

When are you going to widen my road?

Many of our county roads started as mere wagon trails. They were just wide enough for a single path. Over time, these early trails came to be used by cars and became county roads. Now the roads need to carry two-way traffic with today's cars and large trucks. Early roads were not designed for these vehicles.

Over the years, most of the trails (now roads) have been improved for cars and trucks. They have been widened for two lanes of traffic, and corners have been eased for smoother travel.

Most roads built after the early wagon trails were designed for cars and trucks. However, many of them also may no longer be suitable due to more, faster and heavier traffic.

Many miles of roads need to be improved. County engineers must prioritize the roads. They look at which will benefit most from the dollars they have to spend. They look at things like:

- ✓ Is there a safety problem? If the road doesn't have a safety problem, then perhaps improving it is not very important—despite the inconvenience of its narrow width.
- ✓ Is the road highly used? More people are helped by improving highly traveled roads instead of less used side roads.
- ✓ Is the road important for economic vitality? If a road is needed by commerce, it may need improved to move products to markets.

County Engineers use these kinds of information in “priority programs” to decide which projects to recommend doing first. Other projects also sometimes come up. These might be storm damage repairs, bridge replacements, or projects influenced by new land developments. All these projects compete for limited funds.

The result is that available funds are most often used on roads with a bad accident history, those most widely used, and on those which come forward due to other important reasons. Narrow, little-used roads without safety problems might not be given the same priority. There are just not enough funds available to improve all the county roads.

Counties now require that private roads must meet certain standards of suitability (road width being among them) before they can become county roads. These standards will help assure safer roads for future public travel.

If you want your road widened despite the above factors, check with your County Engineer. An option may exist in the form of a Road Improvement District. In an RID, the landowners along a county road (or along a privately owned road) can petition the county to improve the road. Under this mechanism, the landowners pay for the road improvements through special assessments.

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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.