State Program Targets Improving Dirt, Gravel Roads

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INDIANTOWN GAP MILITARY RESERVATION (Lebanon Co.) — There are more than 27,000 miles of dirt and gravel roadways in Pennsylvania.

Most of them are located in the rural areas of the state and its 3.6 million people.

It's a good bet that subscribers of *Lancaster Farming* have traveled on them, provided oversight leadership concerning them, or actually worked to maintain them.

On Tuesday and Wednesday at a Pa. National Guard facility at the Indiantown Gap Military Reservation located north of Harper's Ferry in Lebanon County, a training program was held for specific municipal road managers so they can do a better job of repairing, building and maintaining dirt and gravel roads.

It was part of a multi-agency, statewide program to educate road managers, or "roadmasters," as to better techniques for maintaining and repairing dirt and gravel roads.

If the managers attend the courses, their municipalities qualify for receiving state funds for maintenance of those roads.

In the spring of last year, a state transportation law was passed (Act 3) that, as part of its $400 million per year for bridge and highway construction and better paved road maintenance, included a provision to annually allocate (non-lapsing) $5 million for public dirt and gravel roads.

The program applies only to those dirt and gravel roads open to public use at least for a portion of the year. It doesn't count the private dirt and gravel roadways or long lanes to farms or through private woodlots and estates.

But, many of the concepts being taught about dirt and gravel road construction and maintenance could easily be applied to farm lanes, especially with bridges, crown construction, side drainage ditches, and the use of different materials.

While the funding in the program is not for private use, the information should still be available to those who request it.

The program is essentially funding for rural communities, many of which are governed by councils consisting of farmers or those familiar with farming.

While most should be familiar with the importance of major paved highways and routes to the state's economy, many may not be aware that dirt and gravel roads are also considered essential to the state's economy.

According to state transportation and conservation officials, dirt and gravel roads are very important to agriculture, as well as outdoor sports tourism and other types of tourism.

In a report from the state's Task Force on Dirt and Gravel Roads, it states, "Although many people perceive of dirt and gravel roads as a nuisance — relics of a slower-paced time in our history waiting to be paved — the facts show these roads are important links in Pennsylvania's overall transportation network.

"Covering more than 27,000 miles throughout the commonwealth, dirt and gravel roads provide vital access for Pennsylvania's major industries — agriculture, mining, forestry, and tourism — while weaving the fabric of rural community life for over 3.6 million residents."

(The Task Force report was written by Kevin Abbey and Woodrow Colbert. A transportation consultant, Abbey has a background in zoology and English and literature, and became involved with the Task Force while director of the state Senate Transportation Committee. Colbert has a bachelor's degree in agriculture and biology from Penn State University. An employee of PennDOT's Bureau of Environmental Quality, he is on temporary loan to the State Conservation Commission, and has been hired to oversee implementation of the state dirt and gravel road maintenance program.)

The Task Force report also noted that more than 90 percent of the dirt and gravel roads are owned and maintained by municipal (local) governments. They have limited coffers and frequently limited tax bases from which to draw funds.

The Task Force position is that local municipalities should not be expected to pave their dirt roads and maintain them.

First of all, the Task Force considers that dirt and gravel roads are unique devices with extremely valuable characteristics all of their own, that road engineers find very cost effective (and some perhaps also find a welcome and different challenge to construct well and understand), and many people find aesthically pleasing to travel and maintain.

However, what the Task Force did recognize is that local governments and authorities with control of dirt and gravel roads need to do a better job of building, repairing and maintaining the roads.

The attitude associated with the state effort does not appear to having any tone of chastisement.

Instead, the program seems constructed with an attitude that seeks to establish a cooperative and mutually beneficial working relationship.

The rationale explaining the benefits of such a relationship seems to be this:

• Municipal governments own some of the state's most undervalued properties — dirt and gravel roads — that can be increased in value and made more of an asset to the state and local community.

• If tools for doing improving those roads are provided to the municipal governments by the state, the locality and the state can become enriched, while at the same time addressing water pollution concerns, since many of the dirt and gravel roads are located in the state's forested and watershed areas.

The roads get better, the water gets cleaner.

The local economy has a better shot at increasing local economic opportunities. At the same time, it has the opportunity to adopt some best management practices that can lower maintenance and repair costs.

Many political leaders throughout the state have expressed strong beliefs in the superiority of local governmental control over local affairs.

While the state has increased its regulatory control over a number of statewide businesses and affairs, its political leadership has been fairly consistent in attempting to allow as much local interpretation and control over programs as possible, especially those concerned with environmental laws and regulations.

Some of the earlier cases in which the state attempted to provide local control to ameliorate environmental problems didn't work well — the state made no provision to ensure local expertise was up to the job of making good interpretations.

As an example, when the state saw fit to allow local interpretation of its 1978 Flood Plain Control Act and Stormwater Management Act, problems quickly arose from so much unmonitored local interpretation.

Local interpretation can be readily challenged by residential development groups, etc., which tend to have greater legal resources that local governments, and can sometimes provide professional spokespeople who are skilled at intimidating local leadership.

In hindsight, many cited a lack of local knowledge about flood plains and stormwater management as the reason for some poor decisions made at the local level.

Work is still being done on stormwater management and the control of development of flood plains.

In the meantime, some lessons apparently have been learned.

Now, many environmental programs in the state rely heavily upon continuing education requirements to maintain at least a minimumun level of local expertise, as well as some sort of local monitoring through local agencies.

Some programs such as the Nutrient Management Act, or the Farmland Preservation Program, have state oversight and local control through Penn State Extension Services, Pa. Department of Agriculture, the county Conservation District or formal review boards consisting of "stakeholders."

The dirt and gravel road program is such a program, and it is being administered through the county Conservation Districts.

(The bulk of the funds are to be used for the projects, with a small fraction allowed for local program administration.)

The Act 3 program set up that local municipalities be given funds for dirt and gravel road maintenance, provided that their road masters or road managers attend educational classes.

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