

CROSSROADS

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FALL 2020

THE 2020 WINTER ISSUE

The season's latest technology and trends



County Road Association
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loan for new building

Frost sensors track *page 10*
weather conditions



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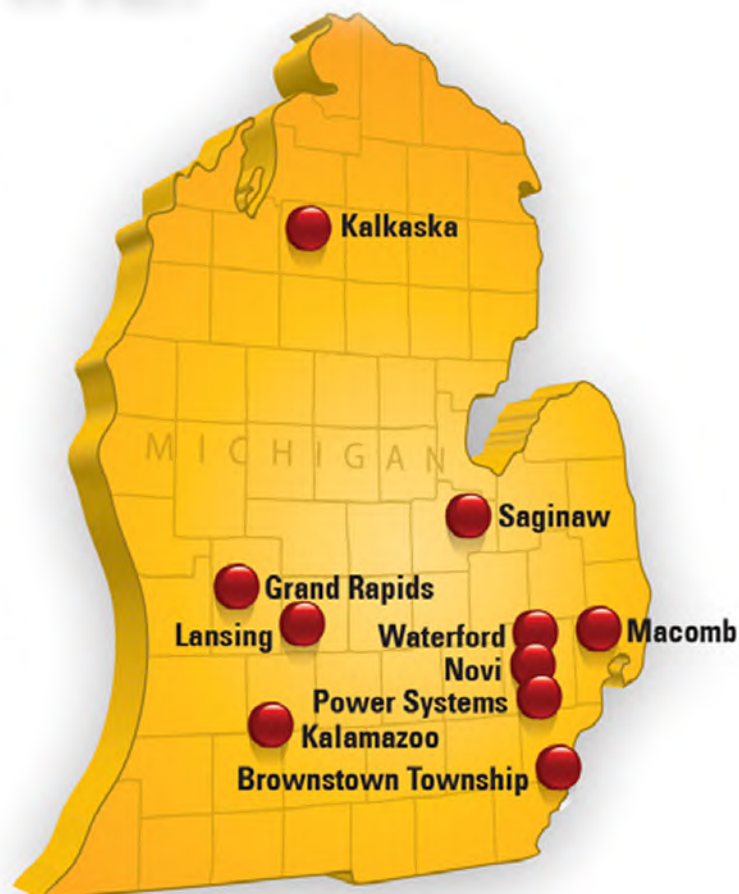
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Crossroads is a publication of the County Road Association (CRA) of Michigan. The 83 county members of CRA support a safe and efficient county road system in Michigan. The Association is dedicated to helping members promote and maintain a safe, efficient county road right-of-way in rural and urban Michigan.

ON THE COVER

East 14 Mile Road in Chippewa County, following freezing rain and heavy wet snow in January 2020.

(Photo courtesy of the Chippewa County Road Commission)

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This issue reflects updates to *Crossroads*. It was time to refresh our look with modern graphics and more visuals. With strong support from our advertisers, we've added four pages. Inside, *Crossroads* will have multi-media links and other content enhancements. Keep those story ideas coming!

— DD, Publisher

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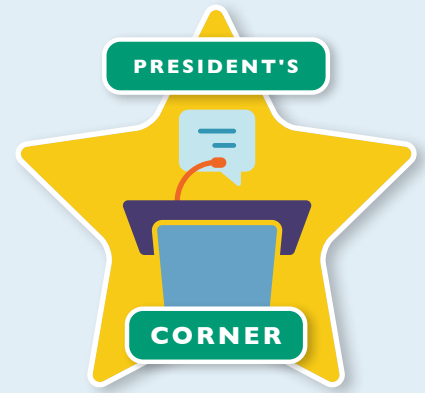


LET'S GET TO WORK

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PRESIDENT'S CORNER



As we begin to work our way through a new normal, I am yet again thoroughly impressed with the role our association and county road agency members play in sharing important information and collaborating to keep us moving forward during trying times.

From flurries of emails on the Listserv to in-depth newsletters, I've watched how our counties have worked together to be safe while still providing top-level service to their constituents.

In this issue we're highlighting innovative ways county road agencies will maintain roads this winter. Based on how we've handled the last few months and risen to the occasion, we're well-equipped to keep moving forward, growing, thriving and innovating as we tackle the challenges ahead and continue to improve the service we provide.

We as county road agencies can get hammered down with the minutia of the job's daily tasks. Perhaps the silver lining of this whole pandemic is that it has provided an opportunity for commissioners, managers and administrative staff to look at operations in a new light. We've been brought back to focus on what's important to our agencies: To prioritize not just within our communities, but within our own organizations.

I'll end by saying I hope we've all had a chance to look at our own lives and what is important there, too. I know I have, and it has made me a better commissioner and president because of it.

Thank you,

Richard Timmer
CRA President and
Chair of the
Chippewa County Road Commission



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GLADWIN COUNTY



Climbing up TO A NEW NORMAL

Erosion around the Estey Road bridge abutment, with Wixom Lake in the background.

GCRC adjusting to change – which change?

The **Gladwin County Road Commission** (GCRC) has been working to “get back to normal” amidst a sea of change. During 2019-2020, GCRC managing director **Dave Pettersch** served as president of the County Road Association (CRA) of Michigan, which made demands on his time, travel and leadership.

After passing the baton to Chippewa County president **Dick Timmer** at the CRA Highway Conference in mid-March, Pettersch expected to come back to a more singular, calm focus in Gladwin.

Alas, singular focus was not in the cards.

GCRC along with the whole state traveled into new territory when the Stay Home Stay Safe Executive Order was released by the Governor. After several weeks of putting new health safety systems in place, Gladwin adjusted to its “new normal,” had its essential workers back out on the roads and was waiting for work to resume on its new office-garage.

Alas, this new normal wouldn’t hold either.

A 48-hour rainstorm that began May 17 dropped 10 inches of rain on northern Gladwin County. On May 19, two troubled dams along the Tittabawassee River breached, flooding communities downstream and sucking all the water out of Wixom Lake.

The Governor declared a state of emergency for Arenac, Gladwin, Iosco, Midland and Saginaw counties.

GCRC’s first goal was to secure life and safety, patching roads together to get people out. Underwater roads and flooded bridges were blockaded as GCRC waited for the water to recede to assess road and bridge infrastructure damage.

“It was a surreal time, helicopters flying, homeowners crying in the streets, with homes literally floating down the lake and over the breached dam,” Pettersch said.

“It was like a vacuum as the water pulled everything downstream, down the river into Midland and ultimately Saginaw counties, and into Lake Huron. Houses, boats and docks were being carried along by the force of water,” he

said. “Here in Wixom Lake, people had high water damage in the bottom floor of lakefront homes. After the dam breach, the water was gone and the people downstream instead had homes full of dirt and sediment.”

Step #2. With safety secured, Pettersch and staff made a list of 50 locations in the county damaged by the storm, and called an emergency board meeting to prioritize the repairs.

“Everyone [FEMA, FHWA, MDOT] says don’t start the repairs until they get there to assess things, but we have people swamped out of their homes, people with no running water, and our roads cut up like Swiss cheese. We went ahead with many repairs that we don’t know if we’ll get paid for [by federal agencies] – but we had to for the benefit of our community and emergency services,” Pettersch said.

In the end, GCRC had two major bridges damaged – one of which re-opened in May. The other is estimated at \$1,000,000 in damage and has a 30-minute detour, creating very limited fire department accessibility for several homes. With the catastrophe, GCRC still had the flexibility to cancel the 2020 chip seal program and half of its paving projects, redirecting the funds to flood damage.

“It will be two years before we are fully recovered from this event,” Pettersch said. “We have a fund balance, but in these times, the last thing you want to do is spend down your savings. We tried to balance getting repairs done as quickly as possible for our residents, and fighting for every dollar that we possibly could in state and federal aid.”

The homes along Lake Wixom and other parts of the Tittabawassee River will all be re-assessed this fall, reflecting a precipitous drop in home values in a county that’s one-third state forest (no taxes). This will directly decrease the countywide road millage.

Building a new building

Although GCRC’s brick structure was 76-years-old, operations staff was mystified when the large overhead garage door stopped working in December 2017. Further investigation revealed structural stress in the ceiling beams that had caused shifting in the opening for the garage door.

The building was condemned and workers were evicted. Temporary braces were put in place to get the road agency through winter – the next two winters, it turned out.

“We have always put our limited funds on the roads first; buildings get pushed back as far as we can,” Pettersch said. After selecting an architect (Hobbs and Black), GCRC’s board and staff came together with ideas for the new space including a hardened entrance, security system, accessibility, environmental efficiency, a new shop for working on vehicles, larger board room and actual offices.

The new building will connect to GCRC’s 2005 vehicle storage building, which includes heated floors and a truck wash – both of which Pettersch credits for extending the life of vehicles by eliminating salt and snow build up in winter.

GCRC is perhaps the first Michigan road commission to utilize a US Department of Agriculture Rural Development Community Facilities Program loan. The loan is low-interest (2.75%) for 30 years, signed for by the Gladwin County Commission and must be used for a design-build contractor.

“The USDA loan allows us to stretch the payments out over 30 years and continue our aggressive road improvement plan,” Pettersch said. “The USDA loan offered features that no other agency could offer.”

A CRA Legislative Priority, which was introduced by Rep. Markkanen (R-Houghton), would allow personal property loans for road commission buildings for 30 years vs. the current 15-year limit. The bill is pending in the House Ways & Means Committee.



“Fifty years of millage investment is priceless,” Pettersch said. “It shows in our roads and drainage.”

We are a road-focused road commission

Today, GCRC builds some of its own roads, while continuing to contract for others. This keeps the snow-plowing staff busy year-round and is now a cost-effective expertise and resource for the county.

“We are a road-focused road commission. A portion of our millage money is spent on managing and investing in new roads from the ground up. Every year, three to five miles of county roads are rebuilt,” Pettersch said. “We contract out our chip seal and have an overall goal of improving 10 percent of the system every year.”

One of GCRC’s innovations recently is utilizing ultra-thin asphalt as the top coat on roads.

“It covers more road for less money and functions really well for the dollars invested,” Pettersch said. “We make a three-quarters-inch overlay on the road using a high-end asphalt liquid and a better aggregate, with a higher crush content.”

JUST THE FACTS



Office Headquarters: Gladwin



Staff: 29 full time, 10 seasonal/part-time



No. of Commissioners: 3 (elected)



Miles of Road: Total paved: 381 Primary: 216 Local: 165
Total unpaved: 500 Primary: 21 Local: 479



MDOT Contract: Yes (169 lane miles)



No. of Bridges: 46



Annual Revenue Budget: \$9,750,000 (FY 2019)

Local Revenue: \$1,200,000 (FY 2019)



Annual Snowfall: 44 inches



GCRC established: 1896



No. of Garages: 1



Office Built: 1941 (2020 – see story)



FUN FACT: Gladwin County Road Commission has Michigan’s longest-standing countywide road millage! It was first passed in 1968 with 2 mills and generated as much as \$1.8 million, recently decreased to \$1.7 million. That figure is expected to slide again as homes and businesses along Lake Wixom are re-assessed following June’s catastrophic dam burst.

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On the value of getting involved

About his year as president of CRA and continued service on the CRA Board, Pettersch said: "I believe you have to be involved to get the most out of the experience. Part of my job is to be as involved as I can to benefit our road commission and the industry. In the end, you learn much more than you bring."

He also believes in getting involved with local and statewide elected officials. "They can make a difference for us as a governmental agency at just the right time," Pettersch commented.

GCRC was recently helped by its state Representative to obtain a Transportation Economic Development Fund (TEDF) Category A grant to enhance the road system to accommodate a major expansion of Kember Kreative Floors, a local plant for timber grown in the area.

TEDF grants come "off the top" of the Michigan Transportation Fund and were created to target funds that would directly create jobs. The Kember

TEDF-A grant was \$438,000, supplemented with \$292,000 from the company and GCRC.

It turned 2.5 miles of crumbling Lyle Road into an all-season road that could sustain heavy loads of timber all 12 months of the year. The 2018 project resulted in 25 new jobs, following Kember's \$5 million expansion of its plant.

"Everyone – the road commission, the township, the county – wanted the Kember expansion to happen, and I know our Representative Wentworth spent a lot of time helping us pull all the pieces together and getting over the hurdles," Pettersch said. "I don't see how we as the road commission can do the best job for our community without being involved with our Senators and Representatives on a regular basis."

Capturing available resources and rolling with change is certain to bring the Gladwin County Road Commission to a higher "new normal" as the years roll on. **CRA**



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Frost sensors are the frosting on the cake for several West Michigan counties

Muskegon, Ottawa (and Kent) counties find advantages in roadside monitors



Drew Nichols is sitting at his desk on a January afternoon, plotting his next move. No, he's not playing Monopoly or solving a Rubik's cube. He has his eyes on the weather on the other side of Muskegon County. Where will he send his trucks next?

With frost sensors, the answer is clearer. The innovative technology allows road agencies to track air and road temperatures, dewpoint and humidity at locations across their counties. Tracking these elements helps road agencies determine which areas need more attention as the snow falls.

"Our trucks have GPS systems so I can see how much material they are using," Nichols, maintenance superintendent at **Muskegon County Road Commission**

(MCRC), said. "Using both the frost sensors and GPS systems, I can sit at my desk and know exactly what's going on. I can call the shots more easily. We're able to perform and react more efficiently using both systems."

WEBMDSS, MCRC's mapping program, allows Nichols to pull up overlay data that also shows weather information from MDOT cameras. Everything is at his fingertips.

MCRC worked with Frost Control Systems to install sensors mounted on telephone poles at 12 locations across Muskegon County. Frost Control Systems will soon install cameras. What's next? The company is also using MCRC as a beta testing platform for laser-guided snow depth sensors.



Frost sensor attached to utility pole.



Frost sensor mounted to utility pole.

Here, there and everywhere

MCRC works with neighboring counties Ottawa and Kent to track weather conditions with frost sensors, also mounted to telephone poles.

“All of us road commissions are a big family,” Nichols said. “Everyone does something different, and we’re always sharing thoughts and comparing notes to see who’s coming up with the next idea.”

Ottawa County Road Commission (OCRC) has 24 sensors located across the county and is in the process of updating its units so they have the ability to take photos every 20 minutes when the road temperature is below 45 degrees.

“We cover thousands of miles of roads, and we can’t be in more than one location at a time,” **Ryan Kemppainen**, OCRC operations superintendent, said. “With the sensors, we have the ability to see what’s going on across the county. A couple of degrees in the winter when the temperature is hovering around freezing can make a big difference in winter maintenance. Frost sensors allow us to react to differing road conditions as quickly as possible.”

How it works:

- 1 Frost sensors monitor air temperature, road temperature, dewpoint and humidity and send out data packages every 20 minutes.
- 2 Cloud-based software organizes data, sends alerts and displays charts.
- 3 County road agencies monitor conditions and receive alerts on both desktop and mobile devices.
- 4 County road agencies can direct truck drivers to areas that need more attention.

Snowfalls and sunshine

When it comes to winter, lakeshore living isn’t always fun.

“We’re in a unique situation in that we live adjacent to Lake Michigan, so there are weird variables with the snow falling and the sun warming up,” Nichols said. “Based on weather data, I can coordinate where our truck drivers go. When we know exactly where treatment is needed, we’re able to eliminate waste and reduce the amount of time drivers are patrolling areas that perhaps haven’t been hit as hard. Instead of drivers patrolling 20 miles on a road, I can direct them to other spots that may need more attention.

“Rather than driving out east to plow snow, for example, it takes five seconds to see what the road looks like there. We can provide a better level of service when we know exactly which areas to target,” Nichols said.

Using the frost sensors, MCRC and OCRC were able to closely monitor their road conditions last winter, saving on both operational and material costs while still prioritizing roadway safety for residents.

“Expectations increase year to year,” Kemppainen said. “This system helps us react to winter maintenance at a faster pace for the motoring public. Monitoring these elements is a great tool, and as time goes on, the technology will only improve and help us even more.”

Frost sensors allow road agencies to better serve the community, improving the driving experience for residents and giving road agencies peace of mind.

As Nichols puts it, “Having the sensors really helps ease the stress of the unknown.” **CRA**

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What if there was an opportunity to have a direct impact on road policy decisions in Lansing? Members of **Roads+™**, the County Road Association (**CRA**) of Michigan's political advocacy organization, help do just that. **Roads+™** helps the **County Road Association** get more time in front of key legislators in Lansing. This year, **Roads+™** is also making endorsements to the campaigns of state office candidates who will advocate for judicious road policies.

Crossroads sat down with three **Roads+™** trustees and found out how members can make a difference in Michigan public policy on road issues.

How do you feel you're contributing to creating good local road policy?

Hulka: It's vitally important that we have access to legislators as they're trying to enact new laws and adjust current laws. It's important to be on the ground floor when those bills are introduced so we can get a positive outcome for all county road agencies in the state. Roads+™ allows us to pull up that seat at the table.

Pemberton: We had a good exchange with the people in the Legislature who control funding. We formed relationships with anyone in Legislature that promoted and was friendly to road construction, road maintenance and road commissions. We had fundraisers and would pay for the tickets and send someone from the district of whoever was having the event.

Ely: We're contributing by sponsoring legislators who would be favorable to roads policy. We're very involved in trying to raise money to help them out.

What are the benefits of being a Roads+™ trustee?

Hulka: We have input into endorsements during election time, and that's a fun exercise. At times we get to talk to legislators, and that's always an interesting chat. At times a few of us have been able to testify at hearings in Lansing. The Roads+™ golf outings are nice, and there are very good people involved.

Pemberton: You certainly are able to stay abreast of what's happening in the Legislature and what's coming up that affects what you'll do in your job at the road commission. You get to convince those in the Legislature who might be sitting on the fence on funding. There are a lot of laws other than funding that can help or hurt road commissions and our ability to help the public. We always tried to have a positive impact on the Legislature. We try to stay on the cutting edge of important road issues.

Ely: We have the benefit, through our sponsorships, to help with the campaigns of legislators who are looking to make our roads better.



Ken Hulka

Roads+™ chair and
managing director of
Muskegon County Road Commission



John Pemberton

Former chair of Roads+™ (formerly RUSH PAC)
and former managing director of
Antrim County Road Commission



Jeff Ely

Roads+™ trustee and
governmental sales manager at
AIS Construction Equipment Corp.

What do you say to someone interested in becoming a Roads+™ member?

Hulka: I encourage people to join Roads+™ because you get input into who we endorse statewide and get involved on a deeper level. It's fulfilling to be a part of a fundraiser. It's important to generate those funds to pass out to candidates.

Pemberton: It's very, very critical to help the public service of road commissions because they stay on the cutting edge of what's happening in the Legislature and the policies that could either help or harm road commissions. It's important to stay informed of those things and be an active person.

Ely: I would say if you are interested in having good roads, then you absolutely need to become a member of Roads+™. This is important to improve the quality of roads. We're the ones who get it done.

Why did you become a member of Roads+™?

Hulka: There wasn't anyone from the Muskegon area involved prior to me. I had been an elected official for 17 years, so I was familiar with the process and the importance of becoming involved. Here you can influence legislation.

Pemberton: I believed strongly in CRA and believed that we needed a strong association and a strong presence in the Legislature. I wanted to try to enhance and protect the public service of road commissions.

Ely: For me, it was nonpolitical. I believe roads are nonpolitical, and I have a passion for good roads. I travel the state of Michigan and other states and see the conditions of roads. Other states are improving, and I wanted to do my part to build better roads in Michigan as well.



"I would hope that everyone could learn to get involved politically; we live and die by it."

– Jeff Ely,

Roads+™ trustee,
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What have you learned about local road policy as a member of Roads+™ ? What do you hope others will learn?

Hulka: What I hope others would learn is that they have a chance to be elected themselves or interact and interject into the procedure of making legislation. They may find it satisfying that they're able to work on something that benefits new law and benefits the roads.

Pemberton: I was always a part of producing local road policy. I learned that a strong County Road Association is good for the traveling public. We try to keep people informed on issues that are critical to us and explain the reasons why. You have to be involved in public policy and keep at it. Never quit.



“Never quit. I hope others learn that it’s important to be involved even if it’s just serving as a member. Be involved, be engaged in what’s going on. We can never let our guard down,”

– John Pemberton , past Roads+™ chair

I hope others learn that it’s important to be involved even if it’s just serving as a member. Be involved, be engaged in what’s going on. We can never let our guard down.

Ely: I would hope that everyone could learn to get involved politically; we live and die by it. We depend on taxpayers’

money, so it’s important to make your voice heard and campaign for it. We need to speak up and hold our politicians accountable for our roads. If a politician runs on a roads platform, we want to make sure we’re making changes and they’re making improvements like they said they would. **CRA**

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The Road Commission of Kalamazoo County celebrated National Safety Zone Awareness Week on a Zoom call.



COUNTY ROAD AGENCIES ZOOM AHEAD WITH VIRTUAL MEETINGS

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pajamas?**

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meetings platform.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant big changes, and people around the world have embraced technology to bridge gaps in communication in the age of social distancing.

Founded in 2011, Zoom has taken off within the last few months. People use the technology to catch up with friends, check in with loved ones and, in many organizations, run internal and external virtual meetings. Road agencies are no exception.

"These times have shown organizations like ours, and the public, that Zoom is a helpful alternative," **Emily Kizer**, communications manager at **Washtenaw County Road Commission (WCRC)**, said. "Virtual meetings can be viable tools for our toolbox. We have been fortunate that our board and commissioners have been so open to this idea. We've received very positive feedback from them."

WCRC has used Zoom for board meetings, board working sessions and public construction information meetings.

The **Road Commission of Kalamazoo County (RCKC)** has taken advantage of the technology for the same purposes. According to **Elli Blonde**, RCKC communications administrator, Zoom has pushed RCKC to further engage with technology.

"Zoom has allowed us to not only continue to conduct our business, but also improve our transparency along the way," Blonde said. "Our meetings are now easier to access for the public than ever before. We're reaching a wider range of residents and road users by integrating technology in our regular practices."

"We find Zoom to be valuable because it allows us to stream directly with a variety of platforms, including the local cable station Public Media Network (PMN). PMN used to come on site and record our meetings, but now they can directly tap into the meetings from another physical location," Blonde said.

RCKC primarily uses Zoom for its external meetings and Microsoft Teams for its internal meetings, with the exception of an all-employee meeting. For this meeting, Zoom allows those without computer access to call in.



Raise your hand

Both Blonde and Kizer said virtual meetings allow those who may not otherwise ask questions in person to engage in the meeting via the "Chat" or "Raise Hand" features.

"Virtual meetings allow for more controlled dialogue," Blonde said. "It's engaging a wider range of users."

"Using Zoom and Microsoft Teams has fostered a new level of engagement with the public, stakeholders and employees alike. The increased accessibility means an even higher level of transparency as a government agency, too," Blonde said.

RCKC developed a virtual meeting protocol document that has since been adopted by other municipal agencies. Blonde said it has proven helpful in setting expectations with the participants in the meetings.

For county road agencies who haven't yet taken the plunge, Blonde offers encouraging words.

"Utilizing virtual meeting spaces wasn't second nature for all of us," she said. "Getting the team up and running with

Five steps to a successful virtual meeting

1. **Have a plan.** All good meetings start with a plan. Prepare a script ahead of time. This is different than your agenda. If possible, get two staff members to run the meeting: One person handles the technology and the other moderates the meeting. Another good idea? Line up a back-up speaker. You never know when technical difficulties may occur, so having an extra person on call to speak is a good idea.
2. **Practice. It's a cliché for a reason: Practice makes perfect – or as close as you can get!** Spend time setting up a practice call with your staff. Run through your script and practice the transitions between speakers. It's important to be familiar with the technology before the meeting starts.
3. **Develop protocol and outline it at the beginning of the meeting.** Come up with appropriate rules for your virtual meetings. For an example, check out RCKC's protocol, which can be found in the Tool Crib in the MyCRA section of CRA's website. Before each meeting starts, explain how participants can use the "Chat" or "Raise Hand" features to submit questions.
4. **Use your virtual meeting platform's moderation tools.** Take advantage of Zoom's useful features – the ability to mute and unmute participants and prevent others from sharing video, among other features. Zoom offers tutorials on its website so you can learn how to use these tools.
5. **Integrate Zoom into your in-person meetings.** Moving forward, it's important for your county road agency to consider a virtual option for public meetings. After all, that'll make it more accessible to many users!

equipment, learning how to operate, getting meetings scheduled and adhering to our agreed-upon meeting protocols all took some time."

Moving forward, RCKC and WCRC plan to keep Zoom as part of their

public meeting strategy, even after the pandemic subsides.

"It's a great tool to have if you can get it to work for your county," Kizer said. "Virtual meetings aren't going away anytime soon." **CRA**



Washtenaw County Road Commission's April 7 board meeting



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Notice requirements remain hot topic on Michigan Supremes docket

Jennifer J. Henderson, General Counsel for the Road Commission for Oakland County



Once again, the Michigan Supreme Court is putting statutory notice requirements under its microscope. Our last Legal Issues Corner for *Crossroads* detailed the issues in *Menard v. Imig, et. al.* (Docket No. 161008), a case against the Macomb County Department of Roads.

The latest update: Although the Michigan Supreme Court denied to hear the matter per its July 1st order, the Court is on track to hear the consolidated cases of *Pearce v. Eaton County Road Commission*, (Docket No. 158069) and *Brugger v. Midland County*

Board of Road Commissioners, (Docket No. 158304).

The *Pearce* and *Brugger* orders direct the parties to brief “(1) whether *Streng v. Board of Mackinac County Road Commissioners*, 315 Mich App 449 (2016), *lv den* 500 Mich 919 (2016), was correctly decided, and if so (2) whether *Streng* ‘clearly established a new principle of law’ and thereby satisfied the threshold question for retroactivity set forth in *Pohutski v. City of Allen Park*, 465 Mich 675, 696 (2002)...and if so (3) whether *Streng* should be applied retroactively under the ‘three factor test’ set forth in *Pohutski*.”

Amicus briefs were due to the Court in mid-August. Given the issues to be addressed, these cases are significant to county road agencies going forward.

At the CRA Legal Issues Forum (LIF) held on March 10, we reviewed many other significant cases, included *Menard v. Imig, et. al.* and held a robust roundtable discussion on the issues raised in the case law and faced by road agencies every day.

In other news from the LIF, plans for the **December Law Symposium** for CRA members are underway. [CRA](#)



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EVENT CALENDAR

WHAT'S ON, WHAT'S OFF

CRA has announced that all large, indoor Association events for the remainder of 2020 have been cancelled due to the ongoing pandemic and associated event restrictions. CRA's Executive Committee convened July 16 to discuss cancelling the events out of an abundance of caution and with the overall well-being of CRA members in mind.

CRA is in the process of planning new ways to deliver information to members including virtual options.

➡ **Cancelled events include:**

- ➔ 2020 Finance & Human Resources Seminar;
- ➔ Unfunded Liabilities Workshop;
- ➔ Northern Conference –
Cancelled by NMARC Board; and
- ➔ Superintendents Seminar –
Cancelled by SAM Board.

➡ **Alternate formats are being prepared for:**

- ➔ 2020 PR Workshop; and
- ➔ December Legal Issues Symposium.

Please be on the lookout for more information from CRA on next year's events. We can't wait to see you all as soon as possible at our next in-person event!

– CRA staff

For details on all CRA events, visit www.micountyroads.org/events.

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COUNTY ROAD AGENCIES TAKE WINTER MAINTENANCE TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL

Before we know it, snow will begin to fly. County road agencies are at the ready to clear the roads, and provide levels of service for the best possible experience for motorists. Listen in as three county road agencies share their thoughts on levels of service for 2020-2021.

THE POLICY:



Mary Samuels, manager-director, Mason County Road Commission: “Roads used to be plowed seven days a week, but with budget constraints, we cut back to no weekend plowing unless there’s a storm with at least four inches on the ground. If necessary, we plow on Sundays so people can go to work and school on Monday. Road conditions vary from one part of the county to the other. One part could get six to eight inches and another part could just get a dusting.

“It’s all about temperature, how much snow falls and what type of snowfall. It makes all the difference. Of course, on our state trunk line we are always required to keep it plowed seven days a week and to monitor the conditions. On county roads, we use sand, salt and sometimes 50/50. It depends on the type of snowfall we’re going to have.”



Darrell Cass, PE, engineer-manager, Menominee County Road Commission: “We strive to ensure that our primary year-round roads are cleared first and then move on to our lower volume roads. It depends on the severity of the snow event.

“For our county road system, we always use a sand and salt mixture. Sometimes we can get by with using just sand for hills and curves. We also plow and maintain roads for MDOT. They have specific performance goals, so we calibrate our trucks to certain salt application rates that are specified for the state system.”



Mark Timmer, managing director, Oceana County Road Commission: “Our priorities are primary paved roads, and then local paved and gravel roads, and subdivisions.

“There is no snow removal on weekends on county roads when the snow is less than three inches. If there are three inches or more, we’ll plow primary roads. If there are four inches or more, we’ll also plow local roads on the weekend. But if there is drifting snow or icy conditions, we’ll come in. If it’s Sunday afternoon and it’s still snowing, we’ll call workers in for an early start on Monday morning.

“We maintain a little under 1,100 miles of county roads and also state trunk line US 31 and several M routes and business routes. Our state roads are priority-one in the winter. We run a night shift so we have 24-hour coverage on state roads. On county roads, our level of service is that we’ll get an early start if we get significant snowfall. It’s a call-in situation on weekends; we come in if there are three inches or more.”

THE TECHNOLOGY:

Samuels: “This year we’re debuting SnowPaths, a real-time snowplow tracking program. Residents can enter their address into the application, and it will tell them when a truck has plowed their area. It’s similar to our GPS system in that it allows us to view the history of the trucks.

“We are also purchasing left wing snowplow wings for state highways. They’re a big timesaver – much more efficient.”

Cass: “Our levels of service have improved because of better technology in trucks. They now have increased capacity to haul salt and sand. There used to be three separate operations: graders would scrape ice and snow, then salt and sand was added, and then the graders would go back and open up the shoulders. With today’s technology, we can do all three operations in one pass.

“Our trucks are mounted with front snowplows, which clear snow initially. If there is any ice or snowpack, we use underbody scraper blades. And then the truck can use a sand and salt mixture or pure road salt to keep the roadway conditions clear. If there’s significant snowfall, we go back through with wings and get the shoulders at the same time.



Oceana County anti-ice truck, fabricated by OCRC mechanics.



Oceana County salt/sand spreader controller.

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Menominee County



Oceana County underbody scraper with ice blade.

“One of the things we just implemented is a GPS tracking system on our snowplows. It helps with operations and efficiency, keeping track of operations from a safety standpoint. If a truck breaks down, we know exactly where they are.”

Timmer: “We are doing things more efficiently with side wings on all the new trucks. We’re able to run through a whole route and clear the lane and shoulder at the same time, and trucks can plow and sand at the same time. In the old days, you would plow and then sand, but now we try to do it at the same time.

“We’re pretty rural, so we don’t need small trucks for some of the tighter roads. We tend to buy larger trucks, so if we need to put down sand and/or salt, we can go farther before having to load them. We have a couple trucks fitted with left wings, and when we stagger two trucks on the roadway, we can do the left lane and left shoulder, and the truck following plows the right lane and right shoulder. Before we had a left wing, a truck would have to come back and plow the shoulder. This saves a lot of time.

“We’ll also use ice blades on gravel roads. Gravel roads can turn icy, and ice blades will cut grooves into the ice. If the ice melts, there are still grooves there, which gives drivers traction and helps them stay on the road.”

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THE COMMUNICATIONS:

Samuels: “To communicate our levels of service, we have our snow policy on our website, and we post updates on plowing status. The SnowPaths program is also helpful in that sense.”

Cass: “If we are using a newer technology, we communicate that during township and board meetings. We have bimonthly township meetings to communicate what the road commission is doing as far as levels of service.”

Timmer: “In the past, we’ve notified the public about levels through the newspaper. Now we share news on Facebook. Our snow policy is also posted on our website.”



Road salt at Oceana County.

THE RELATIONSHIPS:

Samuels: “We started meeting with township officials last fall on a regular basis to discuss any issues they may have and keep them up-to-date on what we are doing. This has helped improve communications with the townships and develop a good relationship.

“We’ve also implemented a 10-year strategic plan and sent copies to the townships. It gives them the PASER rating, which shows them the conditions of roads, and it shows our maintenance plan for each township this year and over the next ten years. We’re looking forward to the future, so they know what to expect.”

Cass: “We clear snow and sand roads for a lot of townships. We also help villages and cities in Menominee County, where we provide them with materials such as sand and salt. If for any reason villages or cities need help, we help clear the roads, too. Other agencies we work with are central dispatch, law enforcement and state police to communicate road conditions and road closures as well as assist in emergency management.”

Timmer: “In township subdivisions, we’ll sometimes hire a subcontractor with smaller pickup trucks and plows. If snowfall continues, we would have to go back and plow major roads, which decreases the amount of time we’d have to plow subdivisions. Partnering with subcontractors allows us to provide a better quality of service.” **CRA**



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State Contract road agencies: Working with MDOT to reduce adjustments in Commission Audit



*Melissa Williams, Finance Director, Road Commission for Oakland County
and chair, CRA Finance & Human Resources Committee*



As county road agencies that contract with the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) for trunkline maintenance pay down their under-funded pension and OPEB liabilities in accordance with the Protecting Local Government and Benefits Act (PA 202, 2017) and buy new equipment, MDOT is experiencing an increase in audit adjustments. Earlier information sharing will help the state recognize these adjustments prior to the annual contract review.

For FY 2019, the last year of reviews completed by the Office of Commission Audit (OCA), MDOT had \$10 million in adjustment costs among local contract agencies with a budget of \$6 million to cover these costs. While CRA has been urging MDOT to plan for its share of contract counties' liability paydown, there is a way that counties can help make the state anticipate these extra costs.

Recapping. PA 202 requires road agencies to work toward funding

pension plans at 60% and retiree healthcare trusts at 40%. Many road commissions fall short of these funding targets and are required to implement a funding plan to bring their plans into compliance. To satisfy the law, and with new funding coming in, many commissions have increased their contributions and purchased new equipment.

Both types of increased spending can affect trunkline contract review adjustments because fringe and equipment rates are typically set in the prior contract year and brought into the next year with the assumption that fluctuation will be minimal.

This was not the case in FY 2018 when PA 202 took effect.

Road commissions can help reduce adjustments encountered in an OCA review, but the fix won't come from language in the contract. It can only come through budgeting and careful monitoring of expenditures, and information sharing with MDOT.

If a road commission foresees that an increase in the fringe rate will bring the amount billed to MDOT for trunkline expenditures closer to the actual amount spent on fringes, it can increase the fringe rate either before or during the contract year. Notice must be given to the MDOT Transportation Service Center (TSC) explaining the reason for change.

The same holds true for equipment rates: Give notice to the TSC detailing the amount of increase and an explanation of why.

If the increase in rates could result in a budget deficit, contact your TSC to discuss the concern before submitting notice of a rate change. This will give MDOT the choice to either find the money in the current year holdback or wait until the review adjustment is calculated later.

Careful monitoring of expenditures and working as a partner with MDOT can help reduce these adjustments. Reducing the adjustments could result in more money allocated to contract budgets.

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Salt reduction – not just good for your diet: County road agencies salt use over the years

Roads and French fries have one thing in common: Too much salt, and you've overdone it.

It's a balancing act county road agencies face every winter. With safety concerns, contractual requirements and budgetary constraints, salting can often be a challenge.

"We use as little salt as we can to protect the budget and the environment and make the roads as safe as possible," **Craig Bryson**, APR, senior manager of communications and public information at **Road Commission for Oakland County** (RCOC), said. "We walk a fine line between those two competing needs of road safety and salt usage. We can't eliminate salt use. Human life is part of this equation as well."

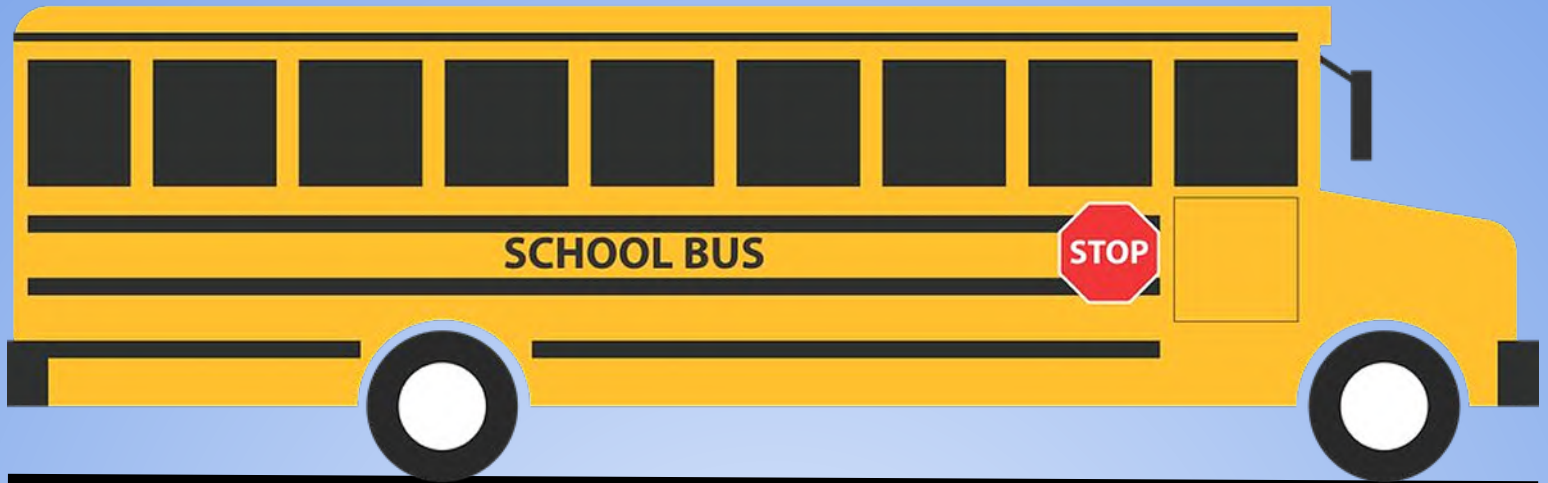
RCOC, which maintains the largest county road system in the state, has refined its processes and equipment leading to a 30% salt use reduction in the last decade. The road agency previously used about 92,000 tons of salt per year, but now they budget for about 60,000 tons annually.

Similarly, the **Road Commission for Montcalm County** (RCMC), a small rural county, is focused on reducing its environmental impact. RCMC uses 6,000 tons of salt annually. Salt usage dropped from roughly 12,000 to 15,000 tons per year. RCMC's commitment to the strategic use of calcium chloride has allowed the agency to reduce its salt usage this dramatically.



RCOC trucks line up for action.

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CHANGING SALT USE

Applying liquid calcium chloride for anti-icing

Each year, RCMC increases its use of anti-icing. It's allowed them to reduce their salt tonnage use by half in the last ten years. Cost effective and practical, calcium chloride is RCMC's go-to product today.

"We can pretreat county primary and state highways with a thin layer of calcium chloride the day before a predicted storm," said **Mark Christensen**, RCMC superintendent-manager.

"It prevents hardpack snow and ice from bonding to the pavement. It's an opportunity to put a barrier in between. When we do this, we use substantially less salt the next day."

In winter 2021-22, RCMC will partner with MDOT to pilot an all-liquid snow removal route.

Pretreating with brine

Another pretreatment tactic is brine application. One of the methods RCOC uses to reduce salt usage is pre-wetting. By spraying brine onto the salt first, the road agency can significantly reduce salt use. According to Bryson, liquid brine weighs down the salt, making it more



RCMC pre-wetting road.

likely to stay on the road than bounce off the pavement. The salt is activated in the air after being sprayed with brine and before it contacts the icy road. This allows it to more quickly start to work.

Calibrating vehicles

Calibrating salt spreaders annually helps both RCOC and RCMC reduce their salt use.

"All of our salt trucks have ground speed control computer systems," Christensen said. "All are calibrated so we use an accurate amount of salt for each location. We'll do one application on the center line so it can melt out to the sides."



RCMC road salt truck.

ALTERNATIVES TO ROAD SALT:

YOU'RE PUTTING WHAT ON MY ROADS?

Road salt isn't the only material that can be used on roads, though alternative materials are often much more costly and have other "down" sides. Take a look in your fridge – chances are some of its contents are being talked about for road use!

Beet Juice



Cheese Brine



Pickle Juice



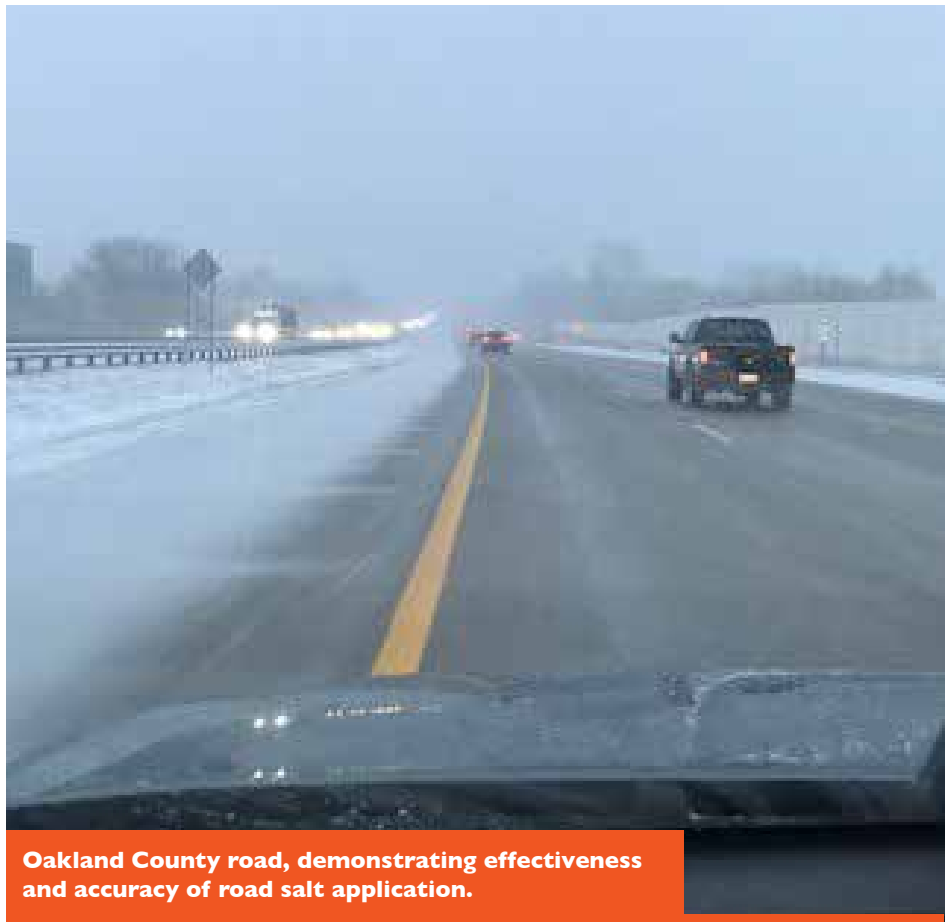
Utilizing innovative technology

Advancements in technology have transformed salt use over the years.

“Historically, when salt was spread, gravity forced the salt out of the back of the truck and spread it out,” Bryson said. “There was little control on how much was distributed. Now we use automatic spreaders, and that has made a big difference over time. They’re powered by a conveyor belt and other mechanisms that control how much salt goes out.”

“A decade ago, the spreader would continue to spread salt at a stop sign, and there would be piles of salt in the intersection. In recent years, we’ve added spreaders that reduce the spread rate when the truck slows and stops. It’s another good way to reduce the waste of salt.”

RCOC also uses an Epoke® bulk spreader, a de-icing device attached to the back of a salt truck that allows for broader spreading of salt across two or



Oakland County road, demonstrating effectiveness and accuracy of road salt application.

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three lanes. These high-tech trucks allow the driver to switch between rock salt, rock salt-and-brine, or just brine, based on the conditions.

Similarly, RCMC uses trucks with both liquid and granular carrying capacity. The salt won't bounce because adding liquid to the rock salt creates a sticky paste, reducing application rates because the salt stays in place.

Monitoring timing and weather conditions

Monitoring the weather forecast is crucial in determining the appropriate ice control material and application rate. RCMC pays careful attention to weather conditions, which helps them determine when and how much salt is necessary in specific locations.

"We try to salt when the weather allows us the best value for your dollar," Christensen said. "We really look at environmental factors when we make the decision to salt – what the road temperature's doing, if it's going to be sunny later, etc. It helps us determine the optimal time to salt, so we can do it when it makes sense. Bottom line: Let the environmental factors help you determine when to apply road salt."

PROTECTING RESIDENTS, REDUCING IMPACT

County road agencies always have the motoring public in mind. For example, in urban counties, often the agencies schedule their salt trucks to allow a complete covering of all major commuter routes prior to rush hour. This assures the roads are open and reasonably safe for morning travel.

"We consider ourselves good stewards of the environment and the road," Bryson said. "We are conscious and aware of the impact we have on the environment. We're also stewards of public money, so we want to reduce the cost of what we do without reducing efficiency, and we want to maintain the safety of roads with less salt." **CRA**



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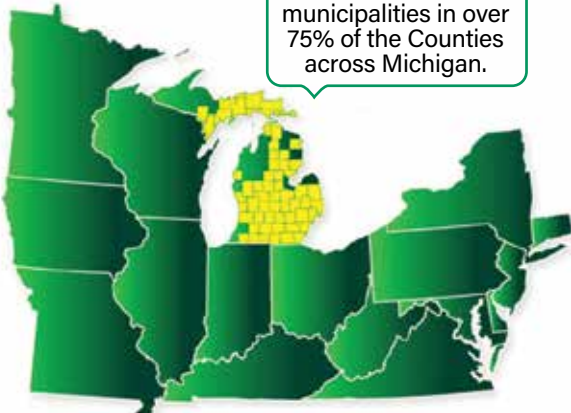
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ote for Mary!

Sholander running as incumbent on MERS board

Mary Sholander, director of finance and administration, Marquette County Road Commission, is running as incumbent for a seat of the MERS board of directors.



This May, **Mary Sholander**, director of finance and administration at the **Marquette County Road Commission (MCRC)**, was appointed to the board of the Michigan Employees Retirement System (MERS). County road agencies haven't had a rep on this board for a long time – if ever. And given the challenges roads have with PA 2020, CRA was thrilled! Sholander will run for the seat at MERS's virtual annual conference.

Crossroads sat down with Sholander to discuss her passion for county road agency finance, her contributions as a member of the MERS board and how she hopes to effect change.

3 THINGS Mary Sholander wants you to know:

It's important for county road agencies to have a seat at the table.

We are very different than many of the municipalities that are MERS members. Our funding is very specific, what we can do with our funding is very specific, and how we're treated statutorily compared to most municipalities is sometimes very different as well. Having a seat at the table provides MERS a chance to know who we are, not just an opportunity for us as county road agencies to know who they are.

I think the importance lies in understanding each other. Having an opportunity to represent road commissions at the MERS board level from somebody who has been around for a while and knows our funding, knows our benefits administration, and knows some of the challenges road agencies are up against is key to growing a mutual understanding between us.

Practical financial experience helps build connections.

At the Marquette County Road Commission, I have played a large role in administering our MERS plan for more than 20 years. We've made significant changes to our plan design in that time.

I've worked closely through the collective bargaining process to educate the union, our board and management how changes would affect our overall bottom line, our unfunded liabilities, and how to move forward providing future employees with a plan that makes sense.

Serving on the MERS board will provide a better understanding of the MERS investment priorities and governing policies. I know investment of employer funds with MERS has been a hot topic

THE SHOLANDER FILE

Road Commission experience

Started with MCRC in 1997 when she was hired as the payroll/cost accountant. Promoted to current position in 2007.

CRA experience

Chair of the CRA
Canvassing Committee

Past chair of the Finance & Human Resources Committee

Active member in the Great Lakes CRA District Council

CRASIF Experience

County Road Association Self-Insurance Fund trustee since 2009

Currently serving her second term as CRASIF board chair

Related experience

Active member of Upper Peninsula Finance & Human Resource Association

Secretary-Treasurer of the Upper Peninsula Road Builders Association



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for road agencies. Being a member of the County Road Association Self-Insurance Fund (CRASIF) board, I understand that the function of *investment earnings* relative to funding a worker's comp. program, liability pool or a retirement program is very different from funding the overall road agency.

I can use my experience in finance to understand what MERS' investing philosophy is, contribute to how that might be changed to benefit road agencies, if possible, and to be able to communicate the MERS perspective effectively to county road agencies.

Advocacy is the key to change.

At the end of the day, I hope to create a

better understanding between the two groups – to be a bridge. As with any Board position, serving as a MERS board member comes with responsibilities to the MERS plan. It would be unprofessional for me not to accept those responsibilities respectfully. But I'm also a road agency person and I think that I can be a good liaison and help us understand each other better.

Should I be elected to continue serving, I would work to identify items that matter to county road agencies as they come up, highlighting where our challenges lie, and communicating how these challenges affect those of us who are MERS members. Examples of these items include designation as

a non-primary versus primary unit of government for reporting and the fact that revenue sharing is not a part of our funding sources.

MERS may not be aware of these things when decisions are made and I would like to help them understand who we are, where our money comes from and advocate for what they can do to help us be successful in our pension administration.

The road commissions have a great network and are quick to identify areas of concern for each other as they arise. It's my hope I can be a voice at the MERS board level sharing and expressing our concerns, while working to identify solutions. [CRA](#)

With the MERS Annual Conference going virtual, road commissions that are MERS members should watch their email for a ballot in September.



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New recruitment campaign unites county road agencies in search for next generation of road warriors

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COUNTIES

You know how great it is to work at a county road agency. So help spread the word! The County Road Association (CRA) has a new recruitment campaign to help you do just that.

At the 2020 Highway Conference, CRA launched a campaign designed to help county road agencies recruit the next generation of road workers – or Road Warriors.

“It’s a really easy-to-use, one-stop shop for agencies to get everything they need to fill important positions,” **Alex Doty**, communications administrator at **Ottawa County Road Commission (OCRC)**, said. “It’s a one-size-fits-all approach that will help everyone.”

CRA’s PR Committee first started exploring the idea in 2018 and officially launched a workgroup comprised of Doty; **Craig Bryson**, senior manager of communications and public information at **Road Commission for Oakland County**; **Emily Kizer**, communications manager at **Washtenaw County Road Commission**, and Dustin Earley and Denise Donohue of CRA.



From left: Craig Bryson, Alex Doty and Emily Kizer present at CRA's Highway Conference.

According to Doty, recruiting the next generation of Road Warriors is crucial to the future of county road agencies.

“Young people have a lot of fresh ideas, and they’re passionate about what they do,” he said. “They’re just starting out, so they’re looking for longevity in their careers. They see these jobs as a destination, so to speak.

“At OCRC, those innovative ideas have paid dividends and saved us money. These new workers can be a real value to an organization. If you can get a young, passionate mind, teach them the skills and expertise, and give them an outlet to do that work, it creates amazing results,” Doty said. “If you

recruit these young people and get them on board, they can really make a difference at a road agency, and we value that in Ottawa County.”

GOING VIRTUAL

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, several career fairs have gone virtual. Recently, CRA presented the new campaign at the Michigan Infrastructure and Transportation Association (MITA) virtual hiring fair. Twenty companies presented, and over 70 job seekers attended the innovative two-session event.

“With the hiring fair, we were able to reach out all over the state, cast a wider net and get people excited about careers



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Alex Doty, OCRC communications administrator, presents the recruiting brochure.

in this industry,” Ken Bertolini, MITA director of work force development, said. “We had a high number of people with experience attend, and these companies can teach them the soft skills needed for the job.”

MITA provided attendees’ resumes to the presenting companies, and attendees were encouraged to reach out to these potential employers. CRA directed attendees to its Jobs webpage at micountyroads.org/roadwarrior, actively recruiting young people to apply for county road agency jobs.

With the recruitment campaign, Doty hopes road agencies gain a sense of the unified message of what makes their jobs unique.

“I hope the campaign brings new ideas and thinking that create cool results at agencies,” he said. “Young people have great ideas, and to get them to change some practices that others had not thought about would be a great asset. I look forward to seeing what people can bring to the table.

“The recruitment campaign is a win-win for everyone. Road agencies find talented people, and these successful people come on board. They enjoy the work they do and the hands-on, positive impact they can have on a county community.”

A WORD ABOUT JOB TITLES:

Equally important as recruiting itself, job titles tell a story about a position’s role in the organization. CRA’s Finance and Human Resources Committee came up with new job titles for county road agency positions, which will better appeal to young job seekers. Want to see what they came up with? Visit CRA’s new Jobs page at micountyroads.org/roadwarrior/.

NOW IT’S YOUR TURN!

START YOUR RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN.

What materials are available to me?

- Brochures
- Facebook ads
- Stand-up banners
- Booth backdrops
- Branded tablecloths
- Horizontal banners
- YouTube video
- Booth map/planner

How do I start?

- Share your job postings on CRA’s newly-redesigned Jobs page. Visit <https://micountyroads.org/post-a-job/> to get started.
- A job fair is the obvious way to get out in front of job-seekers and let them know how cool it is to work at a county road agency. Deck out your booth with a variety of great promotional materials and props from your sign shops.
- Use social media to promote road agency jobs with the Facebook ads. Link your posts to CRA’s job listing webpage.
- Promote road agency jobs with CRA’s recruitment video. Access it on CRA’s YouTube channel and share it on social media. The video highlights the stories of young road agency workers, encouraging the younger generation to get involved at county road agencies.

Get the CRA job kit in the Tool Crib in MyCRA.



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Key transitions at...

Road Commissions and Departments →

Gloria Llamas has been appointed commissioner for the **Washtenaw County Road Commission**.

Michelle McCabe is now director of finance and human resources for the **Muskegon County Road Commission**.

Jo Ann McCollum has been appointed commissioner for the **Washtenaw County Road Commission**.

Brendan Mullane has been hired as manager for the **Leelanau County Road Commission**.

Andrew Nordstrom has been hired as purchasing manager for the **Kent County Road Commission**.

Wade Williams has been appointed commissioner for the **Emmet County Road Commission**.

Mile Marker →

Mary Wiegerink, assistant director of finance for the Kent County Road Commission, has retired after 31 years.

Larry Williams, commissioner for the **Emmet County Road Commission**, has retired after 12 years.

In Memoriam →

On July 15, 2020, **Fabian LaTocha**, commissioner for the **Emmet County Road Commission**, passed away. He served on the Emmet County Road Commission board from 1993-1998.

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¹Sim, M., S.C. Ashmore, & S. Alavi (2000). TechBrief: WestTrack Track Roughness, Fuel Consumption, and Maintenance Costs (FHWA-RD-00-052). Federal Highway Administration, McLean, Virginia.

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