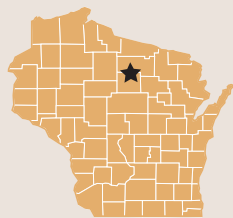




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“With the cost of asphalt, pulverizing would be cheaper than wedging and you end up with a better road.”

INSIDE

- 2 **IDEA EXCHANGE**
Between the storms — Tasks for no-snow days
- 2 New diesel fuel is in the pipeline
- 3 Biodiesel B20 works fine for UW–Madison
- 6 Winter is on the way — Get ready now
- 7 Finding grants to stretch budgets
- 8 Teaming up for better transportation
 - Crash data and more from TOPS Lab
 - MRUTC—Midwest Regional University Transportation Center
- 10 **RESOURCES**
- 11 **Signing Q&A**
- 12 **CALENDAR**

Managing local roads—10 ideas from the Town of Bradley

LIKE SCORES of towns around the state, Bradley had a problem. Many years of too much patching and no rebuilding had left the roads a mess. Then second home development around the lakes started booming, and so did summer traffic.

Fortunately, one resident had the know-how to guide essential improvements: former Town Board member Byron Lange who had

worked 37 years with the Lincoln County Highway Department. He agreed to be the town’s part time construction and planning consultant. Now, a decade later, the worst roads are rebuilt and the rest are in line for upgrades, without breaking the bank.

How did they do it? The system boils down to planning, financial commitment, footwork, and communication, along with some

specific insider’s tricks. Here are 10 town road management tactics that Lange used.

1) **Never do just an overlay.** “An overlay looks pretty for about six months and then the old cracks come through,” says Lange. First repair distressed areas and strengthen weak base. Then take advantage of pulverizing or milling to prepare the road for overlay. “With the cost of asphalt, pulverizing would be cheaper than wedging and you end up with a better road,” he says.

Town of Bradley has many former gravel roads with a thin asphalt surface. To improve these roads they spread the surface with a minimum 4” of new gravel then pulverize. In one pass the pulverizer breaks up the old asphalt and mixes in the gravel. The thicker, stronger base is then graded and paved with an overlay.

“A lot of times look I’ll look at the PASER ratings for an area with worse cracking or see where a road going across the swamp has rutted, and give it a little extra base,” Lange says. They also add extra material—base and surface—on the insides of curves. This protects the pavement edge where drivers cut the corner and keeps shoulder gravel off the road.

2) **Pay by the ton on the road.** After years of working with contractors, Lange doesn’t like total project bids. “We bid per ton on the road because that way



BEFORE This narrow (17 ft), urban road had no drainage and many trees needed to be removed.



AFTER Now 22 ft wide, it has a new drainage ditch and improved curve. The town repaired lawns after the trees were cleared.

10 Tactics for town road managers

Never do just an overlay.

Pay by the ton on the road.

Do your legwork.

Work ahead.

Use smart timing to cut costs.

Collaborate with abutting landowners.

Send certified letters.

Pay yourself in advance.

Find outside money.

Get to know the people who know.

Continues on page 4

Managing local roads

continued from page 1

we are paying for what we're getting," he says. When something on the job takes more asphalt than expected, the contractor is compensated and doesn't have to skimp on asphalt in another spot, says Lange.

To make this approach work requires a good tonnage estimate and collecting the weight tickets from asphalt trucks as they deliver. "Before we let out a project we measure the width and length, and consult a table to get a tonnage estimate," Lange says.



Get better paving bids by using smart timing and detailed specs.

"He gives details [in the specs] like the tonnage they want, length of road, width of road, and exactly what they want done in the projects. I wish other townships would copy his practices."

3) **Do your legwork.** Putting in time and effort up front really pays off, whether in developing a five year road plan, writing a grant proposal, or preparing bid specs. For example, with a multi-year plan already approved by the Town Board Lange can save money on contracts and easily meet application deadlines for LRIP and other grants. He can spread road improvement projects over two years. This helps even out the budget and avoids last minute surprises and costly delays.

Written bid specs also take legwork. The reward is a tight bid based on accurate estimates instead of one with some padding so the contractor can cover unknowns and extras.

"Byron is really good at putting a spec together," says Randy Scholz, Lincoln County Highway Commissioner, who often bids

on projects for the town. "He gives details like the tonnage they want, length of road, width of road, and exactly what they want done in the projects. Also, he doesn't expand the project after it's started and suddenly you're scrambling for people or you're a week behind."

Often, in Scholz's experience, a town will seek bids with a brief newspaper ad like: wanted 2000 tons of gravel. Then bidders must call for essential information like quality, delivery location, and deadlines. Confusion and inconsistency are common. "I wish other townships would copy his practices," says Scholz.

4) **Work ahead.** Are utilities in the path of a planned ditch improvement? The companies need lead time to fit your project into their budget and construction schedule. "Every year in the early spring I write to the utilities and tell them what roads we expect to work on," Lange says. "I do the same with the County Surveyor in January so they can move their monuments." Contacting DNR reps in November for the next year's work lets them inspect sites during slower winter months.

5) **Use smart timing to cut costs.** Offer a contractor work in the slow season and you'll generally get a lower bid. For example, Lange puts out bid requests in October for clearing trees from right-of-ways. "We have a number of smaller operators up here. If it's the right time of year they are looking for work. We got really good competitive bids on grubbing and stumping," he says. Similarly, in February paving contractors with gaps in their work schedules are likely to bid lower than in already-busy May.

Help a contractor be more efficient and he'll probably pass some savings on to you. Lange's bid specs have a 90-day period for starting the project, giving the contractor flexibility to arrange jobs and stage equipment at less cost. It's the same idea as paying lower electric rates for interruptible service.

"We give them a big enough window to work the job in when they have slack time. But once they start, they only have so much time to complete the job," says Lange. If they don't finish on time, there are penalties of around \$100 per day.

6) **Collaborate with landowners.** Cutting trees for road improvements can cause an uproar among landowners, especially in developed areas where every tree is on somebody's lawn. A variety of tactics are helpful, depending on the situation. "On some projects we call a town hall meeting," says Lange. "We walk the road together and show what trees have to go and why you have to do it. Probably 90% of the time it works out."

On heavily wooded roads, the landowner can actually make money from the cutting. A letter tells them they are entitled to the wood and gives dates, deadlines, and details. "For some it's enough to pay their taxes for a year or two," Lange says.

The town also accommodates landowners by making sure that driveways flow smoothly into rebuilt roads, even when that means more cutting and extra asphalt, and by making lawn repairs part of the project contract.

"People are sensitive. Granted it's the right-of-way, but they are trying to keep their yards decent. You don't want to go and screw it up for them," says Lange.

7) **Send certified letters.** With so many non-resident landowners, it is important that they are properly notified, especially for big projects with heavy cutting. "We send a certified letter to the address where they get their tax

"People are sensitive. Granted it's the right-of-way, but they are trying to keep their yards decent. You don't want to go and screw it up for them."

bills," Lange says. "They have to sign for it, so we know they got the letter."

8) Pay yourself in advance.

The price of replacing a grader or a truck with plows and sanders equals almost half the Town's annual road budget. You could raise taxes for one year, but people get upset, so equipment purchases tend to get put off. "When I got involved we had an 18-year-old truck. It needed to be replaced," says Lange.

A machinery fund makes buying equipment a lot easier and lets you do it sooner. It's like buying on time, but ahead of time. The fund grows as the annual budget pays depreciation for each piece of equipment. Depreciation amounts are calculated by dividing the purchase price by the useful life (from a schedule like WisDOT's for machinery equipment rental). Money stays in a separate account, invested through a local bank, until it is needed.

"We just got a new grader, and we had money in the pot to pay for it," says Lange. "We are able to replace the equipment before it starts to nickel and dime us." Dependable equipment is important because the town does its own winter maintenance.

9) Find outside money. Don't be afraid to borrow money. Some projects are just too big and too urgent to wait until the annual budget can cover them. Instead of putting the projects off or

canceling all other road work to get them done, it's better to borrow money.

Two through roads were unsafe and in bad shape. They needed fixing now, so the town decided to borrow \$500,000 from the state fund. "It wasn't an extra burden on the taxpayers. The payments came out of the highway budget, and the people have had a good road for seven years," says Lange. When the loan is paid off next year, the money can go to other road improvements.

Apply for grant funding. Lange got grant money from the statewide TRIP Discretionary program — twice. It paid half the cost of rebuilding the two worst roads. "We would not have been able to fix those roads without the TRIP-D money," Lange says. "There is money out there but you have to do your homework. You might as well try to get it because somebody else will if you don't, and you'll never get it if you don't try."

"There is money out there but you have to do your homework. You might as well try to get it because somebody else will if you don't."

10) Get to know the people who know.

Over the years, Lange has learned a lot from attending TIC workshops and telephone network programs. He also met many people at the regional WisDOT office and at the state level. When he had questions, they would get him answers or tell him who else to contact.

"A lot of people have the idea that people working for the county or the state are just



BEFORE Crass Road has many steep hills with very dangerous slopes, no drainage, and no place for snow removal.



AFTER Slopes now meet modern design requirements. Utilities are moved, trees cut, and ditches built. To pay for these improvements, including purchase of more right-of-way, the Town of Bradley applied for and got a statewide TRIP discretionary grant from WisDOT and used part of the \$500,000 it borrowed.

'leeches on the taxpayer and they won't help,'" says Lange. "But if they don't help it's because you don't ask. It's a shame."

The most important element needed to improve town roads is the town board, Lange says. "We have a town board that listens and understands. If you don't have a town board that decides they want to do something, you can pull the hair out of your head and get nothing done."

Contact TIC for material estimating tables. Sample bid documents are also available, on CD or in hard copy.



With a machinery fund you can replace expensive equipment as needed without raising taxes.