

Texas' Regional Planning Coordination Program

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) provides the industry with an effective example of best practices for a State DOT in furthering the goals and objectives of the United We Ride Program. For the past three years, TxDOT has sustained a comprehensive program of activities utilizing a unique combination of strong leadership, necessary resources, collaborative problem solving, creative changes to business practices, and ongoing communications that has placed Texas at the forefront of transportation coordination efforts nationwide. Today, each of the state's 24 planning regions has an adopted Regional Transportation Coordination Plan and is actively engaged in conversations with stakeholders on implementation and updates to their plan. Exciting and innovative projects are underway in many communities addressing critical needs and representing new partnerships with health and human service agencies, workforce programs and local employers, and other institutions to solve these pressing problems. Some of the projects, with TxDOT's strong support, also have submitted nominations for this award.

State DOTs have a significant role in promoting federal mandates for comprehensive coordination of public transportation services. Additionally, in Texas, the Texas Legislature passed legislation requiring coordination of public transportation services funded with federal, state, or local funds. TxDOT, in strategic partnership with local and state agencies including transportation entities, health and human services providers, workforce agencies, and others has encouraged a decentralized approach to transportation coordination reflecting a belief that plans work best if tailored for the unique sets of needs and resources in communities across Texas. Throughout this process, TxDOT's primary customers, or target audience, have been those lead agencies responsible for directing the planning effort, grantees (or potential grantees) responsible for implementing projects or programs evolving from the coordination effort, and stakeholders whose participation is absolutely essential to the success of this effort. Based on the Texas experience, some key ingredients for a successful state role are listed below.

Leadership: The Texas Transportation Commission (TTC) has been actively involved in providing the initial focus on coordination as well as on sustaining that focus through a variety of subsequent actions and decisions impacting the coordination effort. In 2004, at the direction of then Transportation Commissioner Hope Andrade, TxDOT convened the Regional Study Group, comprised primarily of non-TxDOT representatives from various transit and stakeholder groups, to provide insight and guidance on how to implement the state and federal coordination mandates. Lead by Michael Morris, Transportation Director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, the study group recommended that a unique plan to coordinate public transportation services be developed in each of the state's 24 councils of government/regional planning commission areas. The study group further recommended that interested parties in each region designate a lead agency and that the agency form a diverse steering committee including representatives of transit providers, health and human service agencies, workforce agencies, and the general public to help create the plan. The study group continued its groundbreaking efforts through delivery of the initial set of plans for each region in late 2006.

Resources: Since 2006, TxDOT has provided resources to sustain the planning effort, funded local feasibility studies on coordination issues, conducted training, and devoted significant amounts of staff time to promote coordination activities. Summarizing this effort:

Planning support: TxDOT has awarded almost \$5.5 million since 2006 to support coordination planning efforts in each of the 24 regions. Over half those funds (54%) have been state dollars with the balance coming from federal Section 5304 program funds. TxDOT has also engaged the services of the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) to assist across a broad spectrum of coordination activities.

Local studies: TxDOT has routinely awarded RTAP and/or Section 5304 funds to support local area studies consistent with coordination efforts. Examples include a software feasibility study in rural El Paso County, rural and small urban system consolidation efforts in the San Angelo and Galveston areas, and regional maintenance center projects in Waco and Longview.

Training: Since 2006, TxDOT has funded three courses on Mobility Management using RTAP and Section 5304 program funds. A total of 109 individuals from 27 agencies across the state have attended these sessions. In July 2008, TxDOT, with the assistance of TTI and the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), organized a two-day workshop entitled, "Building Partnerships: Moving Forward," designed to provide guidance and share information with lead agencies and their partners on ways to enhance community transportation services through coordination. The workshop included five areas of focus: Building Partnerships, Coordinated Planning, Technology, Marketing/Outreach, and Public Involvement. Nearly 200 persons attended.

Problem Solving: Early on in the process several issues of statewide significance were identified as constraints to coordination. These issues included: maintenance and reliability problems with alternatively fueled fleets, the overall age of the fleet statewide leading to significant service delivery and reliability (hence coordination) issues, and a general lack of local match necessary to draw down federal program funds. TxDOT responded to each these issues: 1) the Department revised its practice that agencies procure alternatively-fueled vehicles and, instead, refocused its efforts on reduced emission levels (what comes out of the tailpipe as opposed to what goes into the tank); 2) since December 2006, the Texas Transportation Commission (TTC) has awarded more than \$23 million to rural and small urban providers for fleet replacement, including securing an unprecedented statewide FTA 5309 discretionary award of \$11.6 million; and 3) awarding \$10.2 million in Transportation Development Credits (TDCs) in lieu of local match for capital projects supporting fleet replacement, expansion, and coordination. Use of TDCs also allowed scarce local resources to be used as match for operating purposes during a time of significant cost increases associated with the rise in the price of fuel.

Later on in the process it became apparent that many efforts were struggling to get the right persons at the table from various stakeholder groups, especially the health and human services community. In response to this TxDOT organized and facilitated ten regional forums around the state, attended by 375 persons, to help regional lead agencies make the right connections with these key stakeholders. TxDOT facilitated a collaborative effort among a diverse group of stakeholders to design and implement the forums. This included securing executive level support from the Health and Human Services Commission.

Changing Business Practices: As the designated recipient for numerous FTA programs for non-urbanized and urbanized areas of the state, it became apparent to TxDOT that a different approach to those programs utilizing competitive calls for projects could help facilitate and promote coordination. Rather than issue individual program calls for JARC, New Freedom, and Intercity Bus projects during different times of the year, the Department created a "Coordinated Call for Projects," issuing a single RFP for all competitive programs at the same time. TxDOT also included some available Section 5311 (non-intercity bus), RTAP and Section 5304 funds to encourage comprehensive proposals. The objectives of this effort are to: promote comprehensive system development proposals, provide grantees with a more predictable process, create greater flexibility and efficiency by allowing grantees to anticipate grants from multiple funding streams simultaneously, and assist in public transportation coordination efforts.

Communication: Throughout this entire effort TxDOT has emphasized communication as critical to a successful, sustainable, planning process. To that end, two products have been developed to provide routine communication, a newsletter, *Partners* and the Regional Coordination Website. A key theme in our communication efforts is to identify and disseminate best practices.

TxDOT has played a significant role in promoting a comprehensive coordination of public transportation services in the state. The focus has always been on the primary customers - those responsible for directing the planning effort and for implementing projects or programs. These customers have been absolutely essential to the success of this collaborative effort.