



**Madera County Roads:
Has “Doing More With Less” Run Its Course?**

**2017-2018
Madera County Grand Jury
Final Report 1718-03**

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Madera County Roads: Has “Doing More With Less” Run Its Course?

Summary:

The Madera County Road Division faces the challenging task of maintaining the nearly 2,000 miles of roads in Madera County with insufficient staffing, funding, equipment, training and supervision. This report expands on the issues identified by the Madera County Grand Jury (MCGJ) and recommends actions to improve the services the road division provides to the residents of the county and the safety of the road crew workers.

During the course of this investigation, the MCGJ identified several key issues. The Public Works Department (PWD) does not routinely oversee and monitor progress made on citizens’ road complaints. There are no policy and procedures manuals to guide employees in the performance of their job duties. The road crews lack up-to-date safety training. The proper ongoing job training of road maintenance workers has been insufficient. PWD’s five road crews are not staffed proportionately to their respective workloads. They have been told to “do more with less.”

Background:

MCGJ chose to review how the PWD handles residents’ complaints about county roads in need of repair or maintenance. What began as a simple procedural inquiry became a much deeper investigation into the oversight and accountability of both office staff and road maintenance personnel regarding both the system for managing public complaints and the safety and welfare of the road workers.

MCGJ interviewed several employees within the PWD, particularly the Road Division. MCGJ reviewed the 2017-18 budget, job descriptions of road crew positions, select Caltrans documents regarding road maintenance safety procedures, a 2017 PWD informational Power Point presentation, and lists of service requests generated by the office staff. MCGJ also visited the site of a road maintenance job in progress last October.

Discussion:

Madera County’s annual budget for the maintenance of county roads is approximately \$17,000,000. PWD maintains approximately 1,500 miles of paved and unpaved roads. There is an additional 400 miles of paved and unpaved roads within the 118 Special Districts throughout Madera County, but the county maintains these roads with separate funds. To gain perspective, replacing one mile of county road costs almost \$1,000,000.

The mission of the PWD is to protect the health and safety of the public. PWD has four divisions: Maintenance and Operations (including Roads and Utilities); Capital Improvement Projects (including Design, Construction, Development and Permits); Municipal Services (including Water/Wastewater systems, Flood Control/Water Conservation, and Solid Waste); and Administration.

The Road Division, within Maintenance and Operations, is composed of eight crews: five Road District Crews, one Bridge/Construction Crew, one Shop Crew and one Traffic Crew. For many years there was also a ninth, a "Work Crew," but that was disbanded the summer of 2017. The Administration Division has thirteen office staff serving the clerical needs of the entire department.

Madera County's roads are divided into five Road Maintenance Districts (see Appendix 1), each with its own road maintenance crew. The borders of these Districts are not the same as the five districts of the Madera County Board of Supervisors. The Road Districts are categorized geographically as: Madera West (District 1), Chowchilla (District 2), Madera East (District 3), Raymond (District 4) and North Fork (District 5).

Based on the current PWD organizational chart, the five Road Districts' road maintenance crews have the following number of filled budgeted positions and vacancies: District 1 has seven employees and one vacancy; District 2 has five employees and one vacancy; District 3 has six employees and two vacancies; District 4 has four employees and three vacancies; and District 5 has seven employees and one vacancy. The other three road division crews, which service the entire county, also have one or two vacancies per crew.

If a Madera County resident wishes to lodge a complaint about a county road, there are seven ways to do so: call 311, call PWD directly, send an email to PWD, go onto PWD's Facebook page, use a smart phone app called GOREquest, give a complaint in person either at the PWD office or with a road maintenance supervisor on site, or fill out an online form on the Madera County website. If a resident needs to lodge an emergency complaint after normal working hours, s/he can call the Sheriff's Office.

In April, MCGJ attempted to use the website to file a complaint and found it outdated and user unfriendly. MCGJ found that PWD does not actively promote any of the preceding seven methods.

When a resident lodges a complaint through the PWD, the office staff generates an entry into a system designed for taking complaints from the public. The system then assigns it a service request number. Receiving and logging the hundreds of road complaints every year are two of the many tasks for which the PWD office assistants are responsible. New office assistants are verbally trained on the service request system by current office staff.

A random study of service requests by the MCGJ revealed that the road district with the highest number of service requests is the most heavily traveled, yet that district's road crew is lacking its two equipment operators. Each road crew is budgeted to have operators for the large heavy equipment.

The Work Crew, which for many years cleared road obstructions and performed brush, weed and trash clean up throughout the entire county, recorded the second highest number of service

requests in the MCGJ study; however, the Work Crew was disbanded last summer. With the elimination of the Work Crew, the road crews had to assume the Work Crew's duties. Even though the three employees of the Work Crew were assigned to fill vacancies in the road crews, the crews continue to be understaffed.

The service request is used to track the progress of the repair and any communication or notes about that job. If the resident has requested a reply and provided contact information, PWD is supposed to reply with updates. If no reply method has been given, the resident will not hear back from PWD. The standard departmental timeline for completing a service request is about two weeks from the date of the initial complaint to the date of job completion.

Once created, the service request is emailed to the appropriate road maintenance supervisor. The road maintenance supervisor will determine the priority of the service request, keeping public safety number one, and considering the average daily traffic and available funding. The road maintenance supervisor schedules the work, oversees the completion of the work, and returns a copy of the service request with field notes and completion date to the PWD office for closure by office staff.

Not every service request gets closed within two weeks. Based upon past practices, road maintenance supervisors have had a limit of 1,000 feet of road repair or \$10,000 per job before a service request is sent to management for consideration and funding. If service requests are of a low priority, they may be postponed.

Road maintenance supervisors observe road conditions in their districts every day, some devoting approximately 50-80% of their time driving county roads and assessing road quality. With this information they generate about 60% of their crews' routine daily activities, while the other 40% originates from service requests. The completion of service requests is a main priority in the road division. To maximize efficiency, road maintenance supervisors will often combine routine road work with service request work.

This past year Madera County has been obligated to purchase a \$1-2 million pavement management system that monitors road quality in order to receive an increase in state Highway Users Tax Account (HUTA) funding for maintenance and repairs. The county has begun the process of obtaining grant funds to purchase this pavement management system. Individuals interviewed stated the prospect of using a pavement management system as a substitute for the judgment of road maintenance supervisors has negatively affected morale.

Road maintenance workers are trained by their supervisors while on the job. Although the road maintenance supervisors do not have the proper certification to train the workers, they use common sense and their own expertise when training the road crews. The MCGJ noted that road maintenance workers have operated heavy equipment out of classification, without formal training and certification. In the past, the county participated in the California Highway Patrol Maintenance Equipment Training Academy, but that is no longer available to the county.

The PWD stated they "mimic" the Caltrans state guidelines for road repair per Chapter A in the Caltrans Maintenance Manual Volume 1, 2006. PWD does not have an internal policy and procedures manual for road repairs. For example, if not enough road maintenance workers are

available to safely patch potholes, the proper tamping down of freshly filled holes is not done. The patches are left for the public to tamp down as they drive over them.

Traffic control safety procedures vary with changing road conditions, and each road crew has its own safety equipment; however, the trucks lack updated beacons and safety lights. Generally, the senior road maintenance worker on site must oversee the traffic controls. With insufficient crew sizes, at times road maintenance supervisors have been needed to flag jobs. This has kept them from supervising their entire crews, which can be at more than one job location. There have been instances where road maintenance workers have nearly been hit by passing vehicles.

The road maintenance supervisors hold weekly safety tailgate meetings with their crews, and attendees' signatures are obtained. The safety training videos supplied by PWD are in VHS format and rarely used.

Due to drought and beetle infestation, road crews have been responsible for hazardous tree removal along county roads and easements for the past two years. The road crews from Districts 4 and 5 spent most of their time cutting down and removing trees instead of doing road work. As a result, Raymond and North Fork District roads were left largely unattended. During that time, District 4 provided one road maintenance worker to patch roads one day per week. Recently, outside contractors took over tree responsibility, which has allowed the road crews to resume their regular duties.

Some of the road maintenance supervisors said there is disconnect between PWD management and themselves. They are not asked for their input on decisions which directly affect their work or the budget, and their concerns are not addressed. Road crews have worked for months with budgeted positions remaining unfilled. Their requests for resources are not fulfilled, and they have been told to "do more with less."

PWD has recognized the lack of communication and has instituted monthly meetings with the road maintenance supervisors, who said the meetings were ineffective. PWD has also started holding social activities outside of work, where all personnel are invited to attend with their families.

Findings:

- F1. Because there is no instruction manual outlining the service request system, the system users are not properly trained.
- F2. Because there are no regular internal audits and no system for alerting PWD of service requests that remain open after two weeks, the processing of service requests is inconsistent.
- F3. Because there are no written instructions for PWD staff to request contact information, complainants often receive no follow-up on their request for service.
- F4. PWD does not adequately promote the service request system to the public.
- F5. The five road crews are not staffed proportionately to their districts' workload.
- F6. Road crew morale is low.

F7. Because PWD lacks a written policy and procedures manual for road repairs, road repair standards are inconsistent.

F8. Because PWD does not ensure that every road maintenance worker has been formally trained for every type of job to which they might be assigned, job performance can be adversely affected.

F9. Road maintenance workers do not receive proper and adequate safety training.

F10. Written temporary traffic control plans and procedures per Caltrans guidelines are not utilized consistently.

F11. Because PWD does not oversee or review the written temporary traffic control plan for every job before it is started, safety is compromised.

F12. Because road crew trucks lack sufficient safety lights and beacons, safety is compromised.

F13. Monthly meetings between the Deputy Director and road maintenance supervisors are ineffective.

Recommendations:

The Madera County Grand Jury recommends that:

R1. PWD develop an internal office policy and procedures manual within the next year.

R2. Office staff immediately receive formalized training for their service request job responsibilities.

R3. Office staff request the name, address, telephone number and email for every person who generates a service request, effective immediately.

R4. PWD promote ways an individual can report a complaint by placing the PWD phone number, website and GORquest phone app information on every road crew truck within 90 days.

R5. PWD develop its own road maintenance job policy and procedures manual within the next year.

R6. PWD develop its own road maintenance safety policy and procedures manual immediately.

R7. PWD provide certified training for all road maintenance supervisors and senior road maintenance workers in order to train their crews on the operation of road maintenance equipment within six months.

R8. PWD require all road crew workers be trained by certified trainers within 12 months for every type of job to which they might be assigned.

R9. Safety training immediately be updated and provided in formats which can be utilized at tailgates and in shop office settings.

R10. Effective immediately, temporary traffic controls properly follow the California Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices until the PWD develops its own manual.

R11. Effective immediately, PWD designate an individual in a managerial position to review and approve all Temporary Traffic Control plans before each job is started.

R12. PWD maintain a permanent file for all approved Temporary Traffic Control Plans after each job is done, starting immediately.

R13. PWD review the services needed throughout the county and assign road crew personnel as required, on an ongoing basis.

R14. PWD promote better employee morale within road crews.

R15. PWD and road maintenance supervisors continue monthly meetings with clearly stated objectives.

R16. PWD increase and update the safety lights and beacons on road repair vehicles, effective immediately.

Required Responses:

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933, the Grand Jury specifically requests responses as follows:

Madera County Board of Supervisors
200 W. 4th Street
Madera, CA 93637

Madera County Public Works Director
200 W. 4th Street
Madera, CA 93637

Madera County Administrative Officer
200 W. 4th Street
Madera, CA 93637

Appendix 1

