

Chapter 8: Transportation

Introduction

The economy of Alger County, and specifically Burt Township, is very dependent on the growth of industry, forestry and facilities for tourism. This growth is dependent largely upon a safe, convenient, and economical transportation system to facilitate the easy movement of people, goods, and services within and outside the Township, County, and region. A good transportation system establishes a greater social and economic vitality by bringing together the people, the places of production, and the places of consumption. Transportation systems such as highways and railroads, and terminals such as airports and harbors, are key elements in facilitating the movement of people, goods and services.

County Road Network

The County Road Network by law is divided into two systems, the primary system and the local system. Primary roads are those roads of greatest general importance to the county. Local roads are those of lesser county importance. Currently in Alger County, primary roads constitute about 40% of the total road mileage. Map VIII-1 depicts the primary and local road system in Burt Township. County Road H-68, Adams Trail and Coast Guard Point are all primary roads.

There are approximately 500 miles of county roads and 100 miles of state roads in Alger County. Burt Township's portion of this totals 107 miles, of which 48 miles are primary and 59 miles are considered local roads.

In addition to the county roads, the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore has access roads serving attractions at the Log Slide and Au Sable Point Lighthouse.

The map on the following page shows the road system in Burt Township.

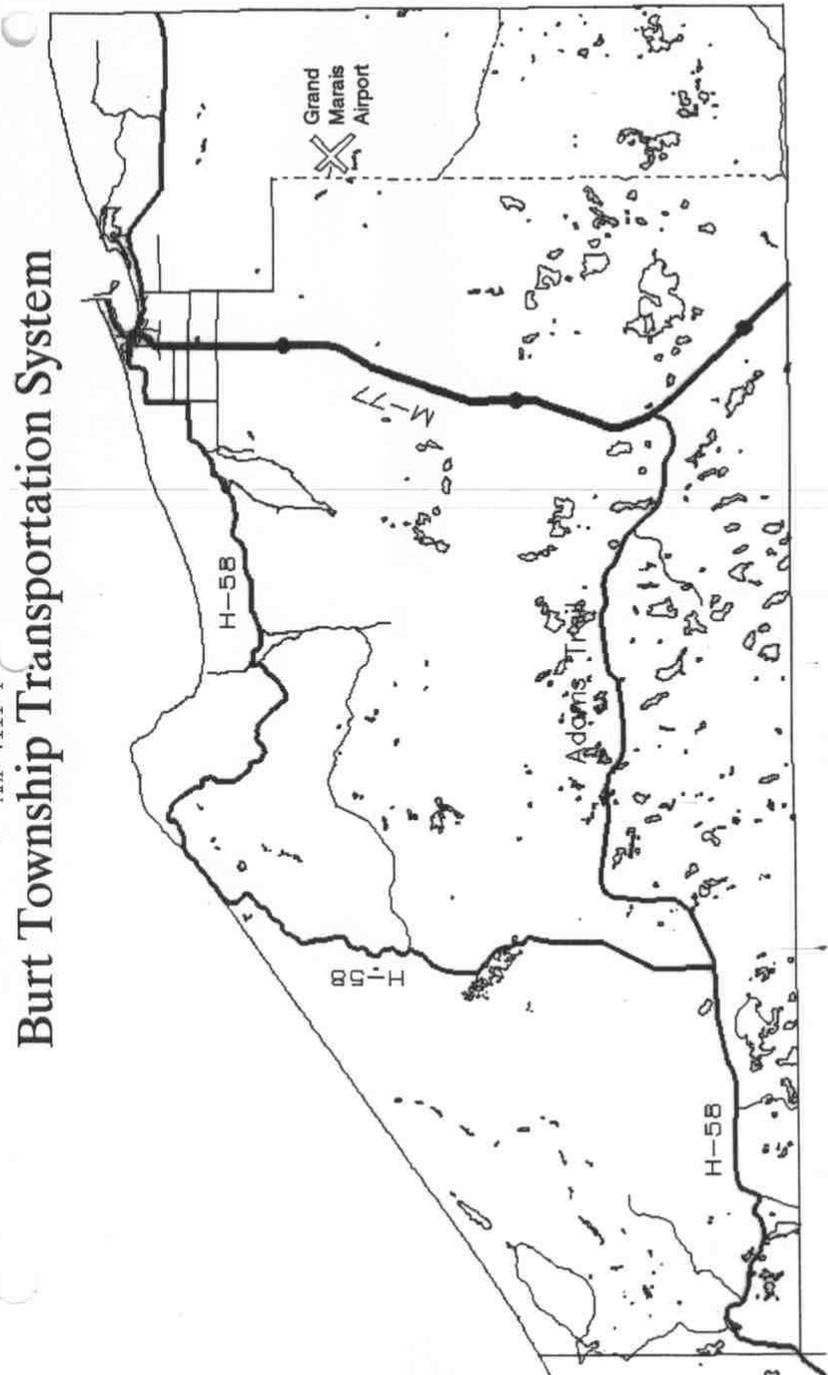
County roads, both primary and local, are certified by the County Road Commissions for approval by the State. Under Michigan law, existence of a certified and approved road is evidence of a right-of-way available for land access and public use. A legal right-of-way does not necessarily contain a traversable road, however. Seventy-two percent of County primary roads and 57% of County local roads are maintained and plowed on a year-round basis. A few of those which are not maintained year-round are not passable even with a four-wheel drive vehicle.

Many roads which are passable and maintained in season only serve cabins, camps, and other seasonal uses. Development of year-round residences on these local roads impose a heavy burden on the Road Commission's limited resources while providing benefits to a very small group of individuals. This problem can be corrected only by measures designed to discourage this year-round development or by legally relieving the Road Commission of its present obligations to provide year-round maintenance of all county roads.

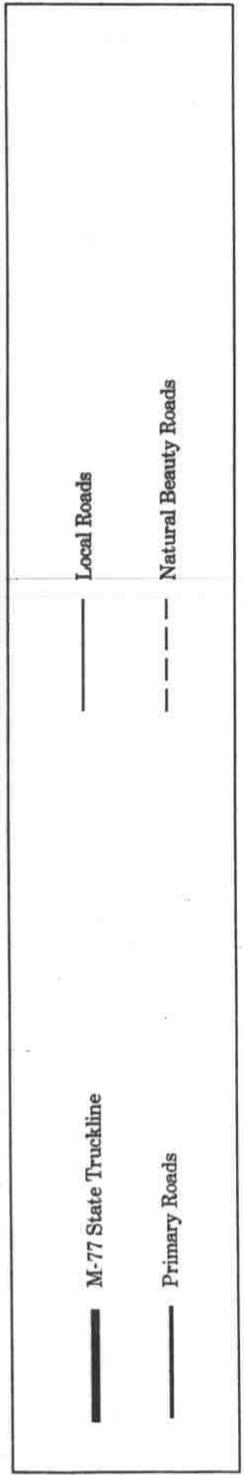
There are differences between the county road network and the functional classification systems discussed below. To discuss all of the differences would be cumbersome and confusing. The county road network is set up by Michigan Act 51 of 1951 and must be either primary or local. Act 51 also distributes road dollars based on this system. The federal classification system identifies only certain of the county primary roads (most important) and all state trunklines. Additional federal dollars are available to maintain and improve those roads.

MAP VIII-1

Burt Township Transportation System



VIII-1a



Grand Marais Street System



State Trunklines

State trunklines also serve Township residents, but more importantly, provide the highest level of traffic mobility for the traveling public. M-77 is the primary access for the community and is the only trunkline located in the Township. A major east-west highway, M-28, across the Upper Peninsula lies to the south of the Township. Traffic counts on M-77 average between 400 and 1,000 vehicles daily. There are approximately 12 miles of M-77 in the Township.

The State of Michigan also has considered legislation to establish a Heritage Route System. The Heritage System would designate certain trunklines to emphasize and protect their unique scenic, historical or recreational values. There has been some discussion by the Michigan Department of Transportation of so designating H-58 and making it a specially classified trunkline.

Natural Beauty Roads

Act 150 of 1970 created the Natural Beauty Roads Act. This Act provides local communities the opportunity to work with the Road Commission to designate certain roads as natural beauty roads. Residents in the Township petitioned the Burt Township Board to designate three local roads as natural beauty roads. A public hearing was held and the roads were so designated. The three roads are: the Old Seney Road, from H-58 to M-77; the School Forest Road; and McCloud Road from Old Seney Road easterly to the Township line. The designation as Natural Beauty Roads restricts what can be done to the road and keeps it in a natural condition.

Functional Classification

Highways, roads, and streets have two functions: to move traffic and to provide access to property. Almost all streets and roads serve both these functions to varying degrees. Roads which will carry strictly local traffic, roads which will serve as major circulation routes, and roads which will carry high volumes of through traffic, all require quite different levels of development. Functional classification is the process by which the County's roads and streets are grouped according to their predominant function and service characteristics. By defining an integrated network of roads and streets, functional classification provides a framework for resource allocation, a guide to design, construction and maintenance of roads, and a means of coordinating land use policies with the road system.

While road projects compete for attention in every area, each should fit into an overall plan for future transportation service and for the physical development of the County and townships. Functional classification is an essential tool for weighing competing demands and planning and developing an efficient road system. If roads and streets are developed to meet present day needs without any regard as to future use, duplication of expenditures and obsolescence are likely to result.

The design of a road depends principally on its functional classification and the traffic volume it is expected to carry at some future time (usually 20 years after completion). It is evident that the kind of road one travels on is determined, in part, by how the road has been classified. Since land use patterns are determined largely by transportation facilities, functional classification is important because it permits coordination of land use policies and the transportation system. Zoning Ordinances, for example, can be structured to insure that specific land uses are guided to locations on the road network which are consistent with the existing or planned capacity of the network to accommodate the traffic generated.

The new Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 at the Federal level made many changes including how roads were classified. The old federal-aid program has been restructured and re-organized into two new principal programs – a National Highway and Bridge Program (U.S. 41 and M-28 are identified in this program) and an Urban and Rural Highway and Bridge Program. This latter program will address more localized needs like local and regional access.

This new National Functional Classification system has identified M-77 as a Minor Arterial and both H-58 and Adams Trail as Major Collectors. Designations on this National Functional Classification system makes three routes eligible for federal funding. This new system replaces both the state and federal classifications. In addition, the Alger County Road Commission can further classify it's roads according to their own classification system.

Superior Scenic Drive

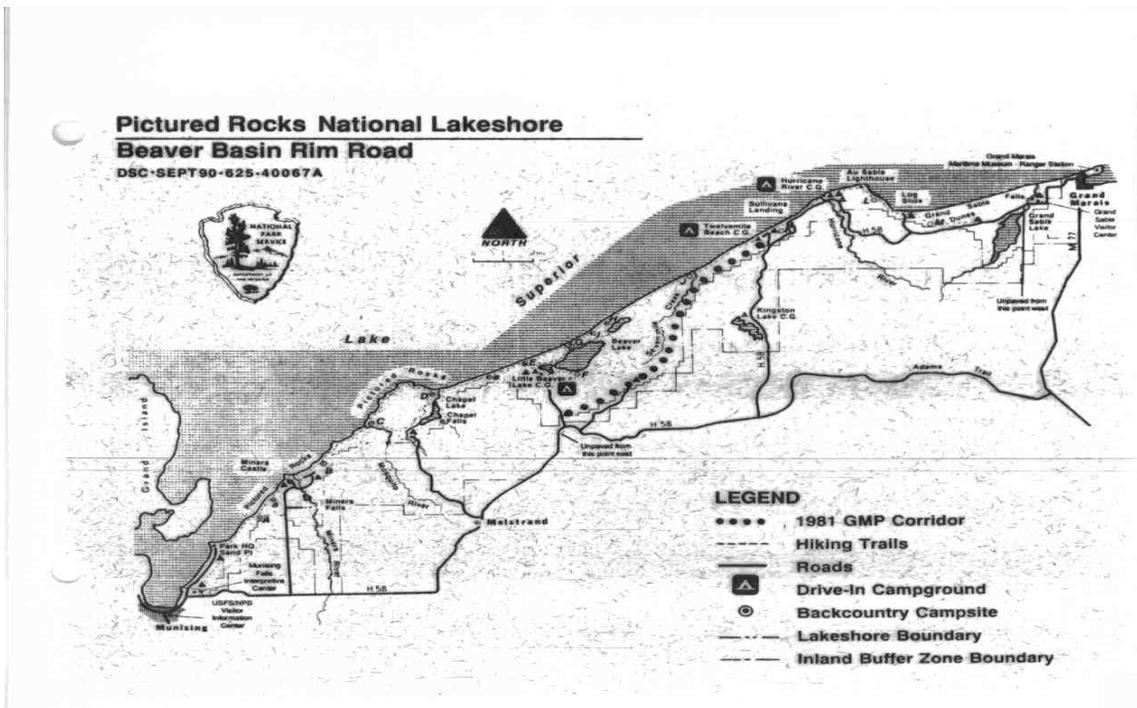
The transportation system serving Grand Marais and the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore has been the topic of many community meetings. Much of this discussion has centered on the kinds of improvements anticipated with the Superior Scenic Drive designation through the Township.

The overall strategy of the Superior Scenic Drive Committee is to make this route a hard surfaced road from Sault Ste. Marie to Munising, a distance of 175 miles. This committee, consisting of members from Alger, Luce and Chippewa Counties, the Michigan Dept. of Transportation, Lakeshore, and both the central and eastern planning and development regions, published their report in 1985. This report identified the route, developed priorities for improvements and set out on a course to obtain funding from a variety of sources to upgrade the route. Much of the improvements have either already been made or are committed to in Luce and Chippewa Counties. The remaining work primarily is focused on addressing road needs within Alger County.

The portion of the Superior Scenic Drive going through Burt Township is along County Road H-58. From the eastern township line, H-58 is paved through Grand Marais, then it reverts to either gravel and in some areas sand as it continues west through the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore.

All of the proposed improvements along the Superior Scenic Drive would be along existing roads with the exception of a 12.2 mile segment within the Lakeshore. The National Park Service is currently conducting an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for this 12.2 mile stretch of proposed new construction. The draft EIS is expected to be completed by the end of 1992 with final approval anticipated in the summer of 1993.

The EIS will consider alternatives for the primary road access system for the National Lakeshore, which includes roads from Munising to Grand Marais both in the Lakeshore and in other adjacent ownerships. Four alternatives will be described in detail: (1) a corridor that includes routing along the rim of the Beaver Basin Shoreline Zone as depicted in the 1981 General Management Plan; (2) a corridor that includes routing removed from the rim of Beaver Basin primarily within the inland buffer zone; (3) the paving of the existing route of County Road H-58; (4) a no action alternative. The alternatives will be weighed against one another to determine the comparative impacts on the environment.



To assemble information essential to preparation of the EIS and assess impacts from the proposed development of a Beaver Basin Rim Road in Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, baseline data studies have been conducted on natural and cultural resources, noise impacts, visitor use, and socio-economics. Technical contractors selected to conduct the studies represent National Park Service, universities, private consulting firms, and private individuals. The majority of the studies were conducted between June, 1990 and March, 1992, within the Beaver Basin Rim Road corridor (also called the study area).

The eastern end of this Beaver Basin Rim Road is approximately 15 miles west of Grand Marais. Within the 15 mile stretch of H-58 there are a number of hazardous curves and a segment near Sullivan's Landing that is very close to the shoreline of Lake Superior. In order to make minor alignment changes from Grand Marais west, an environmental assessment would need to be conducted at an estimated cost of \$350,000. The Alger County Road Commission does not have the funds to make improvements to this road, let alone commit up front money to complete an environmental assessment. The Road Commission will continue to maintain the road in its existing condition and will work with others to seek funding for this environmental assessment.

One of the great fears and discussions through the development of this strategy was centered on the visual experience and quality of driving experience if improvements were made to H-58. Without exception, everyone was of the opinion that if road improvements were made and it meant losing the tree canopy and character of the driving experience, then it should not be done. There are still at least half of the people questioned that believe the road should be maintained in it's present condition, without any improvements or blacktopping. Regardless of how careful an improvement project would be, there are many that say it should not be done, while others have a perception that improvements will turn H-58 into a high speed highway.

Clearly, if improvements are made to H-58, then they have to be done in such a way as to preserve the character of the existing road. This will mean a design standard that has minimum shoulders and a cross section that is as narrow as possible.

There have been two other topics of discussion relating to the Superior Scenic Drive or H-58 centered in the community of Grand Marais. The first involved relocating H-58 south of town. There are a few roads (Webb, Ridge, Carpenter) that run East/West and if connecting links were constructed could make for a continuous route. The problem with this approach is cost and getting across Carpenter Creek valley where there is almost a hundred foot elevation difference from the surrounding ridge.

Finally, consideration should be given to changing the location of H-58 from it's present route to other existing streets within Grand Marais. As H-58 enters the community from the East, it travels along Grand Marais Avenue, turning on Randolph, again at Lake Ave. (M-77) and then onto Carlson Street. A potential change would be to continue H-58 along Grand Marais Avenue (along the shoreline), make a short jog onto Brazel Street and then back to H-58 west of town.

As consideration was given to changing H-58 within Grand Marais, discussion also focused on another alternative within the community. Instead of changing H-58 along the shoreline, keep it along it's present route and abandon the section of Grand Marais Avenue between Randolph and where it connects with Lake Avenue. This would open up additional land adjacent to the community swimming beach and shoreline for public use as a park. There was not a recommendation made on these options, but rather suggested for further community review and evaluation.

Road Improvements and Maintenance

The County Road Commission has the responsibility of construction and maintenance on both the primary and local road systems. The Road Commission must finance all the construction on the primary system. The Township must contribute 50 percent of the cost of construction on the local road system. The Road Commission provides financing for maintenance on both the primary and local systems.

Burt Township, between 1989 and 1990, spent \$20,000 on local road improvements and in 1991 spent almost \$48,000. The Planning Commission has identified the following local roads in need of improvement: Hunters Swamp Road (Carpenter Road) east of the Newberg Road; Cemetery Road; access to the Airport; and Woodruff Road south of Wilson.

The Alger County Road Commission has identified road improvement needs on all of the primary roads in the Township: H-58; Adams Trail; and Coast Guard Point Road. With the exception of the recently completed two mile section of H-58 near Sable Falls, all of H-58 west of Grand Marais needs improvement. H-58 also needs improvement from the eastern Township line going west 1.5 miles. The Road Commission also thins that Lowder Road and Newberg Road need improvements on the local road system. The Newberg Road is one of the eastern access routes into the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, as is H-58.

Financing

The Alger County Road Commission bears the major responsibility for construction and maintenance of all county roads in the Township. The bulk of their funding comes from the Michigan Transportation Fund (MTF). Money for this fund comes from the gasoline tax and vehicle registration fees. The MTF is distributed based on a formula to each of the 83 counties and cities and villages.

A part of the MTF is set aside as the Transportation Economic Development Fund. A portion of this fund allocates revenues to Alger County based on acres of commercial forest and National Park or Lakeshore land and to help create a network of all-season roads. In addition there is a competitive category that counties can apply to where projects are related to economic development opportunities in areas such as tourism, forestry, manufacturing, etc. Alger County has applied to this latter program to help improve H-58.

Another funding source to the Road Commission is through the new federal legislation enacted in 1991. The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) reorganizes and consolidates a number of federal funding sources into this new program. Alger County has an allocation from the federal ISTEA program. In addition to their allocation, the county, because the National Lakeshore and Hiawatha National Forest, can apply for additional funds through other programs, such as the Public Lands Highway Program. The recent reorganization of various federal programs has made it difficult to completely sort out. There are a few county roads, such as H-58 and Federal Forest Highway 13 that are eligible. Alger County has in the past applied for these funds and in 1991 received an allocation to improve two miles of H-58 near Sable Falls in the Township.

In the amount of funds made available to the Road Commission from these different sources, they are continuing to fall further behind needs. The percentage of all roads in Alger County characterized as "Adequate" is diminishing. Inflation increases the county's costs while revenues have been fairly stagnant. It is a safe assumption that road needs will exceed available resources for the foreseeable future unless more funds are made available for this purpose.

Non-Road Transportation

In Burt Township, as in Alger County, highways and roads are the major form of transportation for both people and goods. In addition, the community has a small craft harbor, an airport, and some bicycle paths.

The airport is located approximately three miles southeast of town and consists of a grass runway. The airport is closed during the winter months. It was built in 1947 by Trans-Canada Airways as an emergency landing field which operated until 1959. Now operated by the Township, it annually hosts a fly-in which attracts approximately 250 people each summer. If opportunities arise to improve the airport with grant or other funds, the township should pursue its development.

Burt Township has a bicycle path along Coast Guard Point. There is also interest in developing additional bicycle paths in the Township.

There also has been some concern over conflicts between different modes of transportation. One of the ways to help alleviate this concern is to develop separate trails for off-road transportation.

Designation of County Roads

The designation of roads by name or number serves two purposes. It permits the highway department or road commission to identify roads, and it serves the traveling public. Included in this second purpose are, for example, street names which serve as postal addresses, and highway numbers which help the tourist find their way. The national system of highway numbers came into use early in the century; in 1970, the County Road Association of Michigan, in cooperation with the Department of State Highways, inaugurated a system for numbering Michigan county primary roads. Under this system, the State is divided by its major highways into eight zones, each designated by a letter of the alphabet. Within each zone, east-west roads are given even numbers (starting at the south of the zone), and north-south roads are given odd numbers (starting at the west of the zone). The Upper Peninsula is divided into two zones, G to the west and H to the east of U.S. 41 from Rapid River to Marquette. Alger County is almost entirely in the H Zone.