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Water Runs Downhill — Conclusion

By Roger Godwin
Andover Board of Selectmen

Conclusion of our series on the challenges Andover faces in keeping its roads in good condition.

Andover's road system began as wild-life, walking, and wagon trails and has grown into 52 miles of paved and gravel road. Earlier installments in this series noted that state legislation gives the Town almost total control over the rights-of-way. At the same time, that legal system protects the Town from liability for most road-related problems not actively of its own making and prohibits private interference with the road system.

Road construction standards have continued to rise over time and with the introduction of new materials, machinery, and applications those standards will continue to rise. No longer is roadbuilding "just a matter of common sense," as it may once have been. It nows requires common sense informed by science and technology.

To the extent that our Road Agents

stay current with that technology, we're all better off. And our Selectmen must educate themselves in road construction technology as well, having the responsibility for overseeing maintenance and construction of a system whose cost is the largest element of our Town budgets.

The University of New Hampshire operates a Technology Transfer Center which provides day-long schools in road design and maintenance, attended largely by good road managers who want to become even better. My attendance there as a selectman has always provoked considerable gentle ribbing about how little elected officials tend to know about road matters.

The Town began a more systematic approach to road maintenance in the 1993 Town Meeting, which adopted a continuing resolution directing the Selectmen and Budget Committee "to incorporate provision for [road and bridge] restoration funds in future years' budgets." While the immediate focus of that resolution was the newly-proposed

ten-year road program, it applies until a future Town Meeting revokes it. Its approach, applying funds each year consistent with the objective of avoiding major changes in the tax rate, has worked well.

Decisions on which roads to reconstruct or otherwise improve are made by the Selectmen based on traffic volume, residential density, importance (mainly as school bus routes), and physical condition. Oddly enough, it is usually not appropriate to fix the worst roads first, even though that may be politically popular. Rather, given the vital need to keep water out of the road base, it is crucial to take care of a road that has not yet begun significant visible deterioration.

Once visible deterioration begins, the road's base and sub-base are damaged, and only full reconstruction will suffice. If we let every road begin to show damage before repairing it, then only vastly higher budgets will be enough to keep all of the roads in good shape.

Roads get our kids to school, us to work, and everybody to stores, hospitals, and the other places we all need to be. Their design affects our safety and abutting properties, and their maintenance affects our budgets as well as our comfort and the mechanical condition of our vehicles. In short, they cost a lot more, are worth a lot more, and simply matter a lot more than we usually realize.

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