

THE HIGHWAY QUESTION

HERE ARE THE FACTS:

Considerable has been written, and a good deal more has been said concerning the present controversy in O'Neill on the decision now pending whether or not to keep the Highways. A good many people are understandably confused and a great deal of misunderstanding exists. The proponents of keeping the Highways believe that all of the facts should be presented, in order that you may be able to reach an intelligent decision in your own manner of thinking. We assume that you are interested, and certainly you should be, for this issue directly relates to the future welfare and prosperity of all.

Whether O'Neill will continue to grow and prosper, or whether it does otherwise—these are questions that affect each and every one of you—your business—your jobs—the values of your property and investments. Can O'Neill afford to make the wrong decision; to risk a few business failures; a few empty business buildings, or unrented homes?

Many persons concede that O'Neill is now on "dead-center." If it is going ahead, it is very slow and painful. Every one will agree that it is possible for it to go backward. Many people feel that O'Neill is not so big and independent, nor so prosperous that it can afford to heedlessly throw away one of its principal assets. What growth O'Neill has had in the past has been in large part at the expense of other smaller surrounding communities, with which fact you are all familiar.

O'Neill has profited immensely in the past from the Highways. We are at the "Hub" of the system in North Nebraska. O'Neill businessmen have capitalized upon this fact. They have provided good hotels, motels, restaurants, garages, filling stations, stores and places of entertainment to cater to the needs of the travelling public, as well as the local community. O'Neill has become known as a place where these services are available.

Now, at a time when more emphasis than ever is being placed on travel, when we are about to have hard-surfaced roads in all directions, we are suddenly considering giving away one of our principal advantages.

This decision is really important to O'Neill; it should not be decided on the basis of selfish or petty considerations. Many businesses in O'Neill depend directly upon the travelling public for the principal part of their income. All business shares in it directly and indirectly to small or large degree. So-called "Tourists" are but a small fraction of it. Hundreds of Nebraska, Wyoming and South Dakota people are passing through O'Neill 365 days of every year.

O'Neill has grown some, and still wants to grow more. Public-spirited citizens have worked long and hard to build a beautiful hospital; good schools and churches; to promote highways; to obtain business and industry for O'Neill, and many other projects such as the National Guard Unit. It is hard to understand now why the people should be divided on a matter so admittedly vital to the welfare of the business community. No one has been heard to say in a straightforward way that they actually favor removal of the Highways. Rather they say, "We are in favor of the Highways, but . . ." or, "We favor the Highways, provided . . ." We believe that they must want the Highways out for their own peculiar reasons. We think they would be more honest if they would say so! After all, that is the real issue.

Three arguments have been advanced against keeping the Highways. They are: The Cost Reflected in Taxes — What Guarantee for the Future? — The Effect on Parking.

THE COST?

The Cost to O'Neill for keeping the Highways is approximately \$27,500.00. The published estimate of total cost, prepared by the State of Nebraska Highway Department is \$54,380.47, exclusive of engineering furnished by the State and incidental costs. This appears in the official notice of bids published in the Independent on March 10th. ONE-HALF of the total cost is being paid by means of a Federal Aid grant, which also applies to all engineering and incidental costs.

HOW WILL THE CITY SHARE BE PAID?

It will be paid by means of a bond issue, payable over a period of ten years. Special Assessments will be levied against and collected from the properties abutting upon the streets, proportionate to the benefits accruing to such properties from the paving. Unofficially it is estimated that 2/3 of the City's costs will be repaid by Special Assessments. One-third, or less than ten thousand dollars will be paid by General Taxation in the ten years following. This might require about 1/3 mill of tax and amount to about \$1.50 per year on a medium-priced residence property.

WHAT ABOUT GUARANTEES?

The Highways have been located in O'Neill for 30 years or more. No guarantees have ever existed, and none was required. No other City in Nebraska has received such a guarantee. No authority has been produced to substantiate the statements that the Highways would inevitably be re-routed out of Town. The facts are quite the contrary.

Here is the "assurance" the State has given O'Neill. First: The State is assuming all of the expense of repaving the last block on West Douglas Street. Second: The State is assuming all of the expense of purchasing right of way for a new corner at the West end, including payment of damages for removal of buildings and equipment. Third: The State is bearing the entire expense of constructing a new corner at the West end, costing many thousands of dollars, and providing for three lanes of traffic. Fourth: The State is constructing as a part of this project, at a cost of many thousands of dollars, one and one-half miles of new road from the State Garage, North. This road is being widened, elevated, and completely modernized.

DEPARTMENT OF ROAD AND IRRIGATION
L. N. RESS
STATE ENGINEER



State of Nebraska
VICTOR E. ANDERSON, Governor

LINCOLN 8

January 18, 1955

BUREAU OF HIGHWAYS
BUREAU OF IRRIGATION
WATER POWER AND DRAINAGE
MOTOR VEHICLE DIVISION
LAW ENFORCEMENT
AND PUBLIC SAFETY

IN REPLY REFER TO
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Mayor and City Council
O'Neill, Nebraska

Gentlemen:

It is my understanding that considerable speculation has arisen in O'Neill with respect to the proposed relocation of U. S. Highways 281 and 20. In the event that the City of O'Neill accomplishes the widening of these two highways within the corporate limits of O'Neill, as presently contemplated, and continues the parking arrangements currently in effect, it is improbable that this Department will give consideration to any future relocations of these highways.

This Department contemplates taking bids in March on the 1.5-mile section of U.S. Highway 281 and 20 from the west end of Douglas Street to the Danceland property. This improvement will very definitely establish the location of U.S. Highway 281 through O'Neill. This Department is not contemplating any modernization of the junction of U.S. 281 and 20 at the Danceland corner. This improvement is being deferred at this time in order that future consideration of the relocation from the west end of Douglas Street to Emmet may be studied with the possibility of shifting this location parallel to the Northwestern tracks. A further relocation which might be accomplished in the future would be a relocation of U.S. 281 from the west end of Douglas Street south, which would remove this location from the present 4th Street location in O'Neill. This relocation would probably not be undertaken until such time as traffic conditions at the 4th and Douglas Street intersection became intolerable. I do not anticipate that this condition will prevail in the foreseeable future.

I feel that this thinking on the part of this Department will certainly justify the widening projects now being considered by the City Council and contribute materially to the improvement of traffic conditions within the corporate limits of your community.

Sincerely yours,

State Engineer

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This is all a part of the State's plan to co-operate with O'Neill, in addition to making it possible for O'Neill to secure a donation from the Federal Government for ONE-HALF of the work in the downtown area. Do you think the State and Federal Engineers are deliberately planning to throw all of this work and money away in a few years to move the Highways out of O'Neill? It doesn't make sense.

In addition to this, the State has advised the City by conversations and letters, that it is now considering a plan to rebuild Highway 20 from the West end of O'Neill to Emmet, along the railroad. This certainly does not sound as if the State was planning to take the Highways from O'Neill in a few years. Of course we can force them to if we do not wish to co-operate.

ABOUT PARKING?

The State has told the City that they must think ahead twenty years in their planning for future needs. You can realize this if you will only think back 20 years. The State admits there is no present necessity for parallel parking in O'Neill, but must anticipate that that time may come, perhaps in ten years, perhaps longer. However, the City has been granted permission to defer this matter until such time as a four-lane road is needed through O'Neill, and in the meantime is to be permitted to continue the present method of 30 degree parking. A very substantial increase in traffic will be required to necessitate any change in this situation. When it comes, we will certainly be the first to recognize it in the form of the business and prosperity it will also bring to O'Neill. If it does not come we should be disappointed, but certainly we should not be harmed.

The City Council has not adopted any Ordinance or regulation calling for parallel parking, and is not about to do so, not withstanding the statements to the contrary.

WHAT ABOUT SIDEWALKS?

There is not now and never has been any plan to cut the sidewalks. It was merely discussed at one time as a possible alternative, but long since abandoned. The plans as now adopted call for a 69 foot street, downtown and elsewhere. Many downtown blocks now have a 69 foot street. They will not be molested. Statements appearing otherwise in Court cases and newspaper stories do not conform to the facts. The blueprints are on file with the City Clerk.

IS ANYONE FORCED FROM BUSINESS?

Not unless it is by their own choice. Contrary to published statements, the Ford Garage, and the Arbuthnot and Asimus Stations have not been requested nor required to remove their canopies or places of business. The agreement with the State provides simply:

"To remove the curb pumps at these stations."

"To prohibit filling stations and other business establishments being located in such a manner that vehicles being serviced will be required to stand on the STATE HIGHWAY RIGHT OF WAY."

Admittedly these pumps, or some of them, are now located on public property—not private property. Likewise in front of the Ford Garage and the Arbuthnot Station, the street is to be widened from a present 61 feet to 69 feet, or 4½ feet on each side. This will require that the canopies be narrowed to conform, or removed as the owners see fit. That is their choice. In any case, there will remain 15 feet of space between the curb lines and the lot lines which will be available for the use of these stations without restrictions. Take a look for yourself.

WHAT DETRIMENTS ARE INVOLVED?

If the Highways are to be relocated North of O'Neill, a new City Route will be required for all of the Highways. The City Route for U.S. 275 and U.S. 20 will join with U.S. 281 at the Stop Light in the center of Town. These three Roads will then be routed North on Fourth Street, to pass directly between the two schools and the Church, and on North to connect with the new Highway. Substantially all of the traffic in and out of O'Neill will then pass over these routes. Everyone is familiar with the situation existing at the playgrounds of the two Schools and you know how the children stream into these streets. This will create an additional hazard to the safety of our children.

WHAT BENEFITS CAN BE EXPECTED?

Aside from the business aspect, there are other considerations. The City will acquire at ONE-HALF actual cost, the work necessary to provide an excellent paved street of uniform 69 feet width

throughout the entire business district. This will greatly enhance the appearance of our main streets, as well as greatly expedite the flow of traffic and provide additional badly needed parking facilities at many locations. These improvements are needed and worth the cost irrespective of other considerations. They will be permanent and will benefit the City for years to come.

In conjunction with the building of the new corner by the State at the West end of Douglas, the Engineers are now working on a plan to permanently correct the drainage problem which has existed for years in Southwest O'Neill. Water from the farmlands North of O'Neill has always drained through the Country Club, down to the State Garage, and thence through the Southwest corner of town. The plan being developed is to carry these waters Westward, out of the City drainage system entirely. This will be of immense benefit to the City and particularly the persons who have been bothered with this water. This will not be done if the Highways are moved.

The State Law specifies that when State Highways are on City Streets, the State must bear one-half the cost of maintaining or re-building 24 feet of the width of such streets. The present paving on our Main Streets is 20-25 years old. In the not-distant future it will require major repair and re-surfacing. If O'Neill permits these Highways to be taken out of town, we thereby forfeit for all time our right to have the State share in the upkeep thereof, also we forfeit our right to have Federal Aid. It must be remembered that the major cost of the present streets was paid by means of State and Federal grants at small cost to O'Neill. If O'Neill loses the Highways, it is probable that we will saddle ourselves with future costs far in excess of the amounts now required to keep the Highways. Do not forget this.

WHAT ABOUT THE FUTURE?

O'Neill is in an extremely fortunate position because we are among the few towns in the State having 99 foot streets to begin with. Many towns have narrow streets which cannot be improved. Cities like Grand Island have had to remove all parking from their thoroughfares in order to keep the Highways. O'Neill is in a position to co-operate with the State at little inconvenience to itself. Certainly it is possible for us to keep the Highways indefinitely if we wish.

Likewise if other small towns are to be by-passed in the future, O'Neill may find that it is one of the fortunate few through which the Highways pass.

LOSS OF REVENUES?

You will have noticed in your travels as have others, that when a Highway is routed around a town, many businesses re-locate on the Highway. This will mean that O'Neill business places will move out of town, with a resulting loss of tax revenue to the City. Several O'Neill businesses are now contemplating this possibility. This will not be a wholesome prospect for O'Neill. Many business men have come to O'Neill and have located upon the Highways for one particular reason. Certainly O'Neill is not keeping the faith with these investors if it makes no effort to retain these Highways.

The Highways have been in O'Neill for 30 years. The Main streets are zoned for business use. Undoubtedly the highway traffic is obnoxious to home owners on the street. However, all, or most of them, bought or built there with the presence of the Highway in mind.

Here are some unsolicited comments from recent letters received in O'Neill:

R. H. Parker, real estate and insurance, O'Neill, Nebr.: "I have not been opposed to keeping the Highways in O'Neill since last summer I made a trip to Minneapolis, Minn., and I saw numerous towns along the road that have had the Highway routed around them, and I noticed at those towns that several stores moved from down town out to the Highway. If the Highway was routed around O'Neill, we would not like to see some of our stores move out to the Highway, consequently I have taken a different view and am not opposed to keeping the Highways through town."

Homer E. Davis, Superintendent, City of Benkelman: "You spoke about moving the Highway out of town. If you will take my advice, you had better throw in with the Federal Government and keep them through town, that is unless your Filling Stations, Restaurants, Hotels, Motels and such businesses are prepared to either retire or move with the Highway. We let the Highway go North of town here and too late we woke up to the fact that we were asleep at the Switch. Tell the Council they better think it over. This is just a little tip, it's nothing to me what the City of O'Neill does, you know."

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