

## **A County Engineer? What's that?**

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I was thirty-six years old when I first walked into the courthouse as a newly elected County Commissioner. I had an election certificate that said I had a right to be there; a note in my calendar saying I should be there; and that was about all I had. The Judge had a gavel. The Auditor had a stack of official papers with seals. And the Sheriff had a gun. If I felt slightly out of my element that first day, being outnumbered and outgunned didn't help. It also did not help that the first appointment on the Commission agenda was with the Public Works Director and the County Engineer. They wanted to talk about spending a quarter million dollars or so for something or other. It was like that for most of the morning. In the afternoon, it got worse.

I remember saying to the Engineer that, before I would agree to spend \$250,000 on ANYTHING, I was going to need a bit more information. On my desk the next morning was an inch thick file with an executive summary. It put the entire issue into fiscal terms even a Commissioner could understand! I don't remember if we ever did spend that money. But I do remember one of the most important lessons of my time in office. The County Engineer knew a lot more than how to calculate differential equations. And the relationship I had with that person would be critical to my success in public service.

Many matters come directly to the Commissioners' attention. Those include land development, capital facilities planning, economic development, resource conservation, and a lot of others. What these have in common? They all have a direct bearing on the county's road system, mostly the arterials and major collector roads. I can think of no single office that must integrate some expertise in all these functions more than does the county engineer. He or she must then place that expertise at the disposal of the county commissioners, who then have responsibility for the policy decisions.

The outcome may be a road designed to be more in tune with a given neighborhood or community aesthetic; it may be as mundane as how road drainage will be handled near an environmentally sensitive area; or it may be as immediate as traffic safety and emergency response. One might lend itself to a better quality of life. The other might well save life. Maybe yours. Maybe mine.

Whether it is a quality of life issue or a life safety issue, commissioners rely on the professional expertise of the county engineers. They expect solutions that are safe, effective, and compatible with local lifestyles. The nature of this relationship is crucial to quality local government. The upcoming 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Washington Association of County Engineers gives testimony to its continuing benefit to the public we all strive to serve.

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Questions about this article, or any of the series, or on other topics related to County Roads, may be directed either to your County Engineer, or to Al King, P.E., County Road Administration Board, Olympia, at [Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov](mailto:Al@CRAB.Wa.Gov).