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2022 FTA Transit Asset Management Virtual Roundtable Summary Report

Introduction

On July 19-21, 2022, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) hosted its thirteenth Transit Asset Management (TAM) Roundtable. The virtual Roundtable was divided into two events: a public, webinar-style panel discussion on July 19, and a two-day invitational interactive event on July 20 and 21. The event centered on integration, more specifically on how TAM investment decisions can incorporate additional factors like agency strategic priorities, and on how agencies can institutionalize TAM practices that are beneficial throughout the organization.

This document summarizes the sessions on July 20 and 21. The two-day invitational event included nearly 90 participants from transit agencies and FTA staff from all parts of the country, with a goal of sharing and discussing TAM related best practices. Each day included peer presentations from transit agency representatives, panel sessions, and breakout group activities. The first day focused on how agencies are including priorities like equity, accessibility, and environmental sustainability in TAM investment decision-making processes, with presentations from TriMet (Portland, OR) and the Chicago Transit Authority (Chicago, IL). The day ended with a panel on how agencies have found ways to utilize TAM in responding to uncertainty, featuring speakers from Luzerne County Transportation Authority (Kingston, PA) and Metro St. Louis (St. Louis, MO).

The next day, Seattle DOT (Seattle, WA), Denver Regional Transit District (RTD) (Denver, CO), and Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) (Boston, MA) presented on TAM-related tools their agencies have implemented. Seattle DOT discussed how risk is evaluated for their assets and how the risk rating impacts investment prioritization, Denver RTD provided an overview of a tool they developed using Microsoft Power BI to improve their preventive maintenance scheduling system and significantly reduce related costs, and MBTA shared their process for establishing asset management data requirements for external contracts. The event concluded with a panel of FTA staff from the Office of Budget and Policy, the Office of Planning and Environment, the Office of Program Management, and the Office of Safety and Oversight, which highlighted connections between TAM and other FTA programs.

Discussions during the two-day event generated several themes which are summarized below.

Making Connections

TAM and Strategic Priorities

TAM is still a relatively new component to many transit agencies, and the majority began by understanding the TAM Rule requirements and how to meet compliance. A lot of agencies are still learning the basics of TAM; however, many are going beyond baseline requirements and incorporating broader strategic priorities into TAM investment decisions. For many agencies these priorities include things like equity, accessibility, and environmental sustainability. Several participants noted that aligning their TAM plans and their agency strategic plans is a good way to start the process. A smaller number of agencies discussed having structures in place to ensure agency strategic priorities are incorporated into all agency plans and activities. One agency underscored the value of communicating what agencies are prioritizing to the public in a transparent manner, and how those priorities translate into how they are investing in the system. Data are a major consideration when adding inputs, like strategic priorities, to TAM investment decision processes. Participants emphasized the need to think about what data are needed to integrate additional priorities effectively. It is possible that useful data may already be collected by the agency for other purposes, which would be beneficial but still require interdepartmental collaboration to determine the best way to share information. In some cases, publicly available census data are the best option, depending on the priorities the agency is trying to incorporate. If a new data need that is not publicly available is involved, agencies would have to navigate finding the appropriate source and deciding how to collect relevant information efficiently.

TAM Integration

Many participants have found that having a state of good repair (SGR) score for assets makes it easier to incorporate TAM into other aspects of the organization. Having a concrete data point has helped some agencies to give TAM a more formal place in the capital planning process. Developing the SGR score was less complicated for some agencies because they were able to work with existing data and reframe it. Other participants find it overwhelming to start the effort to create a priority scoring system for TAM and some expressed a lack of support to implement proper use of a rating system and SGR score. Organizational silos are a challenge and strong working relationships with leadership and other teams or departments in an agency significantly impact the success of TAM integration endeavors. Participants said that developing partnerships within their organizations often begins by joining initiatives and meetings with groups that have shared objectives.

Group Plans

For Group Plan sponsors, integration of strategic priorities and coordination in general are more complicated because they are working with many Group Plan participants that have their own goals and objectives for their transit systems. The level of collaboration depends very much on things like State mandates. Some Group Plan sponsors follow a top-down approach driven by mandates with structures in place that require participants to have specific plans completed and provide details on priorities that projects will support when requesting funding. One Group Plan sponsor said that they offer support to their participants in developing the plans and documentation required for funding requests. Many Group Plan sponsors have more informal procedures in place to coordinate with participants and provide support on an as-needed basis.

Advancing TAM Within Agencies

Processes

Although some agencies and Group Plan sponsors are still following the same processes they developed for their initial TAM plans and programs, many have used insight from their experience to adapt and improve. Some agencies have changed or added performance metrics, and many have revisited the use of FTA's default useful life benchmarks (ULBs) and made adjustments based on historical data and local operating conditions. Participants also discussed criticality of assets as a new element utilized to prioritize TAM investments.

Collaboration

Communicating the benefits of TAM to other parts of an organization has been an obstacle and remains a challenge for many agencies, but some are having more success now than in the past. Part of the change may be due to enhanced messaging and more targeted outreach to specific audiences, and it also may be a result of TAM related procedures proving to be effective. For example, one participant described how asset owners at their agency now better understand the importance of condition ratings and keeping them up to date because they have seen how that impacts investment decisions. Several agencies expressed that their ability to use TAM data to demonstrate SGR needs has been helpful in discussions with leadership, especially when advocating for a proactive approach.

Data

Agencies have found ways to improve how they collect information. Some participants shared how they have leveraged the data being collected for other purposes and worked with other departments to avoid duplicating efforts. Several participants described factors to consider when information will be utilized across the organization including common naming conventions. It can require significant work to marry data sets from different departments and establishing universal terminology is a vital step.

Data formats for TAM reporting to FTA's National Transit Database (NTD) do not always align with how agencies track their information. One agency noted that they are developing a methodology for the NTD annual reporting and how they can make better use of asset inventory module forms. They considered all reports that involve asset inventory forms and completed a review at the end of their last reporting cycle to identify lessons learned that will inform the methodology.

TAM tools

As agencies determine how TAM can function most efficiently for them, they are developing tools to support TAM practices. These tools have a wide range of objectives with some used for tracking purposes, which then inform agency maintenance schedules, provide insight on supply chain performance reliability, and feed dashboards for planned investments and asset inventory needs. One participant shared that they created an internal database program for project request submissions that compiles TAM ratings, safety and security ratings, cost savings information, and organizational priorities.

In addition to developing tools internally, agencies use off the shelf software. Many rail operators use software for inspection purposes and to monitor track conditions. One agency said they connect the data coming from their inspection tool to their Enterprise Asset Management (EAM) system to streamline data collection efforts. EAMs are advantageous for many agencies, but not necessary for all of them. One participant discussed how their agency established a successful practice of gathering information from multiple sources throughout the asset lifecycle and directing that information to their

EAM. Others that have EAMs talked about the significant time and effort it takes to set them up and obstacles they have faced when requesting to purchase addition modules for their EAMs to add functionality or incorporate information from additional departments. Use of an EAM has the ability to act as a catalyst for enhanced integration and coordination for an agency, but it also has the potential to overcomplicate information for smaller agencies. Many small agencies find spreadsheets most practical as their main tool for inventorying, tracking, and prioritizing.

Any tool that involves users from multiple departments would benefit from soliciting input from all stakeholders and having a strategic implementation plan. Proper messaging to end users at the outset can help ensure all users understand their role and can provide opportunities to ask for feedback or address concerns. Participants suggested that agencies be aware of their audience and understand that they may need to change their approach depending on the audience. Agencies should plan to provide adequate training, ongoing if needed, and to establish evaluation criteria for the tool or process.

Staffing and Equipment Shortages

Agencies are facing staffing issues in many areas, one of which is maintenance positions. Some participants described that they have sufficient funding to perform necessary maintenance but do not have adequate staff to complete it. In addition, several agencies talked about addressing high levels of staff turnover as well as the loss of valuable institutional knowledge when colleagues leave and the need for better succession planning.

Supply chain delays are also causing challenges for many agencies. Several participants noted that they are responding to equipment shortages by preserving assets as much as possible, sometimes choosing to repair vehicles instead of disposing of them. Others talked about purchasing used vehicles as an option but shared that they can also be difficult to find and are much more expensive in the current environment.