

# Municipal Finance---Its Relation to Pavement Construction and Renewals

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An article, appearing in a recent trade publication, by Mr. George C. Warren, opens again the controversial subject of how we shall pay for our pavements. One possibility, not dealt with by Mr. Warren, is, charging them to the public through a wheel tax levied by the city, county or State. The writer would like to see this idea fully exploited; or, to learn where it is in vogue and how it is working, if at all.

Why do we build roads and pave them? For wheels. No other reason. Were it not for vehicular traffic—other than bicycles

and baby carriages—sidewalks and footpaths alone would serve our purpose. And, since we build the pavements for the wheels, wouldn't it be logical to pay for them through the wheels?

Some disgruntled person may remark, at this point, that we have paid for most of our pavements "through the nose." Or some critic may suggest that, if we pay for our pavements through the wheels, "why should we not pay for our sidewalks through our shoes." The first may be true, and the last may not be so foolish as it at first seems; but, at present, hadn't we better stick to the wheels and the vehicles they support?

It has always seemed to the writer that a tax should be collected through a logical channel. At present, we are fooling ourselves very badly as to the cost of highway transportation. A railway must maintain its roadbed, and collect the cost thereof in its freight charges and passenger fares; while an autobus line, delivery wagon or auto truck, or even a passenger automobile, does not pay for its roadbed, and the expense thereof is not figured into its cost of operation.

It is true that some States are taxing automobiles and using the proceeds for road maintenance. This is a step in the right direction; but, why not carry the principle to its logical conclusion, by securing all the money for road building and maintenance through a wheel or vehicle tax? If roads are for vehicles and vehicles alone, why should the general city tax, or the abutting property, pay for them, instead of the owners of the vehicles to whom the wheel tax would be charged? They, in turn, would charge it into the cost of their services to the community, so that, finally, it would rest, as always, upon the ultimate consumer—but, through the logical and proper channel instead of in the present unsatisfactory way.

Illogical procedure may usually be depended upon to produce illogical results. In the City of Montreal, where the writer now spends most of his time, and which pays for both its pavement construction and pavement maintenance out of the general city fund, the illogical results have fully materialized. On the whole, we probably have the worst paved streets in North America.

Because of a stringency in municipal finance, charged by some to War Conditions, but due much more directly to purely local causes, quite painful for a citizen of Montreal to mention, the "City Fathers" thought it wise to neglect the street pavements. Thereby they avoided spending some money from the General City Fund for those par-

ticular years when these particular "City Fathers" were appealing to the citizens for their suffrage, and they were happy.

Money was saved to the particular General City Fund; but, in doing so, they wasted a lot of money for the community. After a few years of this kind of "saving," the streets of Montreal are so bad that they can be traversed neither with pleasure nor in safety. Trucking firms were, even last year, threatening to sue the city for damages, because of the excess wear and tear on equipment, and the greater expense of smaller loads made necessary through the ill repair of the pavements.

Now what the General City Fund "saved" in dollars and cents was paid out, many times over, in equally good dollars and cents, by the vehicle owners using the streets of the city. They paid in repairs to wagons and automobiles, and in excess horse power—both in the nature of gasoline and oil, and of the old animal flesh-and-blood kind,—required to move a given tonnage between given points. They paid heavily; and they kicked to the "City Fathers," to no purpose.

Were the City of Montreal paying for its pavement construction and maintenance by a wheel or vehicle tax, this condition would not exist very long. The vehicle owners would not be slow to realize that they could get the same results at less cost by paying their money into a proper tax fund to build and maintain pavements, rather than by paying it to the wagon-smiths, the garages, the horse dealers, and in excess labor costs to men who are swearing at the discomfort to themselves growing out of the unkept street surfaces.

Some may object to the wheel tax, as a means of paying for road service, on the ground that it too closely resembles the old toll roads system. To such, it can be said that there were two great objections to the collection of tolls; first, too much of the amount of the tax was spent in the collecting thereof, and second, the toll roads were privately instead of publicly owned. Of these objections, to the writer, the last only seems fundamental; the first is a matter of practical application that is overcome by the wheel tax.

Another objection that might be raised, is, that we are getting away from free public roads. But nothing is free; we are paying for them now, only by a different and less satisfactory method. Nothing that is the result of labor can ever be free. Natural resources may be, but not manufactured products, such as roads. Someone must always pay; so, why not have the burden fall equitably upon the road users through a wheel or vehicle tax?

The writer is not ignoring the fact that so radical a change in the method of paying for our pavements would meet with a lot of opposition from the status quo. Neither does he claim to have suggested anything new; for the plan was, he is quite sure, advanced by others long ago. What he does suggest is that we really begin to think about doing something along these lines. It is a long way to Tipperary, but it is probably an even longer journey to a satisfactory method of taxation to pay for road building and paving. Let's hear what the Single Taxers, and others, have to say about it.

## THREE-HUNDRED-AND-SIXTY-FIVE-DAY ROADS.

Again we are witnessing the spring break-up—not of the ice in our rivers, but of the roads. The stream quickly resumes the normal, the ice is swept out, no damage has been done. The highway, on the contrary, is ruined. The surface has been broken through; that which was a road is now a plague of ruts. If this applied to the byways it would be bad enough. But it is true of trunk highways too. Commerce is stopped and the war congestion on the railways becomes worse. Year after year we have endured this condition, but the war has given us a new point of view. In normal times we stopped road transportation; we endured the condition because we did not realize that it increased the cost of living. Now war sternly forbids the interruption of road traffic—and there is developing with tremendous strength a demand for "365-day roads." They must come. They are an essential of the trunk-road policy of the future—yes, and of these war times.—Engineering News Record.

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