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2021 FTA Transit Asset Management Virtual Roundtable Summary Report

Introduction

On June 22-24, 2021, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) hosted its second virtual Transit Asset Management Roundtable to discuss TAM practices among transit agency stakeholders. The Virtual Roundtable was divided into two events: a public, webinar-style panel discussion on June 22, and a two-day invitational interactive event on June 23-24. Throughout the event, many agencies described the difficulties they have faced during the past year, due to the impacts of the COVID-19 health emergency, and how they have informed plans to move forward while addressing those challenges. They also shared that the health emergency has been problematic for the industry, but it has also demonstrated the essential need for safe and reliable transit service for front line workers, as well as the general public.

This document summarizes the sessions on June 23 and 24. The two-day invitational event included over 100 TAM stakeholders from transit providers and FTA staff from across the country, to share best practices on TAM related topics. Each day had its own theme and included agency presentations and interactive discussions in breakout groups, and with the larger group. The first day featured presentations on processes for updating TAM plans, which was a timely topic given the upcoming October 2022 deadline for agencies to update their initial TAM plans. Speakers from the Vermont Agency of Transportation (VTrans), Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District (San Francisco, CA), and Knoxville Area Transit (Knoxville, TN) explained their approaches to updating their agency TAM plans, including lessons learned since the development of their original plans.

The second day focused on emerging technologies and their relation to TAM. It included presentations from the Utah Transit Authority (UTA), Capital Metro (Austin, TX), and King County Metro (Seattle, WA). UTA provided an overview of a research project that aims to use a new imaging technology to perform condition assessments on rail track, while Capital Metro and King County Metro gave presentations on their current status and future plans to transition to zero emission bus fleets.

Below are summaries of the high-level themes from agency presentations, breakout group activities, and larger group Q&A and general discussions. Many of these topics recurred throughout the two-day event.

Coordination

Internal agency collaboration

Under normal circumstances, transit provider executives have to balance numerous competing priorities when making investment decisions. Some attendees described how, since the start of the COVID-19 health emergency, it can be especially difficult to shift agency leadership's focus to TAM needs. Progress through TAM practices and programs often takes time to become apparent, and in times of crisis, attention usually gets directed away from long term goals and instead to the most pressing issues and the most effective short-term solutions for them.

A number of agencies are still struggling to educate other departments about the value of TAM and how it can benefit those other departments, and the agency as a whole. However, many participants shared that other departments are now more involved with TAM processes. Maintenance departments and asset owners are now contributing to asset inventories, while finance departments, planning departments, or executives are using TAM data to help make investment decisions and inform future plans.

Documenting and sharing specific examples of how a TAM practice can be useful to other departments, creating clear standard operating procedures (SOPs), and providing proper training on new tools and processes are some techniques that agencies have found to be successful when trying to establish improved coordination within an agency.

Group Plan interaction

For Group Plans to function efficiently, both the Group Plan Sponsor and the participants must be clear about their needs and assumptions, which requires regular communication. Group Plan Sponsors are meant to be information gatherers and analyzers but to execute those roles, they have to collaborate with their participants early and often throughout the process of developing or updating their Group Plan. Some Group Plan sponsors noted how challenging it can be to engage with participants sufficiently. Sponsors sometimes find it difficult to get adequate information from participants, especially in the appropriate format. Those that have had success with participant involvement shared that direct communication with all participants is needed. In cases with a substantial number of participants, some Roundtable attendees noted the value of hosting annual workshops with Group Plan participants. Such events provide an opportunity to set clear expectations about the process, format, and information that participants need to provide, and allow participants to ask clarifying questions and learn from experiences and questions of other participants.

Connections between PTASP and TAM requirements

The Public Transportation Agency Safety Plan (PTASP) Rule is now in effect and agencies are finding connections between their TAM plans and Agency Safety Plans (ASPs). The ASP includes risk management and hazard identification; in some cases, those hazards relate specifically to assets. Agencies found their methods to meet PTASP requirements helpful in identifying additional assets that should have been included in their TAM plan inventory. Other connections include condition assessments and their common inclusion of a safety component in rating scales, and investment prioritization processes, though the processes may weigh TAM and safety projects differently. In addition, one agency described how financing sources can impact the implementation of safety and SGR projects. They suggested that having separate funding sources would allow agencies to prioritize both types of investments, rather than having them compete for the same funding.

In some ways the plans complement each other but aligning TAM plans and Safety plans can be complicated. One agency said that they reviewed both rules and found the ASP requirements to be more specific, so they developed their Safety plan and then made changes to their TAM plan as needed to ensure consistency in both plans.

Transition to zero-emission fleets

The scope and implications of transitioning to a fleet of zero-emission vehicles (ZEVs) can be overwhelming for agencies, especially those in States that have or will be instituting mandates requiring such a transition on a specific timeline. Determining which technology would work best for an agency is a first step and to make an informed decision, early engagement with stakeholders is essential. In the case of battery electric buses (BEBs), agencies need to consider the range of the vehicles and the infrastructure required for charging, either at a charging facility or through on route charging. Participants that have started their transition shared important lessons learned about categorizing batteries as additional assets that have their own useful life benchmarks (ULBs), determining the appropriate BEB fleet size, assessing existing facilities that could be adapted for new technology, developing local utility partnerships, and understanding manufacturer readiness and timeline for delivery of new assets.

One agency that is currently transitioning its fleet shared that part of its process includes identifying specific needs for the technology, liaising with internal partners to understand their needs, and then expanding to external partners. They also noted that when thinking about funding for a long-term transition, resource planning is vital. Agencies should have standard decision-making processes in place that include investment strategies that can be updated as needed to adapt as technology needs change and grow.

Workforce needs for new technologies

Transit providers need to consider how the introduction of new vehicle, facility, and infrastructure technologies will impact their staff. Participants said that training programs for current staff will require significant changes, which could include things like providing appropriate resources to operations and maintenance staff, retraining mechanics, and updating overall training programs. Leveraging existing training programs through technology manufacturers may also be a practical tactic for agencies. One agency suggested that TAM staff should coordinate with their Human Resources department to determine if additional labor classifications will be necessary to categorize the knowledge and skills required to support the use of new technologies. Also, agencies should reassess their recruitment strategies for operations and maintenance positions to make sure they can attract applicants with the appropriate education and experience.

Data for decision-making

Depending on the size of an agency, different resources may be utilized to collect, track, and analyze data. Many larger agencies rely on enterprise asset management (EAM) software to manage their data, many smaller agencies use more basic tools and find them to be sufficient. A smaller agency described how they developed their own Excel tool that they use to record condition assessment of current assets, identify lifecycle investment requirements, forecast asset replacement funding requirements, and forecast funding requirements for new assets. Regardless of the tool being used, all agencies are trying to use data to help drive decision-making, and significant time and effort are needed to ensure that data

are accurate and comprehensive. Integrating data can be a difficult process and before it can be done, details like identifying sources of data, confirming methods for collecting data, and determining appropriate formats for data need to be considered. Agencies that have a reliable system in place for collecting and analyzing data are now able to use the data for scenario planning purposes. They can show how different decisions will affect the state of good repair (SGR) backlog at their agency. Having the ability to show real implications of decisions makes it easier to engage with executive leadership as well as colleagues in other departments.