

Standardized Permits from County Road Agencies

*By Denise Donohue, Director
County Road Association of Michigan*

There is a lot of change in the air when it comes to transportation permits that are required to move oversize and overwidth vehicles on Michigan's local road system. And some of them may impact vehicles used by the road and aggregate industries, which are also in full tilt.

First, the county road commissions and road departments across the state are in various stages of moving toward standardized permits, and toward using new technology that allows rapid online application, processing, payment and issuance of e-permits through an on-line permit clearinghouse system.

Permit Revisions

In the summer of 2015 the County Road Association (CRA) of Michigan brought together a working group of licensed professional engineers from urban, rural and mid-size county road agencies to scrutinize its nearly 20-year-old standardized permits.

The group plus legal counsel looked at all eight special transportation permits – three of which are used only in late winter through spring, during seasonal weight restrictions; the two haul route notification forms used for agriculture and utility overweight moves; five of which are used throughout the year for overweight and oversized loads; and CRA's Work in the Right-of-Way Permit, which applies to some road construction projects.

The team found that some of the permits had not kept up with changes in the law; and other permits had been merged together to reduce the number of forms, which muddled proper application of the law.

During the 17 years since the permits were updated, staff had changed at county road agencies with hand-me-down instructions – most fully accurate, but some less clear.

Over the last three years, every form has been reviewed, revised and recreated in pdf-fillable format. The final permit was finished and approved by CRA's Engineering Committee and board of directors in January 2018. The updated permit templates have been provided to all 83 county road agencies, and CRA staff and members have given several presentations on them.

Revisions to Overweight/Oversize Transportation Permits

One of the significant permit revisions that impacts road contractors and aggregate haulers has been the revamped overweight and overlength transportation permits.

At least since 2001, the overweight permit – whether single move or annual move – allowed the load to be 40 percent overweight. This had been adopted simply to be in step with the Michigan Department of Transportation weight allowances.

But in 2016-2017, the work group had intense discussions and concluded this was no longer appropriate on the local road system. This is in part due to 18 years of deterioration in the underfunded local road and bridge system. Data shows that 20 percent of local federal-aid-eligible roads are in "good" condition, compared with 83 percent of MDOT's road system.

And because most MDOT roads are all-season roads built to be much thicker and more durable; local roads are generally not all-season roads. After much consideration, the 2016-2017 work group determined they could not support 40 percent overweight on the annual transportation permit.

They believe county road agencies must know within tighter time restrictions when and where such heavy loads wish to travel on the local road system. For these reasons, the single-move overweight permits allow 40 percent overweight for a 72-hour period and require 48 hours advance notice to the county road agency.

Season-long overweight permits authorize only 25 percent overweight under the new standardized permits.

County road agencies contacted by CRA said that they received very, very few 48-hour haul route notifications – meaning either the loads were moving without proper notice or there are very few overweight loads moving on the local road system.

This change to the overweight transportation permit ensures that for those businesses properly pulling overweight permits, the county engineer can help select routes, if needed, that can best handle 40 percent additional weight in the immediate timeframe, including consideration of weight-restricted bridges and culverts.

This will best protect the local road system, while keeping commerce moving.

Many counties have adopted these updated permits and others are headed in that direction – which may cause some confusion for the next year or so. Many CRA members are also headed toward standardized fees.

Phase II: Online permit applications

With updated standard transportation permits in place, CRA is now moving them into a 21st century business model.

To provide an online, simple e-permit clearinghouse without taking funds away from road and bridge improvements, in February 2018 CRA signed a statewide exclusive affiliate agreement with Oxcart Permitting Systems out of Palatine, Illinois.

With this immediately functional online platform, Oxcart upholds the county road agency's authority and responsibility for special transportation needs with system costs supported by user fees.

Five county road agencies have been live on Oxcart since winter, with no glitches reported. Oxcart is functioning in 74 municipalities and six counties in Illinois.

The system allows 24/7/365 online access to permit applications in counties that adopt the system, is compatible with all modern browsers, has e-signature and e-pay, as well as an e-permit. The online permit clearinghouse has the ability to auto-fill VINs, axle weight and utilizes Google Map to indicate routes. The system moves beyond FAX machines and invoices.

Adoption of these systems and updated permits requires 83 counties to get on board and is a win-win for heavy haulers, local road agencies *and* the local road and bridge network. Anyone with questions about the new forms and online permit technology should contact their local county road agency or the CRA office in Lansing at (517) 482-1189.