



# County Technical Assistance Service

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## County Roads

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We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with county government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other e-Li material.

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## County Roads

**Reference Number:** CTAS-840

## County Public Roads v. Private Roads

**Reference Number:** CTAS-841

One of the main duties of the chief administrative officer of county highways is to exercise supervision over the construction, repair and maintenance of county roads. T.C.A. § 54-7-109. The chief administrative officer must be careful not to work on private roads. T.C.A. § 54-7-202 forbids the use of any county highway materials or equipment to improve or repair private roads, with the limited exception for school bus and postal vehicle turnarounds. A chief administrative officer who authorizes or knowingly permits county equipment to be used for private purposes is guilty of a misdemeanor. T.C.A. § 54-7-202.

All roads running through a county are not county public roads. Some are private roads, others are state highways or city streets. Private roads are the most difficult to distinguish from county public roads. Private roads are generally one of two types. First, a private road may be one used by only one or a few property owners, such as a driveway; or second, it may be a road which the landowner allows the general public to use but which has never been formally accepted by the county legislative body as a county road, or which the landowner has never given the public any rights, either express or implied.

A public highway or road is "such a passageway as any and all members of the public have an absolute right to use as distinguished from a permissive privilege of using [the] same." Standard Life Ins. Co. v. Hughes, 315 S.W.2d 239, 242 (1958). In this case, the court stated that a road may become public in one of the following ways:

1. Act of a public authority.
2. Express dedication by the owner.
3. Implied dedication--Use and acceptance by the public with the intention of the owner that the use become public.
4. Adverse use continuing for twenty (20) years, creating a prescriptive right.

Accordingly, unless the public has acquired an absolute right to use the road in one of the ways mentioned above, any public use is either by permission or license, not by right, and the road remains a private road.

## Classification of County Public Roads

**Reference Number:** CTAS-842

According to T.C.A. § 54-10-103, the county legislative body is charged with classifying public roads. Before the county legislative body classifies a public road for the county road system, the chief administrative officer of the county highway department is required to submit a detailed listing of all county roads to the legislative body. The listing should include a summary of all changes from the road list previously submitted. More detail about the contents of these reports is discussed below. The chief administrative officer is also to include any suggestions and recommendations for changing road classifications with this report. This section (T.C.A. § 54-10-103) along with several other sections and court cases, concludes that the county legislative body is the proper entity to designate or accept roads as county roads. A road may be a "public" road without being designated as a "county" road by the legislative body. County highway officials may work only on county public roads. They do not have the authority to decide which roads will be county roads. They may only make recommendations to the county legislative body about which roads should be county roads.

The Tennessee Code provides a means by which county officials and any interested citizens can determine exactly which stretches of road are county roads. After receiving reports and recommendations of the highway superintendent, the county legislative body is required to make and maintain a list of all county roads, classify the roads according to width, and then file that list in the county clerk's office. Those code sections relating to the road lists are very old and some counties have not kept an up-to-date road list. In the past, there was less need for the road list, but since the passage of the County Uniform Highway Law (CUHL), that list has become vital for the protection of highway officials. With an up-to-

date road list on file, highway officials will know exactly which roads they can maintain and which roads they cannot legally work on. Interested citizens will also have a means of finding out which roads may be maintained by the county. The road list should be amended on an on-going basis throughout the year to ensure it accurately reflects the current inventory of county roads. T.C.A. § 54-10-103.

One major purpose of the road list is to protect the highway officials. For that reason, it is very important not to begin work on a road until it has been officially classified by the legislative body and added to the county road list. In this regard, there may be some confusion in counties that have a planning commission. In such counties, road approval by a planning commission is one step in the acceptance process, but that alone is not enough to make a road a county road. A road is not a county road until the county legislative body has formally classified it, regardless of the action taken by the planning commission. For their own protection, highway officials should not begin work on any road approved by the planning commission until it has also been accepted through the classification process by the county legislative body. T.C.A. § 13-3-406.

The county legislative body is responsible for updating and maintaining the county road list, based on the information and recommendations of the chief administrative officer. The road list is not extremely difficult to compile. It should contain eight (8) items of information regarding each road on the list:

1. Type of road (county or state-aid road)
2. State-aid road description (only for county roads included in the state-aid road system)
3. Local name of road
4. Beginning and ending point of road (describe by reference to geographical features)
5. Miles (length of road to nearest 1/10 mile)
6. Class (classify according to width as set out in T.C.A. §§ 54-10-103 and 54-10-104)
7. Right of way width (in feet)
8. Roadbed width (in feet)

T.C.A. §§ 54-10-103, 54-10-104.

Frequently, only a portion of a total road may be classified as a county road. In such cases, the beginning and ending points, total miles, and other road list items should refer only to the part of the road that is a county road. As was mentioned above, the road list provided to the county legislative body should include a summary of changes to the road list. The summary shall provide the road name, the date the change in classification was approved and the reason for the change.

## Opening and Closing County Roads

**Reference Number:** CTAS-843

The statutory law regarding acceptance of new county roads and the closure of existing county roads is very confusing and the county attorney should be consulted to determine the proper procedure to follow in the particular county. However, some general observations may be helpful. The CUHL must be reconciled to the greatest degree possible with the old general law on opening, closing and changing roads found in T.C.A., Title 54, Chapter 10, as well as other general law such as the general law granting certain powers to regional planning commissions and the state department of transportation in some instances. In 1995 the legislature passed a simpler [alternative method of closing roads](#).

The Attorney General has opined that in counties under the CUHL, the CAO of the county highway department, or the elected highway commission or board in the counties with such an elected board (if a private act grants general control of the county road system to the elected board), has general control of the county highway system and this includes approving the acceptance of a new road, changing the route of an existing road or closing an existing county road before such a change may take place. Op. Tenn. Atty. Gen. U89-10 (January 31, 1989) (It should be noted that since that opinion was issued, the CUHL was amended to delete references to such authority held by elected highway commissions or boards.) However, this is not the only step involved. The county legislative body must pass on additions or deletions to the classifications of county roads in the county road list after receiving the recommendation of the CAO. T.C.A. § 54-10-103. However, if a road has obtained a public character under one of the methods in the Standard Life Ins. Co. v. Hughes case, it is doubtful whether the CAO or elected highway board may prevent the county legislative body from adding such a road to the county road list or prevent a court from declaring the road public and part of the county road system. Hackett v. Smith County, 807 S.W.2d 695 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1990); Rogers v. Sain, 679 S.W.2d 450 (Tenn. Ct. App. 1984).

One aspect of the Hackett v. Smith County case which has become significant due to later decisions limiting the application of the case is the fact that the county road commissioner certified on the plats that the streets, utilities and other improvements were installed in an acceptable manner according to county specifications and that a bond had been posted to insure the completion of all required improvements. In December 2003, the Court of Appeals decided a similar case coming out of Franklin County. In Shahan v. Franklin County, 2003 WL 23093836 (Tenn. Ct. App.), a developer and residents of a subdivision sued the county over the maintenance of roads within the subdivision. The county declined an offered dedication of the roads and further denied building permits for additional structures in the subdivision due to the inadequacy of the roads. At that point, the developer and residents sought a declaration of responsibility for road maintenance. The developer asserted that, as in the Hackett case, there had been an implied dedication accepted through public use. Although the court agreed that there was evidence of public use of the roads, it held that the doctrine of implied dedication did not apply because the roads were in an unapproved subdivision.

The court did recognize the Hackett case, however, and described it as the proper limited application of the doctrine of implied acceptance of a dedication in the subdivision setting. The court ruled that the doctrine may be invoked in regards to subdivision property when a local government has declined or refused to accept property after a developer has complied with all applicable regulations. Because of this case, it is more vital than ever for counties to have established subdivision regulations which include thorough specifications for roads and streets. Reading Hackett and Shahan together, subdivision roads can be expected to become the responsibility of the county unless it can be demonstrated that the developer failed to comply with minimum road standards.

If bonds are issued for construction of county roads or bridges, the approval of the CAO, the county legislative body and the Tennessee department of transportation must be obtained. T.C.A. §§ 54-9-139, 54-9-202. Also, the regional planning commission has authority to approve plats of subdivisions which may contain plans for roads or streets and may set standards for such roads or streets in the subdivision. T.C.A. §§ 13-3-401, 13-3-402, 13-3-406. However, the statutes specifically state that the approval of a plat by the regional planning commission shall not be deemed to constitute or affect an acceptance by any county or by the public of the dedication of any road or other ground shown upon a plat. T.C.A. § 13-3-405; Foley v. Hamilton, 659 S.W.2d 356, 360 (1983).

The old general law found in T.C.A., Title 54, Chapter 10, Part 2, dealing with petitions to open, change or close public roads must be considered when dealing with certain changes to the county highway system. As stated earlier, this old law must be reconciled to the extent possible with the newer statutes found in the CUHL. For example, before a road is closed, adjacent landowners or those controlling the land touched by the proposed road must be notified. T.C.A. §§ 54-10-202, 54-10-203. Since these changes may involve damages to property owners, a jury of view is provided to determine if damages exist and to what extent. T.C.A. § 54-10-204. The exact workings of the petition process, jury of view, any necessary hearings and other procedural matters should be worked out with the consultation of the county attorney as to reconcile the conflicting statutes to the greatest extent possible.

The basic problem with the general law, found in T.C.A. §§ 54-10-201 *et seq.*, is that it was adopted in 1891 when all counties were required to have highway commissioners who supervised all road work in their respective districts. The law requiring these commissioners was repealed in 1963, but the provisions for accepting and closing county roads were not amended to reflect this change. Therefore, these sections still refer to the authority of highway commissioners within their respective districts. Only one or two counties in the state still have district highway commissioners as contemplated by this statute. In spite of these difficulties, the procedure established under these statutes was referenced in a 1963 court case and appears to be applicable to some extent. The procedures of this chapter may be summarized as follows:

1. A resident of the county may make an application to the highway commissioner of the district through which the road runs to open, change, or close a road through a signed petition. T.C.A. § 54-10-201.
2. A highway commissioner may, without a petition, proceed to open, change, or close a road which is deemed necessary for the public interest. T.C.A. § 54-10-213.
3. Before a road can be opened, closed, or changed, at least five (5) days' notice must be given to all interested parties of the time the road is to be changed. Landowners and those controlling land touched by the road are interested parties. T.C.A. § 54-10-202.
4. Once notice has been given, the highway commissioner in whose district the road runs will pick two other freeholders of the same district who have never been consulted on the issue and who

will take an oath of impartiality and these persons will constitute a jury of view. T.C.A. § 54-10-204.

5. The jury of view will assess the damages to any property affected by the closing of the road. T.C.A. § 54-10-205.
6. Any aggrieved party may appeal the action of the jury of view to the Court of General Sessions and from there to circuit and appellate courts. In case of an appeal, the jury of view will forward all the papers in the case to the General Sessions Court. T.C.A. § 54-10-206.

Some counties use the highway committee of the county legislative body to carry out this procedure, with the full membership of the legislative body approving or rejecting the actions of the committee. However, it is noteworthy that the Attorney General, in Opinion No. U89-10, dated January 31, 1989, although stating that the provisions of Chapters 7 and 10 (CUHL), Title 54, T.C.A., must be read together, states that most of the duties to open or close a county road rests with the chief administrative officer of the county highway department where the county does not have a popularly elected highway commission, because of the more recent passage of the CUHL, which will supersede the older law when they are in conflict. However, the Attorney General opined that Chapters 7 and 10 of Title 54, T.C.A., must be reconciled whenever possible. Therefore, the procedure to be followed when opening or closing county roads remains confusing under the current law.

## Alternative Procedure for Closing Roads

**Reference Number:** CTAS-844

1995 Public Chapter 478 provided a simpler method for accomplishing the closure of a road. It was enacted as a new part at T.C.A. § 54-10-216. It is a local option law which must be adopted by a two-thirds majority of the county legislative body to become effective for a given county. Counties operating under this section have the following method available to them for closing roads:

After adopting the provisions of this section, each application to close a designated public road in the county shall be made in writing to the chief administrative officer. Upon receiving an application to close a public road, the chief administrative officer shall give notice to interested parties as provided in this part. The chief administrative officer shall make a recommendation to the regional planning commission regarding whether or not the public road should be closed. Before making any recommendation with respect to closing a road pursuant to this section, the regional planning commission shall provide notice of such action either by written notice mailed to affected property owners or by notice advertised in a newspaper of general circulation in the county not less than fourteen (14) days before such recommendation is made. After receiving the recommendation of the chief administrative officer, the regional planning commission shall make its recommendation to the county legislative body and shall attach the recommendation of the chief administrative officer. After receiving the recommendations as provided herein, the county legislative body may, by resolution adopted by a majority of its members, order the closure of the public road.

T.C.A. § 54-10-216.

## Weight Limits

**Reference Number:** CTAS-831

The county may provide for a system whereby overweight or oversize vehicles may travel on county roads after obtaining a permit to so travel. This permit system must be in conformity with rules and regulations promulgated by the commissioner of transportation.

## State Highways - Weight Limits

**Reference Number:** CTAS-1840

Although county officials have certain powers with regard to weight limits on county roads, this authority is derived from authority possessed by the State Department of Transportation. The ability to regulate weight limits on county roads must fit within the overall scheme of state laws and regulations. For that reason, the following is a summary of the power and authority exercised by the Department of Transportation.

T.C.A. § 55-7-101 - Operation of Vehicles Injurious to Highways Must Conform to Regulations -- No vehicle, truck, engine, or tractor of any kind, whether such vehicle be propelled by steam, gasoline, or otherwise, shall be permitted to operate upon any street, road, highway, or other public thoroughfare which, either by reason of its weight or the character of its wheels, will materially injure the surface or foundation of such street, road, highway, public thoroughfare, including the bridges thereon, unless and until the owner or operator of such vehicle of any kind shall have complied with such rules and regulations as may be prescribed by the departments of transportation and safety relating to the use of such highways by such vehicles.

Statutes regulating the size, weight, and load of motor vehicles traveling on Tennessee highways are codified as Title 55, Sections 55-7-101 -- 55-7-209.

Section 55-7-103 describes when maximum weight limits may be lowered:

Maximum Weight May be Lowered, When - Notices to be Posted -- (a) From January 15 to April 15 of each year, and at any other time by reason of repairs, weather conditions, or recent construction of the road, the maximum weight herein permitted would damage the road, the [state] department of transportation may specify any lower maximum weight which, in the discretion of such department, is necessary in order to protect such streets, roads, highways, or other public thoroughfares from unnecessary injury or damage.

(b) Notice of such reduction in weight load shall be given by the department by posters posted at the termini of the road and all detours for one (1) week before such reduction of load becomes effective.

Violation of regulations contained in Sections 55-7-101--55-7-103 is a Class C misdemeanor and, upon conviction, subject to imprisonment for not greater than thirty (30) days or to a fine of not more than fifty dollars (\$50.00). (Sections 55-7-104, 40-35-110, 40-35-111) In addition, it is illegal to move an overloaded vehicle until the load has been reduced to bring it into legal compliance, or a special permit obtained. Failure to comply is a Class C misdemeanor.

Sections 55-7-107--55-7-109 relate to securing of loads of vehicles hauling timber, pulpwood, logs (T.C.A. § 55-7-107) and loose material hauled in an open truck bed (T.C.A. § 55-7-109), and penalties for violation of these sections. Sections 55-7-201 and 55-7-202 outline maximum length, width and height regulations.

#### MAXIMUM WEIGHT LIMITS

Section 55-7-203 sets out weight limits currently established for public highways in Tennessee, as follows:

Gross Maximum Weight Limit 80,000 lbs.

Single Axles 20,000

Tandem Axles 34,000

The maximum weight limits for vehicles equipped with emissions-reduction technology may be increased by the weight of that technology up to 550 lbs. or the maximum amount allowed by federal law.

Section 55-7-203(c) sets out special provisions for nondivisible overweight loads.

Weight limits for the interstate system are slightly different than those outlined above for state highways. (For a complete explanation of weight limits, please refer to Section 55-7-203).

In addition, Section 55-7-203(b)(7), relates to allowances for error on logging trucks, farm trucks, and certain other vehicles:

(b)(7) For purposes of enforcement of this section, weight restrictions shall be deemed to have a margin of error of ten percent (10%) of the true gross or axle weight for all logging, sand, coal, clay, shale, phosphate, solid waste, recovered materials, farm trucks and machinery trucks when being operated over the state highway system other than the portion designated as the interstate system.

The various types of trucks listed in that statute are defined specifically in the law. The application of the margin of error rule to trucks hauling certain types of materials (machinery, sand) is limited to specific circumstances or distances.

#### OVERWEIGHT, OVERSIZE, OVERLENGTH LOADS

The law not only sets the maximum axle and gross weight limits allowed on Tennessee highways, but also authorizes that "...the commissioner of transportation shall have the authority to grant special permits for the movements of freight motor vehicles carrying gross weights in excess of the gross weights set

forth in Section 55-7-203, or dimensions in excess of the dimensions set forth in Sections 55-7-201 and 55-7-202, and shall charge a fee in accordance with the schedules contained in subsection (h) for the issuance of a permit for each movement." (T.C.A. § 55-7-205(a)) These special permit fees are charged in accordance with the following schedules set out in Section 55-7-205 (h):

Excessive Width:

Not More Than 14 Feet \$ 20.00

Over 14 Feet - Not More Than 16 \$ 30.00

Over 16 Feet -- \$ 30.00 plus \$ 5.00 for each additional foot or fraction thereof greater than 16 feet.

Houseboats over 17 feet – two thousand five hundred dollars (\$2,500), plus one hundred dollars (\$100) for each additional inch or fraction thereof greater than seventeen feet (17').

Excessive Height or Length: \$ 20.00

Excessive Weight: \$ 20.00 plus \$.06/Ton per Mile

Evaluation of Bridges and Similar Structures:

> Movements weighing over 165,000 but not more than 250,000 pounds: \$ 100.00

> Movements weighing over 250,000 but not more than 500,000 pounds: \$ 300.00

> Movements weighing over 500,000 pounds: Actual Cost

A permit shall be available from the department of transportation on an annual basis for overdimensional and/or overweight vehicles except for those vehicles specifically permitted and used to transport cotton seed modules, overdimensional boats used for noncommercial purposes and mobile homes.

EXCEPTIONS TO SIZE AND WEIGHT PROVISIONS

Section 55-7-205 (a) allows certain exceptions pertaining to size and/or weight limits as follow:

Farm Equipment:

...It is not necessary to obtain a permit nor is it unlawful to move any vehicle or machinery in excess of the maximum weight and height....used for normal farm purposes only where the same is hauled on a farm truck....or such vehicle or machinery is being transported by a farm machinery equipment dealer or repairman in making a delivery thereof of new or used equipment or machinery to the farm of the purchaser thereof, or in making a pickup and delivery of such farm machinery or equipment from the farm to a shop of a farm equipment dealer or repairman for repairs and return to the farm, and such movement is performed during daylight hours within a radius of fifty (50) miles of the point of origin thereof and no part of such movement is upon any highway designated and known as a part of the national system of interstate and defense highways of any fully controlled access highway facility.

Utility Companies:

No fee authorized by this section shall be charged for the issuance or renewal of such special permits to retail electric service owned by a municipality or electric cooperative corporation, or to any telephone company or to contractors when they are moving utility poles doing work for such utilities. Upon compliance with the appropriate rules and regulations, such electric services, telephone companies, and their contractors when they are moving utility poles may be issued special permits for stated periods not exceeding one (1) year.

PENALTIES FOR VIOLATIONS

Under T.C.A. § 55-7-206, each violation of Sections 55-7-201--55-7-203, each violation of restrictions on the maximum gross weight of freight motor vehicles adopted by the commissioner of transportation (Section 55-7-205), and each violation of rules and regulations adopted by the commissioner of safety under that section, is a Class C misdemeanor. In addition, when any freight motor vehicle is found to be in violation of only T.C.A. § 55-7-203(b)(3), a fine of twenty-five (\$25.00) is to be imposed. (Section 55-7-206 (d)(1)).

## County Roads - Weight Limits

**Reference Number:** CTAS-1847

COUNTY OFFICIALS' AUTHORITY - OVERWEIGHT, OVERSIZE VEHICLES

Section 55-7-205(a)(8)(B) provides that the county legislative body shall have the same authority to lower weight limits as the commissioner of transportation as it relates to county roads:

The county legislative body shall have the same authority as to county roads; provided, however, that any proposed reduction below the weight limits set by the commissioner pursuant to this section shall require a two-thirds (2/3) vote of the county legislative body and shall be based upon the same criteria as used by the commissioner.

This is the authority to reduce the maximum gross weight of freight motor vehicles operating over lateral highways and secondary roads where through weakness of structure in either the surface of the road or of bridges, the maximum loads provided by law, injure or damage such roads or bridges. T.C.A. 55-7-205(a). Whereas the regular maximum weights for freight motor vehicles are set on a weight per axle basis, with the gross maximum weight limit being 80,000 lbs., the lower weight limits may be a certain gross amount per vehicle.

As lowering weight limits on county roads is done by county legislative body vote, violations of the weight limits could subject the offender to a civil monetary penalty of up to \$500 for violation of rules and regulations of the county if so specified by the resolution of the county legislative body. (Section 5-1-121). Subsequent court decisions probably place limits on this monetary penalty. See Chattanooga v. Davis, 54 S.W.3d 248 (Tenn. 2001). According to the Tennessee Supreme Court in that case, a punitive fine levied by a local government cannot exceed \$50 unless the defendant is allowed to have a jury trial. Higher fines could be enforced if they are remedial in nature rather than punitive, but this distinction is difficult to make. Therefore, a county should generally limit monetary penalties to \$50 or less per violation. Penalty provisions of any regulations should be carefully considered by the county attorney.

Furthermore, the weight limits that are set should be reasonable and based on the best information available regarding the weight that the road or bridge will withstand. The Department of Transportation can assist highway departments by conducting engineering studies that can be used to support the need for reduced weight limits.

Signs should be placed at appropriate places along the road or prior to entry upon a bridge to give the public reasonable notice of the lowered weight limits. In addition, appropriate county officials are also authorized to issue special permits for transporting oversize and/or overweight loads on county roads in conformity with rules and regulations prescribed by the commissioner of transportation.

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