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Computers, Aerial Photos Slash Billions In Highway Construction

Billions of dollars in highway costs can be saved by new techniques in engineering, Charles L. Miller, Assistant Professor of Surveying, declared at the MIT Regional Conference in Albuquerque recently. Professor Miller described newly-developed computer methods to analyze data for highway location. Essential information can thus be obtained in minutes or hours rather than the weeks or months required in the past, he said.

A method developed by MIT, called the "Digital Terrain Model System," will be available in December for use by highway departments throughout the country. The new system was devised in the MIT Photogrammetry Laboratory, directed by Professor Miller. For the past three years, the laboratory has been doing sponsored research in new methods of photogrammetry, a system by which terrain can be surveyed using 3-D aerial photographs.

Photographs are projected on red and blue light screens and computerized to analyze data. The resulting "survey" kills and valleys, automatically recording the measurements for computer use.

By using it, Professor Miller said, the feasibility of several alternate highway routes can be quickly assessed and conclusions reached as to the most economical route. He exhibited a half-mile of road plotted entirely by computer.

"During the next five years--including 1958--the staggering sum of $50.8 billion will be spent in improving our nation's highways," he said. "Before the currently planned program is completed, civil engineers will have been responsible for designing and constructing in excess of $300 billion in highways--a 41,000-mile network of million-dollar-a-mile turnpikes, linking 42 state capitals and 80 percent of all cities over 50,000 population."

Savings through the new system will approach several percent of the cost of highways, a saving of billions of dollars for the planned US network.

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