and a bilateral view, which is to say a proper plan for total transportation requirements.

The key to understanding the plan for a Mississippi River parkway is to appreciate its elasticity. Once the basic land controls are established there are no limitations upon the ultimate physical growth that can take place as the expandable plan reacts to forces of shifting population and new land use. Who knows in this day of decentralization what traffic patterns may develop to dictate future pavement widths in the country's growing heartland?

As we see it now, the application of selected techniques of land control can clear the way for a future Mississippi River Parkway as great as you wish to visualize it, for the plan will keep the way clear for growth along lines equally sound and beautiful. If so, we may be on the edge of a new formula by which much that we admire in parkways and freeways can be extracted and affixed in whole or in part to the ordinary highway at reasonable cost. Many fine pavements throughout the Nation are relatively free of ribbon developments and can yet be diverted to common sense. There is yet time to acquire the elbow-room in which these cleaner roads can grow and so continue to serve, efficiently and pleasantly, their avowed public purpose.

We in highway planning will little change the picture with piddling brush strokes, for, to paraphrase Kipling, this picture which is America is a ten league canvas. We, too, need a cosmic brush.

*(Excerpts from talk delivered at meeting on National Planning and Resources, American Planning and Civic Association, April 13, 1951, Miami, Florida.)*