Cooperative Highway Services Case Study Report: Number 5

Jefferson County
Contracting with Towns
for
Major Improvements

This report was prepared in partial
fulfillment of contract requirements for:

"Cost Effectiveness of
Consolidating Government Highway Services"
A New York State Department of
Transportation Research Contract

Michael Hattery

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Jefferson County Contracting With Towns for Major Improvements

December, 1996

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Jefferson County Contracts With Towns for Major Improvements[1]

Overview

In the early 1970s Jefferson County (population 110,943) began contracting with towns for road improvement projects on county roads. This practice has grown to the extent that the county contracts for portions of most major reconstruction and rehabilitation projects with town highway departments in the county. In 1996 all of the 22 towns in the county participated in some form of agreement to help with county road projects. The town role varies. The county has three different types of contracts with different levels of town involvement.

Road improvement projects are only a part of this cooperative town-county relationship. The county highway department contracts with town highway departments for all routine summer and winter maintenance on county roads. At this time about one-third of the county highway budget is returned to towns through these contracts for road projects and for maintenance activities on county roads. Jefferson County covers 1,500 square miles of territory and has over 550 centerline miles of road and over 400 bridges to maintain. See the County Trend Profile at the end of this report for comparison with other New York counties.

Importance

Appropriately applied technical input into the maintenance and construction of capital facilities (including roads and bridges) has the potential to improve service quality and reduce the long term cost of providing road services to the public. Some observers believe that there are significant barriers or disincentives for smaller municipalities to invest in adequate technical inputs to road and bridge maintenance and construction. Not the least of these barriers is the persistent tendency of local officials to look at current rather than long term or life cycle costs. There are also a variety of potential organizational barriers for smaller governments to obtain this kind of technical input. Among them are: finding appropriate and trustworthy technical

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[1] This is one of six case study reports prepared under contract with the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT). The report is intended to be useful for: relevant NYSDOT staff, local government officials and those who staff and advise local highway departments. A list of all project reports is at the end of this document. This case study is based on a single interview with the Jefferson County Highway Superintendent and the Deputy County Highway Superintendent. Several key documents were collected in this interview. As a result, the report does not attempt to draw conclusions based on evidenced confirmed from several sources but reports information gained through the interview. Other case studies in this series involved numerous interviews and document collection that enabled corroboration of information which permitted conclusions or findings about key study concepts and questions. A draft of this report was reviewed for general content and accuracy by an involved local official.

consultants, writing and monitoring contracts and agreements, changes in elected officials, and evaluating local liability and risk.

The county contracting program highlighted in this case report represents a cooperative approach by county staff that brings town highway departments into contact with county road building expertise. County staff work in a variety of ways with town personnel on county road repair and rebuilding projects. This relationship provides a learning environment where local road staff can learn from county technical staff and technical staff can learn about local operating and application issues. This approach has permitted the county to reduce the size of its department in terms of personnel and equipment and strengthen the financial resources, size (personnel, equipment, investment, etc.) and capability of town highway departments. This may lead to lower costs for overall county highway department operations.

Detailed Case Description

The Jefferson County Highway Department has been developing this working approach with town highway departments for over 25 years. It is not possible, at this point in time, to clearly document the factors that first led to this intergovernmental approach. The purpose of this more limited case study is to give a brief overview of how this relationship works and what appears to be its potential benefits.

Decentralization of Service Delivery

Contracting out a broad range of highway work has allowed the county to downsize their workforce and equipment inventory. Since this has been a gradual process there has not been an attempt to measure the impact of downsizing overtime. The current county highway superintendent estimates that the highway workforce has been reduced by about 20 positions, and overtime costs reduced from $90,000 to $30,000 during the 1990s. These reductions have been achieved through continued "tinkering" with service changes and adjusting contractual arrangements with the towns. As a result, it is assumed that town crews, budgets and equipment inventories are larger. The county highway department currently has three crews: one for regular road maintenance, one for construction and one for bridge repair.

Construction Projects. The county highway department contracts out a large portion of its road construction projects and some of its bridge projects to town highway departments. In 1994 for example, road and bridge contracts to towns accounted for 1.1 million dollars or approximately ten percent of total county highway department expenditures (see Figure 1, below). The contractual relationship between the county and towns varies based on project needs and available town capacity and resources. Town involvement takes three basic forms (the following language is taken directly from the basic county-town intergovernmental agreement template used by Jefferson County and included in the Appendix to this report):

Figure 1

Jefferson County Expenditures for Contract Work on County Roads and Bridges with Town Highway Departments, 1992 to 1995

(in dollars)

	1992	1993	1994	1995
Service Category				
Snow Removal	$1,230,808	$1,660,280	$1,704,680	$1,839,423
Road Maintenance*	360,293	312,037	310,649	335,143
Road Construction	628,477	850,778	943,533	1,618,708
Bridge Construction/Maintenance	69,798	146,698	140,419	81,293
Total Contracted to Towns	$2,289,376	$2,969,793	$3,099,280	$3,874,567
% of Total County	25%	30%	28%	34%
Total County Highway Spending	$9,032,142	$9,743,200	$10,906,923	$11,261,008

Sources: Except where noted below, the expenditure figures in this table for 1992, 1993 and 1995 were taken from staff memoranda of the Jefferson County Department of Highways (dated March 2, 1994 and June 3, 1996). Figures for 1994 were taken from the 1994 Annual Report & Almanac of the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors (page 25). Total County Highway Spending for 1992 and 1993 are from the New York State Comptroller's Database Summary. The database summary is compiled from Annual Financial Report documents filed with the Comptroller by New York's counties, cities, towns and villages.

A. Predefined project work done by the Town on a unit cost basis, with *project supervision provided by the Town* under the oversight of the County Highway Department.

B. Predefined project work to be completed by the Town on an hourly reimbursement basis at standard rates with *project supervision and oversight provided by the County Highway Department.*

C. As needed project work to be completed by the Town on an hourly reimbursement basis at standard rates.

These basic options provide flexibility to both the town and county in arriving at a level of project involvement by the town highway department that is acceptable to both. A key difference between "A." and "B." type agreements is "who" provides project supervision.

In "A." type agreements the town provides supervision and in "B." type agreements the county provides direct supervision. This flexibility allows for differences in the availability of town forces and equipment, and differences in the experience and skills of the town highway

superintendent and other town personnel. County staff view this as an opportunity to work closely with town personnel and provide on-site training and assistance to improve the capacity of town highway departments.

Road Maintenance. Jefferson County, also, contracts all basic winter and summer maintenance on county roads to towns (see Figure 1, above). In general town highway departments do maintenance work on county road mileage within the town. This includes: snowplowing and ice control, roadside mowing, brush cutting, pothole patching, ditching, and paving. County staff leadership believe that contracting most basic road services to the towns has real "deployment" advantages in conducting road maintenance. The proximity of town garages to county road mileage within the town provide much closer access and quicker response time than the deployment of county crews out of their centralized facility. In contrast, the county would be sending county crews much greater distances, loosing a greater amount of crew time to arrive at job sites in a variety of circumstances. It is assumed that this difference in getting manpower, equipment and materials to the job site results in significant savings. In addition, problems on county roadways within the towns are spotted earliest by town employees that travel the roads frequently. Town departments field most requests and complaints regarding county roads in their area.

More Town Resources. County officials believe that the contracting arrangement has, over time, helped build more well staffed, housed, and equipped town highway departments and increased the level of town financial resources. Figure 2 below contains data comparing the relative level of expenditures and available financial resources with other comparable towns in two adjacent counties, Lewis and St. Lawrence. These two counties border Jefferson and have similar weather patterns and geography. Jefferson and St. Lawrence have roughly equivalent total populations and Lewis is much smaller. Only three counties in the state have a smaller total population than Lewis. The three counties have combined town and county centerline road mileages of: 1,544 for Jefferson, 1,143 for Lewis, and 2,418 for St. Lawrence. Both Jefferson and St. Lawrence Counties share their sales tax receipts with towns while Lewis County does not. Based on overall characteristics, towns in Jefferson and St. Lawrence have the most comparable situation.

The items in Figure 2 were calculated to determine if Jefferson County's contracting program led to a significantly higher level of town highway resources. No attempt was made to determine in detail the contracting practices in St. Lawrence and Lewis counties. Information from previous survey work indicates that St. Lawrence County contracts with approximately 28 of 32 towns for winter road maintenance and eight of the 32 for roadside mowing. The survey did not indicate similar contracting with towns in Lewis County. Amounts in Figure 2 do indicate that a higher annual resource flow for towns in Jefferson County. For every population group (groups 1 through 4) the average intergovernmental revenues per mile of town road are substantially higher than in St. Lawrence or Lewis.

Figure 2

1994 Average Town Expenditures and Intergovernmental Revenues
For Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties
Grouped by Town Population Size

	Jefferson	Lewis	St. Lawrence
Total County Population, 1990 (Area in Square Miles/1000)	110,797 (1.3)	26,796 (1.3)	111,974 (2.7)
Do Towns Share a portion of Sales Tax Revenues?	Yes	No	Yes
Population Group 1 (Up to 1,514)*			
Number of towns in Population Group 1	4	9	13
Road Surface: % of town road mileage paved	40%	39%	63%
Total town expenditures per mile of town road	$ 10,231	$ 5,954	$ 8,083
Intergovernmental revenues per mile of town road	$ 6,226	$ 321	$ 973
Highway budget as % of total town expenditures	61%	72%	63%
Population Group 2 (From 1,514 to 2,782)*			
Number of towns in Population Group 2	6	6	10
Road Surface: % of town road mileage paved	81%	54%	75%
Total town expenditures per mile of town road	$ 10,912	$ 7,122	$ 7,604
Intergovernmental revenues per mile of town road	$ 3,295	$ 551	$ 1,022
Highway budget as % of total town expenditures	51%	73%	61%
Population Group 3 (From 2,782 to 6,409)*			
Number of towns in Population Group 3	10	2	5
Road Surface: % of town road mileage paved	84%	61%	86%
Total town expenditures per mile of town road	$ 11,836	$ 9,265	$ 8,377
Intergovernmental revenues per mile of town road	$ 3,616	$ 173	$ 454
Highway budget as % of total town expenditures	49%	62%	57%
Population Group 4 (Greater than 6,409)*			
Number of towns in Population Group 4	2	0	4
Road Surface: % of town road mileage paved	96%	_	85%
Total town expenditures per mile of town road	$ 15,603	_	$ 18,165
Intergovernmental revenues per mile of town road	$ 3,145	_	$ 591
Highway budget as % of total town expenditures	38%	_	40%

Source: The revenue and expenditure calculations in this table are based on figures from the New York State Comptroller's Local Government Database. Town road mileage figures taken from 1994 Annual Highway Mileage figures maintained by the New York State Department of Transportation based on mileage reports submitted by the municipalities. All mileage, revenue and expenditure calculations in this table are

group averages for the towns in the population group.

* The population ranges for Population Groups 1 through 4 are based on population sizes that divide the states 932 towns in to four equal sized groups or quartiles.

In most cases the differential in average intergovernmental revenues translates into roughly equivalent differentials in expenditures per mile of town road. In one case, Population Group 4, the average expenditures per mile of road for St. Lawrence towns is higher by roughly $2,500 per mile even though towns in Jefferson County receive an average of $2,500 dollars more per mile in intergovernmental revenues. This contradiction appears to be due to an inordinately high level of capital expenditures among Population Group 4 towns in St. Lawrence county in 1994. Operating expenditures for personnel and contractual costs for this group are more in line with the general trend across the other groups.

These figures tend to confirm that Jefferson County towns have a significantly larger pool of resources to work with when calculated on a per mile basis. Along with these resources come additional county road mileage maintenance responsibilities. By receiving reimbursement for labor on a town cost basis and equipment at published state rates, towns should be able to cover the costs incurred by taking on county work. These broadened budgetary resources may increase the general size, personnel and equipment resources of Town highway departments in Jefferson County.

Recent Changes

Contract Streamlining. Town agreements for work with the county have traditionally been handled in three separate contracts. A separate contract was signed for each of three areas: road and bridge maintenance, winter road maintenance (sanding, snow and ice removal), and construction and reconstruction of county roads and bridges. Beginning in 1997 a single contract will be signed with each of the county's 22 towns covering relevant work in each of the three areas. This will reduce the number of contracts being negotiated and handled by each municipality by two-thirds. For the County Highway Department 22 contracts will replace the previous 66 agreements. The intergovernmental agreement template for these contracts is included in the Appendix.

Contract Cost Arrangements. The contract template used by the county clearly lays out cost reimbursement guidelines. These guidelines indicate clear rules for reimbursing personnel and equipment usage for doing county work. Personnel is reimbursed at the actual hourly and fringe benefit rate of personnel working on county projects and equipment rates are set at rates specified in the NYSDOT schedule (at 90 percent of scheduled rates for snow removal services). Materials costs will be paid directly by the county. This cost arrangement is a direct "fee for service" approach and does not contain any administrative or fixed overhead reimbursement charges for towns.

County staff believe the town-county relationship has been useful in promoting improved management and cost saving approaches among the towns. For example, the new contract template calls for the towns to, where possible, "minimize overtime pay by use of a shift work system" to achieve cost savings for snow and ice removal. The concept of increasing shift work during winter months to reduce overtime hours was already being practiced in some towns. By raising this issue through contract discussions with groups of towns, board members were

stimulated to look into this option. A transfer to shift work during the winter has the potential of reducing overtime costs in both town and county expenditures.

Maintenance District Concept. The county highway department is initiating a further step in 1997 to enhance the partnership with town highway departments. Five county highway maintenance districts are being created to regionally deploy county employees and equipment throughout the county. While many counties have satellite facilities located in areas of the county, this change goes one step further. Each of the county's maintenance district's will be co-located in town highway department facilities. The county has negotiated shared facility space with town highway departments in exchange for sharing in facility operating costs (e.g., heat, utilities, etc.).

The county believes this will lead to cost savings in several ways. First, county administrative staff estimate that they spend about $160,000 per year just getting crews out to the field. By deploying personnel, equipment and materials regionally, closer to job sites, county staff believe they can achieve substantial time and transportation cost saving. Second, the county will need to replace some of the aging centralized highway facilities in the near future. By regionalizing personnel and equipment the size of new central facilities can be reduced, decreasing facilities costs. Third, county staff believe that co-locating county and town highway personnel will increase joint and cooperative opportunities leading to further cost savings.

Other Administrative Issues

Contracting with the Private Sector. Administrators in the county highway department contract out for a substantial level of services with the private sector as well. For example, in 1994 forty-five (45) percent of total cash expenditures or over 4.8 million dollars were returned to the private sector to buy materials, supplies, lease equipment, and obtain subcontracted services for county road and bridge maintenance. By actively working with the private sector county administrators remain in touch with private sector pricing and can use it as a benchmark in evaluating town contracts, performance and cost estimates.

Contracting and Administration. County staff believe that the practice of contracting out work to towns probably increases the need for some administrative tasks and costs. It is reasonable to expect that it will take both more administrative work as well as different mix of skills to run a county highway department with a strong focus on maintaining good cooperative relationships and evaluating contracting options. This kind of orientation requires skills in contract monitoring, negotiation, etc. For this reason it is not a surprise that Jefferson County's deputy public works superintendent is not an engineer by training but has a background which includes a stint as Jefferson County Auditor and in private sector contract management.

Why Decentralize?

The initiatives of the Jefferson County Highway Department are counter to the instincts of many regarding how to improve highway services. Many would argue that counties should take a more central role, particularly in highway construction project work. County highway administrators in Jefferson County believe that contracting out county highway work improves the overall maintenance system and helps the county effectively transmit technical expertise in design and road building to town highway personnel. Gary Robbins, Jefferson County Highway Superintendent believes that town personnel are often more capable than they realize. By working directly with town employees, county technical expertise can be used to give "on the job" training and expand the kinds of work that town crews attempt and accomplish.

Another critical factor is how one views the road network within a county. Robbins believes county, town and village road mileage should be viewed as a total county road system, an inter-related road network (not in the sense that the county government controls the whole system). From this perspective, it is important for all highway departments in the county to work together as efficiently as possible to maintain that network. Secondly, Robbins points out that Jefferson County is geographically very large with lots of roads, lots of bridges and some very remote areas. Recreation and tourism are important to the county's economy. Good roads that are maintained efficiently are important for getting people to and from recreational and tourist amenities. The whole county, town, village road network has to work well together for this to happen. In this and other ways a well maintained road and bridge network are an important prerequisite for economic activity and improvement.

In keeping with the view of the county road network the County Highway Superintendent has initiated discussions to swap town and county road mileage to adjust for changes in traffic counts and patterns related to Army's expansion of Fort Drum in the 1980's. The proposed swaps would transfer higher volume towns roads functioning as commuting connectors in the county in exchange for roads whose traffic counts have dropped and are more appropriate to town ownership.

County Board Structure. County highway officials believe that the former Board of Supervisor's structure of the county board was an important factor in county initiatives to contract out highway work to the towns. Under the old structure elected town supervisors also served as members of the county board. In a desire to reduce government overlap these supervisor's were naturally more inclined to support a reduction in county staff and an increase of contract work to town highway departments. In 1996 the county board changed its form. The county legislature now is composed of separately elected legislators from single member districts of roughly equivalent population size. One positive effect of this change has been less pressure to annually do construction projects in many or most towns. Because of this the department has been more able to prioritize and concentrate capital project resources on a smaller number of major construction projects.

Implications for Legislative and Regulatory Change

No legal or institutional barriers were identified in this case that suggested a need for legislative or regulatory change.

Summary of Key Findings

1. **Costing Services:** There is a general need for improved cost analysis practices and tools for use by local governments. Assistance in this area would prove beneficial for local governments in assessing opportunities for cooperation and in developing costing approaches to guide contractual relationships. It appears that detailed cost analysis has been an important management tool in evaluating and adjusting county to town contractual arrangements in this case.
2. **Mechanisms for Monitoring and Maintaining Agreements.** Even well structured agreements require fine tuning and adjustment over time. Agreements should include mechanisms (a process for mutual agreement on annual statements of planned work, regular meetings, etc.) for board members and or operating personnel to communicate and accommodate need for adjustment and change. The contract approach developed by Jefferson County provides an annual mechanism for discussing and adjusting the working relationship with towns over time. It also appears the county highway staff initiate meetings with town board and highway officials as a tool for evaluating new initiatives and addressing problems.
3. **Flexibility for Differences in the Capabilities, Resources and Motivations of Participants.** The towns in Jefferson County vary in their resources, availability (during a given construction season), and resident skills and abilities. The multi-role contractual approach developed by the county permits a flexible partnership which acknowledges these differences in capacity. This flexibility permits towns with varying capabilities and resources to participate in construction partnerships with the county. It also gives the county the ability to structure town responsibilities to ensure successful project work and to take advantage of exemplary town skills and resources where they exist.

Case Study Documents

Below is a list of all legal, budget and organizational documents collected for the case study. Documents marked with an asterisk in the list below are appended to this report.

**Intergovernmental Agreement Between Jefferson County, New York and the Town of _____, New York Relative to Road and Bridge Maintenance Services; Construction and Reconstruction of County Roads; and Sanding, Snow and Ice Removal.*

Highway Construction Agreement between Jefferson County and the Town of Ellisburg for Project No. 90-95 (example of Type A agreement).

Highway Construction Agreement between Jefferson County and the Town of Ellisburg for Project No. 91-96 (example of Type B agreement).

Jefferson County Highway Department Internal Memorandum from Deputy Superintendent John Delles to Superintendent Gary Robbins Regarding Town Services, March 2, 1994.

Jefferson County Highway Department Internal Memorandum from Deputy Superintendent John Delles to Superintendent Gary Robbins Regarding 1995 Expenditure Categories, June 3, 1996.

Persons Interviewed

Gary Robbins, Jefferson County Superintendent of Highways

John Delles, Jefferson County Deputy Superintendent of Highways

County Trend Profile

Other Project Reports

Overview of the Case Study Project

This report is part of a larger research project funded by the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT). The Department sought proposals on the "Cost-Effectiveness of Consolidating Government Highway Services." The issue of jurisdictional realignment, combining units of government, was not to be the focus of the study. NYSDOT was interested in identifying both service functions that are appropriate for consolidation and methods of achieving this consolidation. The Department wanted to identify the institutional and political barriers that adversely affect decisions based on economic factors and to suggest methods for dealing with such barriers (including recommendations for change in state laws and regulations). To achieve these goals a case study design was proposed by the investigator and selected by NYSDOT. A Project Advisory Group (PAG) was recruited to give advice on the selection of case studies. PAG members included a town highway superintendent, a county highway superintendent, a NYSDOT regional maintenance engineer, a staff member from a metropolitan planning organization, staff from the Cornell Local Roads Program, and a staff member from the New York State Legislative Commission on Rural Resources.

A mail survey with telephone follow-up was conducted in the fall of 1995 to identify cases of intergovernmental cooperation in the provision and production of highway services. A list of ten examples were selected for possible case study analysis and refined through consultation with the Project Advisory Group and the NYSDOT Consultant Manager. Six case studies were conducted and the final reports are included in the list of reports below.

A review of current reports and findings on existing statutory and regulatory barriers to service delivery cooperation was also conducted as a part of this project. The results of this review were combined with relevant findings from the case studies in a report on barriers and recommendations for change. See the summary report or executive summary listed below for a review of the projects overall findings and recommendations.

List of Project Reports

Case Study Report: Suggested Cases of Highway Cooperation and Consolidation for Further Study. Michael Hattery and David Kay. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. November 9, 1995.

Appendix to Case Study Report: Data Base of Cases Identified through the Interview Process. Michael Hattery and David Kay. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. November 9, 1995.

Case Design Report: Research Design for Cases of Highway Cooperation and Consolidation. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of

Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. May 15, 1996.

Contract for Street Maintenance and Repair between the Town and Village of Bergen, Genesee County. Cooperative Highway Services Case Study Report Number 1. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Chautauqua County Bridge Program. Cooperative Highway Services Case Study Report Number 2. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Cayuga County Vehicle Maintenance Pool Service to the City of Auburn. Cooperative Highway Services Case Study Report Number 3. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Town of Esperance Contract with Schoharie County. Cooperative Highway Services Case Study Report Number 4. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Jefferson County Contracts With Towns for Major Improvements. Cooperative Highway Services Case Study Report Number 5. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Fostering Exchange with Local Governments: New York State Department of Transportation Region 7 Office of the Regional Maintenance Engineer. Cooperative Highway Services Case Study Report Number 6. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Recommendations for Legislative and Regulatory Change to Promote Highway Service Cooperation and Consolidation. Duane Wilcox, Michael Hattery, and Kevin Crawford. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Summary Report of Case Study Findings and Recommendations for Legislative and Regulatory Change. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Project Executive Summary. Michael Hattery. Local Government Program, Department of Agricultural, Resource, and Managerial Economics, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University. December, 1996.

Appendix