

Hearths & Crafts

What's In It For Me

by Dr. Richard H. Craft

On occasion, public officials will hear a criticism that goes something like this, "I live out of town, I have a 100-foot road frontage, have my own water and sewer, I don't ask anything of anybody, and yet my taxes are going through the roof." (Try living in Orange County!). They then ask, "How can this be?" The answer is simple. You own your own home and it's that 100-foot frontage.

To get to and from your property from anyplace, you need a road, and it needs to be maintained. Your neighbors share the same need and being mobile comes at a high price. Think for a moment what this entails.

In order for your road to be kept in reasonably drive-able condition you need paid employees on the job five days a week (sometimes more when there is an emergency such as a snow-storm.) The Town of Wawarsing has 170 miles of road, the second highest in the State of New York. These roads need to be plowed, sanded, swept, patched, replaced with any number of different coatings. Ditches and culverts need to be cleaned of debris, guard rails need to be replaced, catch basins rebuilt. Grading needs to be done – as well as well as rolling and scoring pavement – and there's our one dirt road. Road signs of all descriptions need to be maintained and roadside debris such as couches, building materials need to be removed as slob homeowners "dump on the town," instead of using our landfill.

In order to make the job easier and more efficient for town employees (complete with employee benefits), equipment is supplied ranging from shovels to bulldozers. Maintenance on equipment needs additional employees, parts, and a parts manager to control the thousands of items necessary to meet the needs of every vehicle. The town owns well over fifty vehicles. Surprisingly enough, the ancillary employees – secretary, parts manager – actually save us money by recording, inventorying employees time, purchasing parts at the best price, etc. Then there is a need for radios in many of our vehicles for any number of reasons. There is also a crew especially trained at thinning and removing trees that overgrow our roads, presenting ice thawing during winter storms. Dead tree removal is a constant activity since you never know when a dead limb or worse will endanger a car or pedestrian.

This was brought home to me a couple of years ago when a tragedy was narrowly missed in Port Ben. The town had just purchased a bucket truck over the objection of some on the town board. One of the priorities was a large dead tree at the turn in Port Ben. On the day of removal, a family was preparing for an outing with their boat. The boat was hitched to their van and the children asked if they could sit in the boat while final preparations were being made. The father said no and ushered the children inside. No sooner had they entered the home when that large tree fell onto the road and demolished the boat. Needless to say, nothing more was said about the need for a tree trimming crew from that point on. Can you imagine the lawsuit if there had been fatalities?

Space does not allow me to continue this saga of the 100-foot road frontage until later. Suffice it to say that those who make up the town budget think long and hard over every item that might raise the tax burden. They have to weigh wants with needs. Are there other sources of income? If the item is a service that many will benefit from, should the budget support it?

More to come.



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