Introduction

The Research and Special Studies (RSS) Section of the West Virginia Department of Transportation (WVDOT) hosted a Peer Exchange from October 19 - October 22, 2010 at the Bavarian Inn in Shepherdstown, WV. Members of the Peer Exchange included:

Kevin Burgess, Planning Engineer; FHWA – WV Division
Kim Carr, Program Coordinator; West Virginia Local Technical Assistance Program
Sabrina DeVall, Editor; West Virginia Local Technical Assistance Program
Mridul Gautam, Interim Associate Vice-President of Research; West Virginia University
Sandra Schmahl Hoff, Manager – Transportation Research; Tennessee DOT
Bill Kelsh, Director; Virginia LTAP *(Moderator)*
Elizabeth Lilly, Highway Engineer Associate; West Virginia DOT
Andrew Morgan, Program Coordinator; West Virginia Local Technical Assistance Program
Radhey Sharma, Chair – Civil and Environmental Engineering; West Virginia University
James Sime, Manager of Research; Connecticut DOT
Linda Taylor, Director of Research Services; Minnesota DOT
Andrew Williams, Administrator – Office of Innovation, Partnerships and Energy; Ohio DOT
Donald Williams, Research and Special Studies Section Head; West Virginia DOT

The expressed objectives of the Peer Exchange were to discuss

1) A draft revised policy manual for the RSS Section that in its final form is clear, concise, and a stand-alone document.
2) Strengths and weaknesses of the outlined policies.
3) Other program's policies, specifically concerning progress reporting and/or deliverables.

In preparation for the Peer Exchange, each team member reviewed the draft of the manual and was asked to come prepared with comments. The primary focus was on content, however, the team members were also asked to make notes and provide feedback on format, color, spelling and grammar.

Primary Discussions

Team members reported that overall they had a positive impression of the draft manual. They indicated that the manual is user-friendly and very professional looking. Team members liked the format and the layout of the document, as well as the use of colors and occasional graphics. The Peer Exchange team had suggestions regarding the following key points:

- Clearer definitions in the preface, along with a few additional words. The abbreviations list also had a few additions
- Minor changes to the review and evaluation forms
- Including more flowcharts throughout the text to help readers follow the RSS process, particularly that of soliciting research and the RSS Section budget

Suggested Program Changes

The most discussed item during the Peer Exchange was the RSS Section's current process of receiving progress reports and invoicing. Other states shared that they use a task-based milestone process for payments. Representatives from Ohio and Minnesota were particularly knowledgeable on this subject, as each of their programs uses the milestone process. Suggestions were made to the WVDOT to replace the current progress report system with a deliverable system, in which each task has an associated deliverable that must be received and approved before the contractor receives payment for the invoice. The idea of holding a retainer for the final report up to 20%, rather than the current 5%, was also discussed. The goal of this system is ensuring that research meets the needs of the WVDOT, with researchers closely following the contractual agreements and presenting tangible items to the WVDOT. Ideally, this will result in more timely and efficient work by both the contracted researchers and the WVDOT.

Opportunities for Attendees

Attendees at the Peer Exchange gained an opportunity to closely examine their own policy manuals and make possible improvements. Linda Taylor reported that she planned to start updating Minnesota's manual after the Peer Exchange, as did Sandra Schmahl Hoff of Tennessee. Participants also discussed ways to provide their respective DOTs with more control over research projects. Suggestions were made by Andrew Williams of Ohio to require a DOT champion and Linda Taylor of Minnesota to have a DOT liaison. Both suggestions were discussed and considered as possibilities for the WVDOT, as well as Connecticut and Tennessee, who currently do not require an internal "champion" or "liaison" for research projects.

With respect to their own manuals, each state representative agreed that their manuals needed revised, or completely rewritten. In an effort to help Peer Exchange attendees improve their own manuals, the WVDOT RSS Section will provide each member with a final copy of the policy manual, upon its completion.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Peer Exchange team members agree that the meeting was successful in addressing the quality of the draft manual. Based on the discussions during the meeting, the RSS Section is hoping to make some significant changes to the research process at the WVDOT. Most important, the RSS Section will attempt a transition from progress reporting and percentage complete for payments to task-based deliverables and milestones for payment. New text is being drafted and incorporated into the manual that will serve as the new payment policy for the RSS Section.

The RSS Section also plans to unveil the new manual in a sort of town hall meeting. This will provide WVDOT personnel, researchers, contractors and others involved in the research process an opportunity to become familiar with the new policies and ask questions about the policy manual.