

Please Return
to Office Senator Humphrey

"More Funds for Urban Highways and Streets"

by
Honorable Hubert H. Humphrey
before the Municipal Division,
American Road Builders' Association,
at the Road Builders' Conference, Feb. 7, 1949

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Note: The following address was given extemporaneously and has been transcribed from the notes of the conference reporter. Senator Humphrey voices ideas which have come out of his diverse experience as Mayor of the City of Minneapolis.

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The subject matter that has been assigned me is quite specific -- "More Funds for Urban Highways and Streets." I imagine that you felt I would be coming over here as a representative of the United States Mint, or at least one of the guards from Fort Knox, Kentucky, and I would have waiting outside the doorway large piles of greenbacks or bags of gold. I assure you that I am not one of those who is on the Ways and Means Committee of the House of Representatives, nor on the Appropriations Committee of the United States Senate, nor have I ever been consulted either by the President or the Speaker of the House, or the President of the Senate as to what we should do about federal funds and federal allocations to municipalities. Frankly, you surely didn't select the man you should have to tell you where to get this money. All you have done is just select somebody who is of kindred spirit, somebody who still feels the misery that you are experiencing as municipal officers and as roadbuilders.

I do want to make a few comments, however, because I think we have to be a little bit bold in answering this problem. I think I heard someone say just as I came in that one of the main problems that confronted the whole country was this traffic problem, and particularly the problem of parking on the streets. If you don't believe that, I suggest that all of you in this room wait around here until four-thirty in the afternoon, or I suggest that you try to find a place to park on the streets of Washington, D. C. If you are not properly convinced by that, would you please go up to New York City anytime of the day and try to drive your car, or try Pittsburgh or Philadelphia, or, even better, try Boston.

What do we do? We have an established federal policy of federal aid to highways. That policy started out many years ago in this country under the Public Roads Administration. I would call to your attention that on all federal programs we are victimized by inflation, just as the housewife is. Every municipality has the problem of increased costs, just as a businessman does. That used to be one of my theme songs out my way as mayor of the city, that you cannot run and operate government today on 1940 financial standards. You can't operate a municipal government today with the revenues you had back in the late 1930's or early 1940's. A municipality is just like a business; it is like a household; and if the cost of materials has gone up to build a house, if the cost of materials and labor have gone up to produce the products you need for the operation of a house or a household or a business, then it has happened just as much in the operation of municipal affairs or state government, and particularly, local government.

I would like to say also in line with that, all appropriations at the federal level must be properly adjusted in terms of that. Don't think I am one of those spendthrift fellows, because I have never had enough to be that. It was more or less of an effort to even keep shoes on the youngsters' feet out our way, and we buy them three sizes too large and find out that they still grow out of them. I am not advocating wanton waste, nor am I advocating extravagance. I am simply saying today that if we need a highway program in this country, and one that pertains particularly to municipalities, you will have to pay for it, and an American public official has to go back to the constituency to say frankly that the costs of highway construction are up, the costs of government are up, and if you are not willing to face the music on that basis, you are not going to get a thing. There are too many people elected who, on the one hand tell groups such as this, "Sure, you ought to have more. Absolutely, we simply have to have a better distribution of funds. We simply have to have more funds for highway programs within municipalities." And then they go up on the Hill and vote to cut taxes.

Now, you can't do it. We have to make up our minds what we are going to have. If you want what some people want -- economy in government, which, in the framework of their thinking means "little spending" or at least reduced spending, then don't expect to have greater appropriations to solve your problem of highway construction. Just don't expect it, because it just won't be. To me, economy in government is not necessarily reduced spending. Economy in government is prudent spending. It means a careful use of the money for the greatest amount of productivity or achievement that that money may yield. I have never been one of those who believed it was economy to go out and buy a ten dollar suit if you can get one. I think it is foolish. I never thought it was economy to take a good automobile to some sort of a steel butcher and let him get at it with a hammer and hack saw, even though he may charge you twenty cents an hour less for his labor. I never believed it was economy to take a fifty dollar wrist watch to a person who works in a blacksmith shop. I believe you have to pay for things, and we ought to get most out of the money that we have available.

Do you need to have it impressed upon you the major No. 1 traffic problem in the United States of America is municipal traffic flow and control -- because highways run through municipalities. I would like to have the automobile manufacturers in here, because you had better get hold of those fellows. We perfect the automobile so that it will drive safely on the highways at 50, 60, 70, 80, or 90 miles an hour, and, at the same time, they have never perfected highway engineering nor applied modern highway engineering to meet the needs of that super-automobile.

Let's assume in the countryside you have these great highways, these four-lane highways and parkways with a little strip down in between with nice curves, properly banked, and everything is as wonderful as you could dream to have it. Let's assume we have it and -- of course, we do not have it -- then, after you have been going down that highway at 85 miles an hour in an effort to get to your point of destination, what happens? The first thing you know you see a sign which says "city limits." Here is this marvelous four-lane highway, and all at once, it becomes similar to a pathway made for Daniel Boone or the Lewis and Clark expedition. I don't care how many monuments you put on the roadside saying "historical sites ahead," you still have a traffic bottleneck. In my own municipality we have a great big four-lane highway coming in. We are doing something about a bridge after many, many years; but, after the bridge is constructed, there is still the problem of streets in the city that do not meet up with this particularly well-constructed highway that brings this great flow of traffic into the city.

It is utterly ridiculous and impossible, to assume a municipality can pay the costs of meeting the present traffic needs. It just can't be done. The municipalities all over this country depend mainly for their financial income or revenue upon the property tax base. The municipalities that do not depend on a property tax base have to add other taxes like sales taxes, payroll taxes, and income taxes, which place that municipality at an economic disadvantage with its neighbor.

If we are going to have municipal services like we ought to have, we are going to have to do something about the basic revenue problem that affects municipalities. While grants from the Federal Government are helpful, they are not the solution.

Before I say what I want to about how I think the moneys ought to be divided up, I wish to re-state what I have been talking about for four years. Until the state legislatures of the respective states of this Union begin to recognize that cities are here to stay; until they can recognize that in this country about 60 per cent of the people of America live in municipalities, or better than 60 per cent; until they recognize municipalities are vital to the economy for the performance and continuation of services that are needed by all people; until legislatures recognize these facts, there will be no answer to your problem. There will be no answer, because the Federal Government is not going to pay the whole bill for expressways and for street widening, or for new streets to expedite the flow of traffic. What is more, the Federal Government isn't even going to pay part of the bill on some of the little side streets that are so vital to this entire network of traffic -- this web of streets and byways and highways that go through a municipality.

So, here's the first job. I would say the next meeting of the American Road Builders' Association ought to be held with state legislators, because the state legislatures of this country have the municipalities at their mercy. Every municipality is created by the state; it is a servant of the state. I would remind every governor and every state legislature in America that more services directly needed by the people are performed by the city officials than by any state or set of state officers in the United States of America. That is where government really works -- at the municipal level. That doesn't mean to say that the state government doesn't do great things, but the vast number of our people are more directly affected by what is done or what is not done by municipal governments. And the life blood of a municipal government is the revenue it has. America is cursed today by anemic municipal revenues. Cities just do not have it. Many of your municipalities have bond limitations; you can only issue so many bonds. Many of them have taxpayers' associations that won't let you issue any bonds. And, all too often, we have people who are unwilling to stand the public criticism of asking for the investment that is necessary to preserve the vitality of the community. So, I would like to have as many of you as possible go back to the people and say, as I used to say in my city, "I am not talking for Hubert Humphrey." I have never had much of the worldly goods. The men who have the greatest stake, economically, in the traffic control program, in a parking program, in an expressway program, in a street widening program, in a new street program, and the men who should have the greatest concern, and the men who are most directly affected one way or another by it, are the men who have great investments along the so-called main streets - in other words, our friends who have the department stores and big office buildings, who have the big factories, the merchandising marts, right along the main thoroughfares.

What is happening all over America? People are moving out from the center of the city. Business is moving away from the great property tax base you have in the municipal limits and getting out along the little suburbs. At the same time, the people who live in the little suburbs come into the big city to do their office work, and you have all the problems of congestion and traffic flow without any of the revenue to take care of it.

The first problem that has to be answered is, What are you going to do with your state legislature; or, do you have home rule provisions in your city charter that can supersede the action of a state legislature? If you do, you will have to take action there.

Let's get down to the other part, which is Federal. Under the Federal Highway Act of 1944, the urban centers received 25 per cent of the funds -- I believe that is correct -- and 25 per cent was to go to the state and local governments for urban or metropolitan highway programs. It has to be matched, however, and it does no good for the Federal Government of the United States of America to appropriate 50 per cent of the federal highway funds to municipalities if you can't match it. I venture to say there is a host of cities today that can't match 10 per cent or 20 per cent, much less 50 per cent. So, if we put it up to 50 per cent on the basis of matching, we are still not going to answer the problem.

Well, let's say then that we can't get the state legislatures to act. By the way, the state legislatures that are predominantly rural in their complexion perhaps won't act. I can see where our rural friends would like to have the money primarily expended upon the great highway projects out in the country. Then, do you have the courage to go out and fight for reapportionment? I think somebody is going to have to do that.

I was in a city, for example, the other night, up in Connecticut. I may be wrong on this, and I won't make my figures exact, but just put them in generalities. The little town of Essex, Connecticut, and the big city of Hartford, Connecticut, have almost the same number of legislators representing them in the state legislature. Is that fair?

Back in the seventeenth century, in England, we had what we called the rotten boroughs, which simply meant there were members coming into Parliament from communities where there were no people, somebody just represented them, and these were known as the old "rotten boroughs". I know in practically every state -- in New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and in Minnesota -- the situation exists where there has been a great shift of population. Yet there has been no commensurate shift of representation. Until that happens, I doubt if we are going to get too much out of the state legislatures.

What should we expect from the Federal Government? I think we are going to do something about this problem in the Federal Government -- maybe not this year, but we are going to begin to do something. We Americans seldom plan anything so we can save ourselves a little money. We just wait until we get into a fix and don't know how to get out. Then we rear up in the harness and throw money around left and right. We, then, will bring out the bulldozers, cement and concrete and build roads all over the place. We have done that with hospitals. We have hospitals now where there are no people and have cut out hospitals where there are hundreds and thousands of people, because nobody was willing to sit down and plan where we might need them. We cut out 16,000 hospital beds in the places where they ought to have been and built a hospital sixty miles away from the closest town where you can't get a doctor or a nurse to stay. But we are going to have a hospital, although nobody is going to be in it.

The same thing can happen in the highway program. We may lose our sense of balance and our sense of judgment on this, out of the sheer, stark necessity of having to do something. I don't want to have that happen, so I would advise one thing to be done for sure, whether you get any money or not. Have your plans perfected for highway expansion and highway construction, for highway patterns, for street alterations. Have it all planned. There is nothing wrong in having some plans. The only people opposing planning in government are the people who can exploit the government by the failure of the government to have plans. I believe in governmental planning for governmental services. That means the planning commission must be in on it, in the over-all city plan, and it means your city engineers and highway engineers must be an integral part of this plan.

Now, we have done a lot on a national defense program, and I have some arguments with my friends about national defense. Some people think national defense is "seventy air groups." Some people think it is a big navy, and some people think it is U.M.T. In the President's budget there is an item for something like 800 million dollars for Universal Military Training. Some people believe that national defense is just building up another atomic energy plant. I think it is all a part of national defense -- the navy, air force, and atomic energy. But one thing we have learned out of this last war, surely, was that one of the secrets of the early success of the Nazi army was the great highway program that the German government had under Hitler. I hate to admit he ever did anything that was right, but every single thing in the totalitarian state -- every single thing that is done, from the education of the child to what little worship may be permitted, to the periodicals printed and read, is directed to one thing -- the strengthening of the state. I don't want to embrace that program by empowering a President or some strong man on horseback to come along and say, "This is what is going to happen in America," but I want to tell you that if we should be involved in a conflict with a totalitarian power, we had better get over the silly notion that the strength of the country and the defense of the country and virility of the country is expressed in the number of men we can put in uniform. That is as old-fashioned as Louis XIV. The mobility of our country, its productivity, the transportation system of our country, the communication facilities, are all as much a part of national defense as the big bombers that flew over Washington on Inauguration Day. We are finding that out. It is no good to have the airplanes without airports. We are finding that out all the time. You have to have someplace to put them down and to take off from. You can build the finest planes in the world, but, if you can't land a plane or make an ascent with them, what good are they?

The same thing is true so far as our highway program in America is concerned. I will say very candidly that, despite the wonderful work the railroads performed in World War II, we haven't yet gone ahead with the modernization of rail transportation. A tremendous amount was taken out of rail transportation during the war. A good deal of the stock equipment was used up, and, in a future emergency -- pray God we never have one -- I think we ought to remember there is a possibility in any future emergency that rail transportation alone is not going to be able to do the job. We had to have all kinds of highway and truck facilities. Where do the products come from that must be transported? They come out of that fine little town, alongside the highway, that has 300 people in it. They will come out of Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago; Gary, Indiana; Birmingham, Alabama; Minneapolis, St. Paul, Portland, San Francisco, and all the other great cities. And I wouldn't want to leave out Los Angeles; they came from there, too.

From the very basis of our national defense, we ought to have highway programs within the city comparable to those without. I think that ought to be one point we ought to project. At least 50 per cent of the Federal funds for highway construction ought to be allocated to urban and metropolitan centers. I am a great believer in the principle that money ought to be allocated through state governments, and I think the federal-state relationship ought to be preserved. I want to say if a state government has been niggardly in its program of allocating money to municipalities before for highway construction, the municipality ought to have the privilege of by-passing the state and coming direct to the Federal government. I don't know whether people are going to like that, but I know in some places, if the money were allocated to be distributed later on by the states, unfortunately, many of the municipalities wouldn't get what they ought to have. I would say it ought to be a two-way proposition. Yes, money allocated to the state, and the state then allocates it to municipalities, but, give to the municipality the privilege, in case it thinks it is not getting its fair share, of going directly over the head of the state officers to the Federal government to see whether or not it is being given equitable treatment. I think we should work for a 50 per cent allocation of funds for municipalities.

Secondly, I think in the long run you are going to have to ask for direct federal grants without matching, if you can't revise your local revenue structure. Who pays these taxes? I always get a big bounce out of this business of thinking somebody is getting something for nothing in this country. Every once in a while you hear somebody say that is a foolish statement to make, that 50 per cent of the federal funds should be allocated to municipalities. But the vast majority of taxes in this country are taken from people in municipalities; the vast majority of revenues this nation has in the Treasury Department, where our money is collected and where ultimately it is withdrawn -- that money comes from the taxpayers who live in municipalities. Now, I think that if the Federal government should give back a little bit to the cities, that wouldn't be a gift; it would be proper reward, and proper appreciation for the fact that the citizens of municipalities first paid their taxes in generous amounts so that they could receive some back to do the job they ought to have done with local revenues at home.

I will tell you, as a former municipal officer, that any citizen is much more prone to pay his federal taxes and pay them as they ought to be paid than his county or local taxes, or state taxes. I don't know why that is. They are all taxes. But when Uncle Whiskers comes around, when the Internal Revenue Department comes up to see you, everybody gets a sense of guilt. I suppose we all put in an extra five dollars somewhere along the line for church collections, and right away begin to feel maybe we ought not have a tussle with the law and pay up. So the Federal government does act as a convenient tax-collecting agency.

I am concerned about what we are going to do about this parking problem in municipalities. I am one of the persons who believes parking is a part of the street. I have never been one to disassociate the parking with the street problem. In other words, it is just as vital to have a place to stop your car as it is to have a place to drive your car. It seems to me we ought to be considering parking areas in the construction of highways, just as much as we consider expressway areas. What good is it to have airplanes if you have no airport? What good is it to have airports if you have no airplanes? What good is it to have highways and automobiles if you have no parking spaces?

Now, again, I think we ought to get hold of the automobile manufacturers and tell them very frankly that it is up to them to help us solve this problem.

It is up to them to do a job of public education. It is now becoming somewhat prohibitive in some areas to drive an automobile. The average worker cannot afford to pay fifty cents to a dollar a day to park his car, plus the element of smashed fenders, running boards and grills that go along with it. I believe in the establishment of municipal parking ramps. I don't know of any divine prohibition that denies us the right to build them up in the air and down in the ground. I see no reason why we have to take valuable municipal property in a loop district and have "one layer" for parking. Somebody may say that it costs too much money. I am of the opinion that it will cost too much money under present construction costs for an individual investor to build a parking lot of the ramp type structure, where you can have 200, 300, 400 or 500 cars and be able to sell the service or sell the space in that parking ramp at a price people ought to pay -- in other words, sell it for a full day for twenty or twenty-five cents. That is why I favor municipal parking facilities.

We have some wonderful highways in certain areas where there is a sparse population, and the people who drive their automobiles out there could not have paid for their own highways -- the cement, concrete, sand and gravel and steel that went into those highways and bridges, such as in the states of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, South Dakota, North Dakota. Do you think we could have paid for them ourselves? It was done cooperatively all through the nation. If it is the job of the federal and state and local governments to build highways so that you don't have to pay a dollar every time you cross a bridge, then I submit to you that it is the job of the state and local and federal governments to build parking areas so that people can stop their cars and get out and live. You can't be running around in a car all your life. You have to, sometime or other, light. I think it is just plain ridiculous to assume that parking is something separate from transportation. I am of the opinion that federal and state and local governments ought to have a cooperative program wherein we build parking ramps as a part of the transportation and highway service, and that, if we desire, we can charge a ten, fifteen or twenty-five cent fee for parking; but that will only be just as a sort of a bridge, from the time we get rid of the idea we should have special parking lots where you pay fifty cents to a dollar a day, to the time where we may not have to pay at all, and just take it out of our revenues, gas taxes, vehicle taxes, that come from the people who drive their cars. If anybody can give me a sensible argument why we ought not have that, I will stay to listen.

I will conclude with the thought that we need, again, some boldness of thinking, and we need to remember that for the next ten years, anywhere from 2 to 5 billion dollars a year must be expended upon our highways nationally. We have a tremendous highway program to be developed. We are going to have 50 million automobiles on the highways and it doesn't do any good to moan and groan and say that people ought not buy them. The fact is that we have the problem -- people are going to drive, and the automobile manufacturers are going to convince and persuade people to buy cars, and there will be 50 to 55 million cars on these roads of ours by 1952. If there aren't, we are going to have mass unemployment in the automobile industry. The American people are going to have cars and lots of them.

We built a highway system capable of handling 18 to 25 million cars, and we are going to have just twice as many as the highway system was constructed for. Does that tell you what we ought to do? It tells me very definitely that we are going to have to extend the highway system in the country as a matter of public convenience and national defense. The population has grown. You can hear the speeches about going back to the country, but if people go back to the country, they want to come to the city on Saturday nights, anyhow. So the next

thing we have to do is recognize that our cities have streets that were constructed to handle traffic in 1915 or 1920. We are living in a mechanized, automotive age, with millions and millions of people coming to our municipal centers. Either one of two things is going to happen; either the city is going to die of dry rot from within through lack of adequate transportation facilities, and new cities will be started up outside, which is a greater expense than taking care of the old one on the inside, or you will find that the municipalities will simply pass out of the picture -- the old ones -- and we will go ahead and build new ones with new problems. And so I advocate an amendment to the Federal Highway Act with a 50 per cent allocation, and I suggest that you sooner or later press for a direct grant to municipalities for street widening, new street construction, street remodeling and renovation, and off-street parking right now. The parking problem in the municipalities is the No. 1 problem. If you can vacate every street, even as they are now, every one of them, and be able to put up parking facilities that people can afford to pay for and can afford to use, we will have made a great dent in the traffic problem and the road problem of the municipalities.

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