

ROAD REPORT

A publication of the Road Commission for Oakland County for public officials serving Oakland County

www.rcocweb.org

RCOC already sharing services as governor suggests

Recently, Governor Rick Snyder has encouraged local units of government in Michigan to explore possibilities for sharing or consolidating services. While the governor may not be aware of it, the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) already does a lot of this.

It doesn't usually make the headlines of newspapers when RCOC shares services with cities or villages in Oakland County or other governmental units, so it's not surprising the governor is not aware these cooperative efforts are taking place. Many residents are probably equally unaware.

"When you don't know what is already happening," stated RCOC Managing Director Brent Bair, "you tend to assume nothing is happening. I think that is the case when it comes to road commissions and shared services."

A prime example is RCOC's long term arrangement with the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) to maintain state highways in the county on MDOT's behalf.

Another example is when RCOC contracts with communities to take over some or all of the road maintenance on some

**"When you don't know what is already happening, you tend to assume nothing is happening."
- Brent Bair
RCOC Managing Director**

county roads within those communities. In some cases, this involves only winter road maintenance (salting and plowing).

In other cases, it involves only summer maintenance, such as pothole patching. In still other cases, it involves both. In those cases, the Road Commission pays the communities most of the state funding it receives for the roads in question (RCOC keeps a portion of the funding because it retains liability for the roads).

"These agreements are a win/win for the Road Commission and the communities," Bair said. "By allowing the communities to maintain some of the county roads within their boundaries, we are able to focus our manpower elsewhere, while

the community is able to augment the funding we give them and, thus, provide a higher level of service than we could."

But road maintenance is just one area where RCOC works with the communities. Another area of cooperation is in the area of purchasing. For materials such as salt, gravel, road patching material, etc., RCOC collaborates with communities to purchase larger quantities and therefore get better prices.

In some cases, where communities use fairly small amounts of materials, RCOC purchases an additional amount and then resells the materials to the communities at cost. Again, this benefits both RCOC and the communities because it increases RCOC purchases, resulting in lower unit costs, and allows the communities to benefit from cheaper prices than they could get on their own.

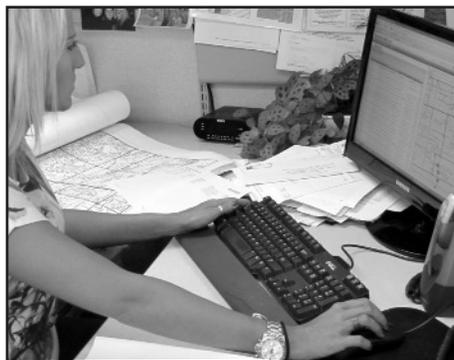
Traffic-signal maintenance is another area of cooperation. For many years, RCOC has maintained nearly all the traffic signals in the county -- those on its own roads as well as those on MDOT
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New software helps RCOC track, fulfill customer-service requests

It was many years in the planning, but now that it's here, a new software program implemented by the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) Department of Customer Services (DCS) is making processing and tracking citizen concerns much easier.

The new software, known as Cityworks and created by Azteca Systems Inc., was installed in August of last year. It replaced an antiquated software system that had been in place for at least 20 years.

DCS Director David "Cz" Czerniakowski noted the new software makes the process of reporting a concern to RCOC easier and faster for citizens



A DCS clerk records a citizen concern using the new software.

who call the agency, and will help to ensure that RCOC is able to track and
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Much maligned earmarks have been good for Oakland roads

It is currently popular in some quarters to find fault with the legislative process known as earmarking. While there are certainly examples where the earmark system has been abused, when it comes to Oakland County roads, federal earmarks have helped to ensure a number of priority projects were built that otherwise never would have been constructed.

Earmarking refers to the process by which U.S. senators and representatives insert specific projects in their districts into federal funding bills. The process is sometimes criticized because it bypasses the federal road-funding formula process and takes funds off the top of the amount allocated to the state in which the project is located.

The formula funds are then distributed to each region within the states by another formula, and ultimately to each county in each state. Eligible agencies must then apply for those funds and compete with each other for the available dollars.

The downside of the formula funding



process is that there is never enough money for all the worthwhile projects seeking funding, and those that are funded through the process often have to wait years (sometimes decades) to receive the funding.

Over the last several decades, the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) has been very fortunate, in that several congressmen from the county have served on the proper committees and had sufficient seniority so they were able to acquire quite a few earmarks for Oakland roads. This has resulted in millions of dollars of road funding for RCOC that otherwise would have been spent somewhere other than Oakland County.

In the case of nearly every road-related earmark that has come to Oakland County, the dollars were targeted not at congressmen's pet projects, but at projects identified by RCOC and Oakland County communities as high priorities.

"The congressmen have always come to us and asked for our top-priority unfunded projects in their districts, and have then

sought earmarks for those projects," RCOC Managing Director Brent Bair said. "No member of Congress has ever sought funding for a project on an RCOC road that was not a top priority for us."

Bair noted that the addition of these earmark dollars has also helped to reduce the state's road funding "donor" status. "Michigan has long sent more money to Washington DC in fuel tax revenues than it receives back in formula funding. Federal earmarks have helped make up for that loss of funds."

Bair noted he understands why earmarks have been vilified by some, but notes when it comes to Oakland roads, this animosity is misdirected. "We certainly understand the desire to eliminate wasteful spending in Washington DC," he stated. "However, I think anyone who examines the road funding earmarks we have received will agree that these are projects that are badly needed. The reality is our road needs are so great that we simply don't have the luxury of building roads before they are needed, and that is certainly true of all the earmarks we have received."

SHARING -- CONT'D FROM FRONT highways and almost all city and village streets. "We achieve a much greater economy of scale by acting as the primary signal-maintenance agency in the county," Bair noted.

RCOC has also partnered with a number of the communities in the county to purchase road striping services, again resulting in a larger -- and therefore more cost effective -- contract than either RCOC or the communities could achieve on their own.

"These are just a few examples of the way we save money by working with MDOT and the communities of Oakland County," Bair stated. "There are many other examples that are too numerous to mention here. I suspect the governor simply doesn't realize that Michigan's road-funding crisis has been going on for decades, and that the state's road agencies have been in cost-cutting mode for many years. As a result, we're already doing many of the things that he has championed for local governmental agencies. We look forward to being able to discuss with the governor what we're already doing to save money."

Pass it along:

RCOC provides officials with info that can be shared with constituents

The Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) Public Information Office regularly shares information with public officials serving Oakland County (city/village managers, township supervisors, county commissioners and state legislators). Some of these officials report that they resend this information to their constituents or specific groups of constituents.

"We have been told that some officials find this a great way to share Road Commission-related information with their constituents," explained RCOC Managing Director Brent Bair. "That's great -- we encourage all officials in

Oakland County to consider doing that."

Bair noted RCOC sends out a variety of types of information to officials serving the county. This includes press releases (the subject of the release determines whether or not it will go to all officials or just those to whom it is most relevant), operational updates during winter storms, construction project notices, etc.

"Typically these items are provided to public officials and the media. However, the more people who receive the information, the better," Bair stated. "Sharing RCOC information with your constituents is beneficial to all of us."



Reasons to be proud of your Road Commission:

Oakland roads now among the safest in the world

As have all governmental agencies lately, the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) has had to make many cuts in recent years due to declining funding. However, despite these cuts, RCOC remains a leader in many areas.

As reported in the first quarter 2011 edition of the Road Report newsletter, over the course of several editions, we'll share some of the areas in which RCOC remains on the cutting edge. This edition will focus on one area: safe roads.

Safe roads

For more than 30 years, safety has been RCOC's top priority. During that time, the agency has helped move Oakland County from having a traffic-fatality rate worse than the state as a whole and the nation to having a rate substantially lower than the state or national levels.

In 1967, Oakland County had a traffic fatality rate of 6.8 deaths per 100 million miles of travel. At that time, the statewide rate was 6.5 and that national rate was 5.7. In that year, a number of county officials recognized the need for improvement and joined forces to create the Traffic Improvement Association of Oakland County (TIA).

Since that time, TIA has been a leading agency in the nation in collecting, compiling and analyzing traffic crash data. From the start, RCOC was the most frequent user of TIA data -- using the numbers to identify problem intersections and road segments and to devise solutions.

Then, in 1978, RCOC officially made safety its top priority -- as a matter of policy. Since that time, safety concerns have been a key part of all road project selection and design decisions and have been fac-

tored into nearly all other agency decisions.

As a result of these changes, as well as the efforts of the cities and villages in the county and their law-enforcement agencies, today Oakland County roads are among the safest in the world.

While the traffic fatality rates across the country have come down dramatically in recent decades, thanks to seatbelts, air bags and other vehicle-safety improvements, the decline has been far more dramatic in Oakland County, thanks in part to RCOC's efforts.

The fatality rate on Oakland roads in 2009 (the most recent year for which statistics are available), was 0.44. This was less than half the statewide rate of 0.91 and nearly one third of the national rate of 1.16.

RCOC remains committed to safety, and expects the fatality rate in the county to continue to drop in coming years.

SERVICE -- CONT'D FROM FRONT

follow-up on those concerns. He explained that the software provides the DCS clerks with an intuitive form to fill out as they talk with residents.

"The calls and e-mails we receive from county residents are critical to our ability to provide a high level of service," Cz stated. "This new software is ensuring that we can make the most of the information we receive from our customers."

Not only does the form provide the requisite boxes for filling in pertinent information, but it automatically provides prompt questions related to specific topics to ensure the clerks gather all the necessary information.

"We are fortunate to have a very experienced crew of clerks right now," Cz said. "They know exactly what questions to ask in just about any situation. But, in the future, when new clerks are brought in who don't have the same level of experience, this will be extremely helpful in ensuring we get all the information we need to follow up on a citizen concern."

He added this feature is so effective because all RCOC departments helped shape the software. "We asked all RCOC departments, 'What information do you

need?' and all departments provided input to make sure all the prompt questions are there and are correct."

Another significant improvement of the new system compared to the old system is that it is now far easier to search the database of previous reports. For example, this allows the department to quickly and easily determine if an issue had been reported previously or if there is a history of similar problems in the area. With the old system, finding this information often was either extremely time consuming or simply impossible.

"With the new system, we can search the database based on numerous factors," Cz said. "The old software had four search parameters and was not at all easy to use. The new system is a modern system. It's lightyears ahead of the old system."

Additionally, RCOC has just begun to scratch the surface of the benefits that the Cityworks software promises. Cz noted the new system allows for the "geo-coding" of issues. That means when citizen concerns are logged into the system, the system automatically identifies the location of the concern on a map. The clerks can then look at the map and see if other problems have been reported in the same area.

In the future, Oakland County Water Resources Commission (WRC) and Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission issues may also appear on the map, so RCOC staff can better deter-

mine if issues reported to the Road Commission are related to WRC or Parks and Recreation issues.

This will ultimately allow RCOC to "take a snapshot" of a road segment, showing all the citizen concerns logged for that segment, and how RCOC responded to all those concerns.

"We really don't yet know the full extent of what we'll be able to do with the software because we haven't yet had it long enough," Cz said. He added that already the system is enabling the Road Commission to better track problems over time -- including both when they were reported and by whom as well as how RCOC responded.

Finally, the new system has helped reduce the amount of paper that is pushed between departments at RCOC. "In the past," Cz said, "some of the citizen concern reports had to be printed out and the paper reports sent to RCOC departments. Now, all the reports are sent to departments and divisions electronically, and the response comes back electronically. There's virtually no paper involved."

This also makes it much easier for DCS to monitor which reports have been responded to and which ones haven't. Agency supervisors can also easily see this, so they can ensure that reports are responded to in a timely manner.

"This system truly is a very big benefit for the agency, and a great step forward technologically," Cz said.



*Dave "Cz"
Czerniakowski*

RCOC continues staff reductions

While the Michigan economy may be beginning to show some signs of life after being dragged through the worst downturn since the Great Depression, the state's road agencies have yet to see any light at the end of the tunnel.

In fact, in the case of the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC), the agency responsible for the largest county road system in the state, the push to reduce staffing levels continues. RCOC has now reduced its staff by 114 positions since 2007.

Through the agency's three-year budgeting process, RCOC officials have determined that the agency will need to continue to eliminate positions through at least fiscal year 2013.

RCOC Managing Director Brent Bair points out the eliminated positions have included both management and hourly positions. "These positions have been across the board," Bair stated. "While there have been more salaried positions eliminated than hourly positions, the loss of hourly laborers is the most apparent to many residents, as these are people who drive the snowplows, patch the potholes, repair road drainage problems and so forth."

To date, all the positions have been eliminated through attrition. "We are hopeful that the staff reduction can continue to occur through attrition," Bair said. "But that will be determined by the level of road funding the state collects in the coming years."

Gas-price rise means less road funding

As the price of gas has shot back up past the \$4 mark in recent weeks, some have mistakenly assumed this means more money for the road agencies funded through the gas tax. Actually, just the opposite is true.

That's because Michigan's gas tax, the single largest source of road funding in the state, is a set 19 cents per gallon, regardless of the prices of gas.

What makes this confusing is that Michigan also charges sales tax on gas. That sales tax is 6 percent, meaning the sales-tax revenues DO go up when the price of gas goes up. However, none of the revenue from the sales tax goes to roads. Most of it goes to schools.

What does happen, though, when the cost of gas rises, is that people drive less to save money. As a result, gas tax revenues tend to go down as gas prices go up.

Contacting RCOC

If your constituents need information about a road project or want to report a pothole, traffic signal problem or other road issue, they should call RCOC's **Department of Customer Services** toll free at:

(877) 858-4804

OR

Send us an e-mail via the **RCOC Web site:**

www.rcocweb.org

(click on "Contact us")

ROAD REPORT

Road Report is published quarterly by the Road Commission for Oakland County. Have a question or comment about Road Report? Call Public Information Officer Craig Bryson at (248) 645-2000, ext. 2302 or send him an e-mail at cbryson@rcoc.org.

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Have a question for RCOC? Call or write:

Department of Customer Services

2420 Pontiac Lake Road, Waterford, MI 48328

(877) 858-4804 or visit RCOC online at:

www.rcocweb.org

ROAD COMMISSION
for OAKLAND COUNTY

**31001 Lahser Road
Beverly Hills, MI 48025**