

CITIZENS LEAGUE
530 Syndicate Building
Minneapolis, MN 55402

September 29, 1983

STATEMENT

TO: Members, Minnesota Highway Study Commission

- I. YOUR COMMISSION IS ABOUT TO BEGIN A PROCESS OF GREAT IMPORTANCE TO THE STATE AND ITS PEOPLE. EACH OF YOU IS TO BE COMMENDED FOR YOUR WILLINGNESS TO UNDERTAKE THIS AMBITIOUS AND DIFFICULT TASK.

Highway jurisdiction is as much of a major issue in other states as it is in Minnesota. Many states, such as Colorado, Florida, New York, Arizona, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and South Dakota are re-examining their present systems of highway jurisdiction with a view towards realigning state and local road responsibilities.

Nor is the question of highway jurisdiction a stranger to Minnesota. On at least three previous occasions this issue has been considered. At the present time, the Metropolitan Council's Transportation Advisory Board is studying the issue. East Central Minnesota's Regional Development Commission has already issued a Background Report on the Issue of Highway Jurisdiction for its area (April 1983).

Highway jurisdiction is an issue in which the Citizens League has recently been very active. Our report, Use Road Revenue for the Roads that are Used, released last March, came to some significant conclusions and recommendations about highway jurisdiction and the long term viability of our present state trunk highway system.

One of those recommendations called upon the State Legislature to create an independent commission made up of legislators, representatives of local government (cities, counties and townships) and representatives of rural and urban areas. We urged that such a body be created because we recognized the inherent geographic limitations of our organization's membership and believed that only a policy body with statewide representation could appropriately deal with the issues of statewide significance which our report raised. So we are pleased that the legislature created a commission such as yours to take a fresh and independent view of these important issues.

As your committee begins its work and attempts to identify the critical issues which must be addressed, we thought that it might be useful to offer you our thoughts on this matter. We have chosen to use this statement simply to raise the questions we believe should be addressed in your study without attempting to offer our answers to them. We would appreciate the opportunity, at some later date, to appear before your commission and provide you with a more complete accounting of our findings, recommendations and the rationale behind them.

- II. THE MOST IMPORTANT SINGLE ISSUE FACING YOUR COMMISSION IS THE APPROPRIATE SIZE OF THE STATE TRUNK HIGHWAY SYSTEM AND WHETHER THE STATE CAN AFFORD TO MAINTAIN THE EXISTING SYSTEM OVER TIME.

From our perspective all other issues are of secondary significance in comparison to this question. Concern about the size of Minnesota's trunk highway system and the state's financial ability to sustain it have been raised in a number

of different quarters. Both the Minnesota Business Partnership and the Minnesota Taxpayers Association have urged the state to reduce the number of miles on its trunk highway system. Editorials in both the Minneapolis Star and Tribune and the St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press have raised this question as well. MnDOT Commissioner Richard Braun told our committee that the entire road system in Minnesota is too large - "perhaps twice as large as it should be." Turning specifically to the trunk highway system, Braun stated that the state could no longer afford to rebuild or reconstruct the entire trunk highway system to present standards.

In order to thoroughly evaluate Minnesota's capacity in this respect, we believe that your Commission should seek answers to the following questions:

- A. What is a reasonable schedule of maintenance for the entire state trunk highway system? (i.e., How many miles of state trunk highway must be resurfaced, reconditioned, or reconstructed each year in order to keep the state's investment in its road system current?) What level of investment will be required to keep Minnesota up to date?
- B. How well has the state done in meeting that schedule of maintenance in recent years? How likely is it that Minnesota will be able to afford that schedule of maintenance in the years ahead?
- C. Given the answers to the preceding questions, can Minnesota afford to maintain a 12,200 mile state trunk highway system? If not, what size system can the state afford?

III. THE MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION SHOULD BE CALLED UPON FROM THE OUTSET OF YOUR COMMISSION'S WORK TO RENDER ITS PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENTS IN RESPONSE TO THESE QUESTIONS.

What kind of lifecycle can we reasonably expect from our roads? How much "extra" time can we buy for them with each increment of reconditioning, reconstruction or resurfacing? What is the impact of existing road and bridge standards and financing ten-ton road improvements on the state's ability to sustain the present system over time?

IV. ADDRESSING THE QUESTION OF THE SIZE OF THE STATE SYSTEM FIRST WOULD GIVE YOUR COMMISSION SOME IDEA AS TO WHETHER CHANGE IS NEEDED AND IF SO, HOW MUCH.

It would, in addition, provide an overall context to your inquiry. Only then, it seems to us, do the other portions of your charge become meaningful. If your Commission should decide that the state cannot afford the size of the system now in place, the following questions suggest themselves:

- A. Should the state divide the present state trunk highway system into two systems with explicitly different levels of maintenance supplied on each, based on function and usage? Or should the state pursue a policy of jurisdictional realignments between the state and local levels of government?

- B. If jurisdictional changes are needed or if a two-tiered state system seems indicated, what criteria should be used in determining which roads remain as part of the state system or receive higher levels of maintenance?
- C. If the Commission decides that jurisdictional changes are necessary, what barriers stand in the way? How can these barriers be removed or overcome? What kinds of incentives can be given to local governments to facilitate jurisdictional realignments? Should changes be made in the Highway User Tax Distribution Formula? If so, how should any revised formula be allocated?

V. BEYOND THE ISSUE OF THE SIZE OF THE STATE SYSTEM, THERE ARE THREE OTHER ISSUES WHICH BEAR ON THE QUESTION OF WHETHER MINNESOTA WILL BE ABLE TO FINANCIALLY SUSTAIN THE PRESENT SYSTEM OVER TIME. THE LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION SHOULD ALSO ADDRESS ITSELF TO THESE QUESTIONS.

- A. The first issue deals with the standards to which present roads and bridges are built. Are these standards realistic? Are they more costly than the state can afford? To what extent do these standards act as a subsidy to heavy users (trucks)?
- B. The second issue involves the level of damage done to state roads by heavy vehicles. Do all classes of vehicles pay their fair share of the road and bridge expenditures which they occasion?
- C. Are we being as aggressive as we should in identifying non-corrosive de-icers? Would it be more cost-effective to society as a whole to use a salt substitute on Minnesota's roads and bridges?

VI. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In closing we would like to reemphasize the importance of the task ahead of you. The decisions you make will influence the direction of Minnesota's road and bridge system for some time to come. We became aware, during the course of our study, that there are powerful constituencies interested in discouraging serious consideration of these issues. We are confident that your commission will not be deterred from the task at hand.

Even so, however, the members of the Minnesota Highway Study Commission should be aware from the outset that there has been speculation in the press as well as in the legislature that it will do little more than protect existing "turf." While we give no credence to such reports, they underscore our hope that Commission members will examine the issues from an objective standpoint in the public interest and thereby attain a new and creative consensus based on your independent analysis of the issues at hand.

We wish you good luck in your efforts and pledge our support and assistance whenever it may be indicated.