

On the Road

County Road Systems in Kansas

By Norm Bowers, Local Road Engineer and Lisa Harris of KU Transportation Center

Note: This article was published in the June edition of the KU Transportation Center quarterly newsletter which goes to road departments in Kansas. Since road systems are of interest to a wider audience it is reprinted here with a few edits.

Responsibility for maintaining township roads in Kansas can be handled in a few different ways, each bringing plusses and minuses to counties. This article will describe the three road systems enabled by statute, and some thoughts about those systems by county road officials that have worked under them.

In Kansas there are three types of road systems for roads outside cities.

NonCounty Unit Road System: The NonCounty Unit Road System is also called the *County-Township System*. In this system the County maintains the main traveled roads, which includes the county federal aid routes and those roads designated by the county commission as routes designed primarily for the movement of traffic between different areas of the county. The townships maintain the local roads that are not within a city. The county maintains all the bridges as well as those culverts with a waterway opening of 25 square feet or larger.

Prior to 1917 the townships maintained all the roads, but since 1917 the County-Township System is the road system unless the county has elected to use one of the other road systems.

There are 35 counties in Kansas with this road system. Funding for the county roads is on a countywide tax basis with all property in the county having the same mill levy for county roads and bridges. Township road maintenance is provided by the townships and is funded from a mill levy on property within the township. Townships do not collect property tax for property within a city.

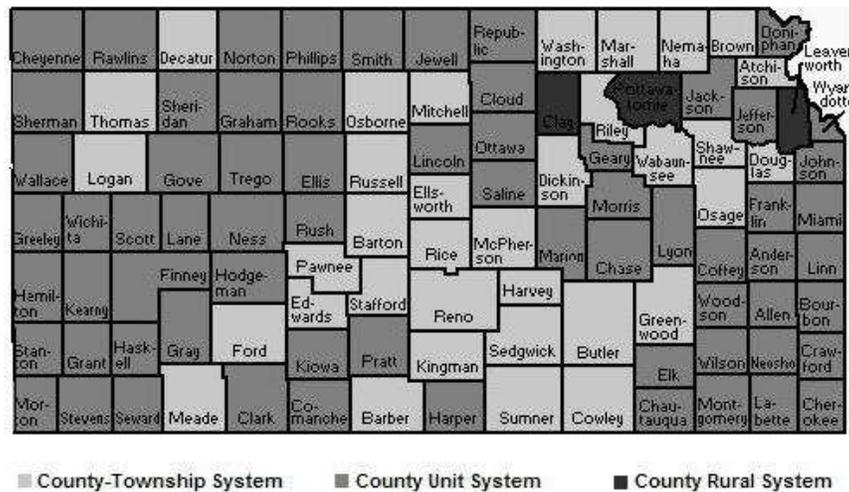
County Unit Road System: In the County Unit Road System the county is responsible for maintaining all the public roads outside the cities. The townships have no road maintenance responsibilities. The County Unit System was authorized by state law in 1917, but it takes action by the county to take over the township roads.

There are 65 counties in Kansas that have this road system. Funding for all the county roads is on a countywide tax basis with all property in the county having the same mill levy for county roads and bridges. This results in a somewhat higher mill levy for city residents than with the County-Township System, as the city residents have to pay taxes for maintaining all the roads in the county, including the old township roads. This road system is authorized by KSA 68-515b.

General County Rural Highway System. The General County Rural Highway System, or *County-Rural System* is similar to the County Unit System in that the county maintains all the public roads outside the cities, and the townships have no road maintenance responsibilities. In this system, however, the county has to have two separate funds, one for the main traveled county roads, and one fund for what were previously township roads. The County-Rural System was authorized by state law in 1970.

There are just three counties in Kansas with this road system. Funding for the county roads is on a countywide tax basis with all property in the county having the same mill levy for county roads and bridges. Funding for former township roads comes from a mill levy on property within the townships. In this system city residents do not pay taxes for maintenance of the former township roads. The county has to keep track of expenses on their two road systems, and must ensure that the correct amount is spent on county roads and township roads. This road system is authorized by KSA 68-591.

**Road Maintenance Systems in Kansas, by County
As of July 2008**



Source: Kansas DOT Bureau of Local Projects

Trends: The map illustrates the type of road system in each county. The following table illustrates the trend in conversion of the County-Township System to another road system.

Trends in Road Systems

Decade	Counties adopting County Unit	Counties adopting County Rural
1910's	2	
1920's	16	
1930's	7	
1940's	26	
1950's	5	
1960's	4	
1970's	7	1
1980's	0	1
1990's	0	
2000-2008	0	1

The last county that converted to a County Unit System was Coffey County in 1979. It appears that there is currently a reluctance to convert to a County Unit System as this will increase the taxes for residents inside of cities.

Here are some comments about these systems from three road and bridge professionals who are (or have) been responsible for maintaining both county and township roads.

Steve Liby. Steve is road and bridge administrator for Clay County, a rural county with a few small cities. In 2001, Clay County changed from a County-Township System to a County-Rural System. One of the factors contributing to the decision was that 8 out of their 18 townships had already contracted their road-work to the county (with county approval). As a result, county road operators were dead-heading as they went from one area to another, which was inefficient and costly.

The county held some preliminary discussions with its cities to assess support for changing to a County Unit System. It did not go well. "It was clear that the cities would vote it down," said Liby. So the county decided to pursue changing to a rural road system.

Liby favored the change to take over maintenance of the township roads, to provide better service to citizens in very rural areas and to make more efficient use of the county's vehicles and resources. These objectives are being realized. Another thing that has been realized, however, is a big headache for the county.

"The County-Rural System is a bookkeeping nightmare," said Liby. "Our employees need to keep track of the time they spend on township roads, and we bill that and all other equipment and material expenses for roadwork done in the townships

to our township fund. We bill the fund monthly, to stay on top things,” he said. “I don’t like it.”

There are advantages to the new system, though, said Liby. Some townships, especially those with the fewest residents, are getting much better services. The county is also getting more utility out of its investments. “We used to have 25 motorgraders between the county and the townships combined; now we get by with 12,” said Liby.

Township roads also benefit from having access to more and better equipment to work on them. “Most townships had just a motorgrader, and maybe a rubber tire loader. Townships were using contractors to haul rock and road materials. Now we do all that,” said Liby.

Which system would Liby prefer if he had a choice? County Unit. It provides the same benefits to the community with much less hassle. Plus, cities would help support the roads in the county, which Liby thinks is fair. “Rural residents travel on those roads to get to businesses in the cities,” he said.

Liby’s advice for communities considering switching from a County-Township System: “Go for County Unit, and do your homework. Hold meetings everywhere—Lions, American Legion, wherever you can, and have your facts and figures in hand.” Liby noted that persons who are not natural public speakers, like him, will have to get over it. “You just have to get out there and do it,” he said. He also noted that your county commissioners need to support you “110 percent.”

Leu Lowrey, public works director for Pottawatomie County, has had experience under all three systems in different counties. Given a choice, he would prefer the County-Township System. “Frankly, because it’s much less work for the county,” he said.

Lowrey noted that under the County-Township System, with townships maintaining their own roads, counties have fewer miles to maintain and they don’t have the same kinds of drainage problems to contend with.

Lowrey said the townships have fared better under the current County-Rural System, except for perhaps one county that contains the Jeffrey Power Plant and contributes half the all the township tax valuation combined. “They are not so pleased that their valuation gets pooled with the others to maintain roads in all the townships now,” said Lowrey. “That’s understandable,” he said.

With the County-Rural System, the county has had to hire more staff and motorgrader operators to handle all the roads.

Lowrey echoed Liby’s comments on the complicated paperwork under the County-Rural Highway System. And in Pottawatomie County, it’s even more complicated because the roads are organized into maintenance districts, sometimes with parts of several townships in one district. “The district boundaries don’t match up with township boundaries,” said Lowrey. Boundaries are based on obstacles to travel,

like rail lines or rivers, rather than political boundaries. They create efficiencies in maintenance services, but folks notice when some of the roads in their township are maintained sooner than other ones.

Lowrey thinks that the chances of a county changing to a County Unit System is “not likely” these days. “Cities are just not going to vote to make that happen, he said. People are better informed these days, and they will not want to see their taxes increase to pay for maintenance in the rural areas.”

Leon Hobson, director of public works for Riley County, has had experience under two systems—the County-Rural System in Pottawatomie County (before Lowrey) and the County-Township System in McPherson and Riley Counties. Like Lowrey, he prefers the County-Township System.

“With the township system, the rural residents have a closer relationship with the decision makers on their roads. If there are complaints, the complaints go to the township officials. We would get inundated with complaints about township roads in Pottawatomie County,” said Hobson.

Hobson pointed out that when rural township roads are maintained by the county, residents who live on those roads expect a much higher level of service—oftentimes not justified due to low traffic volumes. He thinks it makes more sense to keep the township road responsibilities with the townships.

“Township officials are aware of their roads and their budget constraints, and can communicate that more effectively than the county,” said Hobson. “When the switch was made to a County Rural System the township residents thought services should be better, because the county had lots of money. It doesn’t necessarily work that way,” he said.

Hobson echoed the headaches with keeping two different sets of books for the county and township roads. In Pottawatomie County some equipment was owned by the townships and some by the county, and all that had to be tracked separately.

Hobson noted that townships that generated the lowest taxes benefited the most with the switch. Consolidation and consistent staffing (some townships have trouble finding a grader operator) are overall benefits to the countywide systems.

Conclusion

Kansas statutes provide different options for maintaining township roads. The County-Rural System, while a good idea on paper, comes with paperwork and complaint headaches for counties that give pause.

Liby, Lowrey and Hobson each shared their own views on maintaining township roads, and their perspectives are shaped by their experiences and by the characteristics of the counties and townships they have served. Which system is best? There’s no

clear-cut answer, but, if you are considering switching from a township system to another system, we hope this article will give you some good food for thought.