

T H E W O R K S P R O G R A M

--Works Progress Administration--.

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Address by Perry A. Fellows before National Society of Professional Engineers.

The following paper was presented by Perry A. Fellows, Assistant Chief Engineer of the Works Progress Administration, on "Evaluating Work Relief" at the Second Annual Convention of the National Society of Professional Engineers, October 12, 1936, at the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.:

In discussing, in an orderly and unbiased fashion, any kind of work program, it is advisable to consider not alone the physical accomplishments, but also the purpose for which the program was conceived, the planning, the direction, and many other things including the speed and spirit of the execution. The reasons for making an evaluation of work relief projects may, on examination, be found to vary greatly, and so sometimes the results of that evaluation are vitiated by the limitations placed on the scope and direction of the inquiry.

Nearly all engineers have had some experience in connection with valuation. Some of those present have undoubtedly worked on assignments that included some of the more intricate features of valuation. I am sure that experienced and careful engineers are not likely to be easily misled by false limits or prejudice. The engineer's professional ethics would not permit him to offer as a complete analysis the findings based on what he knew to be insufficient data or incorrect conclusions.

Purpose. In the case of a work program designed to provide relief employment, the reason for doing the work is the first thing to be considered, as well as the most important, even though the end product may give full return for the money spent. If the work had been initiated merely to accomplish the economical construction of certain selected projects and the purpose of the evaluation was to determine whether or not these completed structures were built with the minimum

expenditure of dollars, then the method of procedure would be fairly clear. A success of that kind might be a failure as a program of relief employment. The purpose which led to the initiation of a program of relief work was not primarily the economical construction of public works, but a quite different one; one, however, not necessarily incompatible with true economy. Any attempt to make an evaluation of the program should impartially recognize the original intent, the size of the job, the physical results of the work, and the other things that make the Works Progress Administration program a great humanitarian enterprise.

Planning. The program was conceived to fill a need. If the planning had not been in harmony with that need, the work would have lost value. The real pinch of disemployment, want and hunger, was felt locally, pretty close to the individual. The effects of correction had to come close to that same spot. Since that correction was in the form of a work program, the projects selected had to fit that plan. They had to be wide of range and varied in character. They were not the result of the expression of some individual's whims, but, within the limits of the law, were an attempt to provide work for people who were in need. The skills of these people were of every conceivable variety, and the location of their homes seldom conveniently near the site of an easily developed project. They were people who were known to the authorities in their communities. These same authorities were confronted with the task of planning the projects to fit the abilities of these particular people. And so the determination of the character of the projects and the selection of the people for whom these projects would provide work

opportunities was a matter of local planning. That is one of the reasons that most of the shallow criticism is of the long range, arm-chair variety. The people close to the job know some of the parts to the problem that the easy-answer people forget.

Design. Engineers are often personally, and as a rule professionally, interested in the design stage of planning. There was a formula for the manner in which the application must be made for Federal funds for Works Progress Administration projects. This provided for proposals from the local people which were later translated into formal applications and, if allowable, into authorizations. One of the first provisions incorporated in this formula was that the responsibility for the design rested with the sponsor. In general that is easily understood, because the local official when installed in his office is given the responsibility for certain well-defined work. This responsibility is quite independent of relief work and is one that he cannot relinquish to another unless he relinquishes at the same time his right to office. Without giving up this responsibility he may enter into an understanding with somebody who will aid him in carrying out his work and his responsibility. In general that is the nature of the relationship that exists between the Works Progress Administration and the local sponsor. The affirmation of the sponsor's responsibility for the adequacy of plans, designs, and specifications, and for the accuracy of engineering calculations in connection with projects for construction, is a part of that agreement.

Supervision. Resting on the careful determination of the relationship between the local sponsor and the local Works Progress Administration

is the authority and responsibility for the supervision of the projects as they proceed. The integrity of the project in a large measure depends on the character of this supervision. Therefore, it is necessary for anyone attempting to analyze the program to learn about the basis on which this responsibility is established. If the project provides for the paving of a street or similar municipal construction, the officials of the municipality are obviously the ones on whom the responsibility for the care and maintenance of the finished work will lie. This responsibility for the finished project requires that they have a corresponding measure of authority in maintaining project integrity during its execution. When sponsors are in a financial position to furnish the detailed supervision required in project operations, full advantage is taken of their ability to do so. When adequate supervision is thus furnished by the sponsor, its duplication with Works Progress Administration employees is not permitted. When paid from Works Progress Administration funds, supervisory personnel is obtained, as far as practicable, from persons certified by local public relief agencies.

Even when exercised to its maximum degree, the authority of the sponsors in matters of project operation may not be extended in such a manner as to cause conflicts with Federal regulations controlling the expenditure of Federal funds advanced to aid the local sponsor to meet a need he could not meet alone. The general opinion goes much farther. The Works Progress Administration is responsible, in the opinion of the public, for the manner in which projects are conducted and, to a large extent, for the success of the completed work as well. Since competent supervisory personnel in sufficient numbers is the first essential for

efficient project operation, it follows that the Works Progress Administration should require to the maximum extent practicable that project supervisors and managers be persons who have had ample training and experience in the kind of work of which they will have charge.

Inasmuch as the value of relief work is not by any means all in the final product, it is apparent that this assurance as to integrity during operation is of utmost importance.

Engineers. The engineer's share in the planning, supervising, and general carrying out of these projects is of particular interest. We have no established way of accurately estimating the number of engineers which the sponsor has employed in the preparation of the plans for projects which have been submitted and which are underway. Obviously the number is great and includes not only those in regular municipal service but the supplementary aid of consultants and temporary additions to staff. To supplement the sponsor's work and to provide engineering supervision of the execution of the designs on behalf of the Federal Government, there are many engineers employed on the Federal payrolls. Many of these are from your own organization and some of them are present. They may be justly proud of the way in which they have been able to carry the work. It is under the direction of such engineers that the employment has been so speedily provided for two and one-half million men and women from the relief rolls on 90,000 Works Progress Administration jobs. The thousands of community improvements which they are building will be of lasting benefit to the community which originated the projects requested by their local officials. If we look at the physical inventory of projects alone, a part of it may be recited as follows;

Accomplishment. The present day pattern of frontier life is lived by the millions of farm families whose homes are not on the improved roads. 130,000 miles of these roads are being improved besides the work on hundreds of miles of city pavement, streets and alleys, sidewalk and curbs, and on thousands of bridges, viaducts and culverts.

In the service of better education more than 6,000 schools have been built or repaired. More than 5,000 other public buildings have provided places for work. Nearly 6,000 parks, playgrounds and athletic fields have been built new or improved greatly. The benefit is far greater than one might at first believe. Some can be found on comparison of old police records with new.

Works Progress Administration workers are carrying out nearly 4,000 flood control and other conservation projects. Get one who has suffered from one of these disasters to help place a value on the work.

Sewer construction and the laying of water lines are inglorious tasks, but over 5,000 sewer systems have been extended by Works Progress Administration workers and nearly half as many water systems improved. There is not much to see but the value is there.

For the benefit of air travelers, Works Progress Administration workers are air-marking thousands of cities and towns and are building or improving 551 airports and landing fields.

In nearly every community, large or small, Works Progress Administration workers are carrying on the program of construction to improve sanitation and health, to expedite and increase the safety of travel, to house public services and to provide additional facilities for recreation and enjoyment of leisure.

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The stalwart laborers and skilled craftsmen who could dig and build in this vast construction program were not the only ones for whom projects must be fashioned. Three quarters of a million people who were clerks, teachers, professional and technical unemployed were unsuited to the physical labor no matter how willing they might have been to undertake it.

This was still a task to test the ingenuity of local officials. It is estimated that the work of repairing library books, rare documents, revising public records, and making tax surveys and studies has recovered or saved millions of dollars. Scientists in our great universities and teachers throughout the land are engaged on projects. In the field of recreation and community organization of leisure, a great advance has been made. Architects and engineers are doing their share. The recorded measurements of all historic buildings will insure the possibility of authentic restoration if the original structure is destroyed. The field work and office computations of the nation's basic mapping program have been advanced and many local surveys of high value are being carried forward. Disemployed artists, writers, musicians, actors, and theatre technicians are maintaining themselves and giving the people of America a dollar for dollar in value that cannot be measured in terms of cubic yards of concrete in place or in the cubic contents of a finished building.

Nearly half a million women have been given assignments at worthwhile work. They are sewing, nursing, and teaching. To evaluate the whole relief program, it would be necessary to learn of the garments made for the destitute, of the sick who were cared for, of the untrained who

had been taught to do useful work.

Evaluation. These projects combine with those for engineering structures to make the Works Progress Administration program. That program cannot be evaluated by old standards.

The United States Conference of Mayors in a report to the President recognized these social as well as pecuniary values when they said:

"The integrity and permanent usefulness of the city projects which have been approved by the Federal Government need no apology from anyone. These are the cities' own projects. Honest and impartial analysis.....will reveal that practically every project represents a useful and, in most cases, a permanent public improvement."

I think that qualification of honesty and impartiality is the only limiting provision you should adopt or permit in your inquiry as to the value of the work relief program.

I believe it is the duty of each of you as an interested citizen to inspect and evaluate the projects in your home locality. You will, as a matter of professional ethics, consider the avowed purpose of the work, the circumstances which control the selection of personnel, the many other economic and social factors which cannot be separated from the very real and obvious accomplishments. When you do that, I venture to predict that you will find each of these lowly tasks an appreciable increment of the greatest humanitarian enterprise of all time.