

# WEIGHMASTERS HELP

It was a late summer morning, just before 10 a.m., when **Lenawee County Road Commission's (LCRC)** then-weighmaster **Robert Emery** received a call from a motor carrier officer saying something big was coming their way. "An officer working as a weighmaster in our area received a tip that someone was trying to illegally haul an overweight load from Lansing down to Ohio," said Emery.

Emery was first on the road, and on M-52, in a small town called Madison Center, he caught up to the truck carrying the illegal load before the Michigan State Police motor carrier officer arrived. The load itself was an auto press being transferred from one plant to another. After the officer arrived, and it was confirmed that the driver was missing the proper permits to transport a load of this size, Emery went to work.

The process of weighing a truck this large is challenging. Scales are placed under different tires, with boards placed under the tires not being weighed to keep the vehicle level. Using four sets of portable scales, it took Emery and the officer three hours in the summer sun to weigh the 200,000-pound vehicle.

The result was a ticket to the driver for \$49,000. At the time, it was the biggest ticket ever written for such an offense, and could have been avoided if the proper permits had been acquired. "Being a weighmaster is not really an exciting job," said Emery. "But sometimes you get to see some really interesting things."

## The job of the weighmaster

There are many reasons why roads deteriorate prematurely, including weather, pavement design, subbase, subgrade, existing soil and age.

Commercial traffic and maximum weight loads can be particularly rough on deterioration rate. Many primary and local roads were not built to carry the weight loads of today's commercial truck

configurations or modern agricultural husbandry equipment.

An important tool in the county road agency's box for preserving roads against excessive weight, is the position of weighmaster.

The weighmaster is responsible for using scales to weigh trucks observed on local roads, to ensure they do not exceed weight limits. The number of certified weighmasters at a county road agency varies.

Weighmasters are usually seasonal jobs, used during the "frost laws" or seasonal weight restrictions timeframe in March to April or May. It's also not uncommon for weighmasters to patrol during the spring rush when companies may be looking to make up for lost time from the colder months.

Some weighmasters are county road agency staff, who have different jobs at other times of the year; and some are local police. Weighmasters can be deputized by the local sheriff.

When a weighmaster observes a truck on a local road or county primary road that could potentially be overweight, he or she is authorized by law to pull the truck over. Weighmasters can only issue citations for overweight and oversized vehicles, permit violations and unsecure loads.

Some weighmasters use portable scales that are placed beneath a truck's wheels out on the roadway, which can be

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**– Robert Emery, retired weighmaster, Lenawee County Road Commission**

dangerous due to traffic conditions. Others will direct the truck to a nearby drive-through scale to get an accurate weight.

Weight violations – whether on a road or a local bridge – can cause serious road damage costing thousands of dollars to repair during the vulnerable spring frost break-up.

Citations issued by weighmasters for violation of weight restrictions are prescribed by statute and range from





# PROTECT LOCAL ROADS

\$500 up to thousands of dollars, depending on the magnitude of the violation. Weighmasters can also impound vehicles for failure to pay a ticket.

## Stories from the field

Weighmasters play an important role in the field as “road protectors.”

**John Posegay** has served as weighmaster for the **Washtenaw County Road Commission** for 10 years.

“With all the trucks on the road, it’s hard to keep up with,” Posegay said. “If we catch three to five percent of trucks that are actually violating the weight restrictions, we’re doing pretty well.”

Michigan’s economy is driven by manufacturing and transporting natural resources and agricultural products from rural areas, which depends on trucking. And trucking across Michigan’s fragile roads, takes its toll.

A loaded truck with five axles, weighing 80,000 pounds (the maximum weight on

interstate roads) can result in more damage to a highway than 5,000 cars. An overloaded truck has the impact of nearly 10,000 cars.

“With enough axles and proper spacing of the axles, trucks can haul up to 164,000 pounds,” said Posegay. “The weight allowance on most local roads in Michigan is under 70,000 pounds.”

## Michigan is an axle state

Unlike many other states, Michigan law has long relied on weight-per-axle to determine the size of trucks allowed on its roads. Engineers believe weight-per-axle is the best way to determine the potential for road damage.

“The amount of weight on each axle is critical to how much damage the load can have on the road,” said Emery, chair of LCRC. Emery also worked for LCRC for 22 years as weighmaster.

While many argue for smaller trucks on Michigan roads to prevent damage, others say such a move would simply put more trucks on the road because Michigan has a fixed amount of freight that must be hauled.

## Patrolling the roads and finding common ground

Policing roads to enforce weight restrictions is challenging, difficult and, at times, dangerous. But it’s important to protect taxpayers’ roads from additional damage during the fragile frost laws period. Building partnerships and collaborating with state police and local commercial entities helps road agencies take a proactive approach to weight restrictions.

“Enforcement of weight restrictions is not meant to harm people,” said Emery. “We strive to educate and inform people of the rules and what they need to do to follow them. Our job is to protect our roads and make them safe for the people in our community.”

**Kevin Harju**, PE, engineer-manager for the **Houghton County Road Commission**, helps oversee a quad-county weighmaster service with the **Baraga County Road Commission**, **Keeweenaw County Road Commission** and **Ontonagon County Road Commission**.

Harju says the four counties see few violations in the region, something attributed to the weighmaster’s presence in the community and the road commission’s proactive communication with local industries.

“We’ve been able to foster a great relationship with the timber industry in our area, where we regularly meet to discuss issues affecting each other and work together to come up with innovative, effective solutions,” said Harju. “Finding a common ground on issues like weight restrictions has gone a long way towards keeping our relationships with local industries positive.”



*“Quad County” Enforcement team members, Dan Judnich and former Keeweenaw Sheriff Ron Lahti. They are responsible for Baraga, Houghton, Keeweenaw and Ontonagon co-operative programs where costs are shared between the four counties.*