

0-7133: Develop Guidebook for Managing System Costs: Operational and Capital Cost Management at Rural and Small Urban Public Transit Systems

Background

Rural and small urban transit systems across the United States face fiscal challenges caused by the growing gap between the cost of providing transit service and available federal, state, and local funding. Rural and small urban transit systems also often face high levels of staff turnover and a lack of knowledge management procedures to help sustain cost management practices over time.

Although a variety of topic-specific transit cost management resources exist, many are out of date, and none provide cost management strategies in a way that is both comprehensive and approachable—especially for new transit managers. This project developed and tested a guidebook (with accompanying toolkit), an instructor-led workshop, and an online course for rural and small urban operational and capital cost management.

What the Researchers Did

This research performed the following activities:

- Conducted a needs assessment of Texas rural and small urban public transit systems to better understand their cost management needs, what cost management topics are most critical, and what format of training materials would be the most helpful to rural and small urban transit managers.
- Conducted an inventory and review of existing cost management materials.

- Conducted case studies with highly cost-efficient rural and small urban transit systems to identify unique and notable practices for operational and capital cost management.
- Synthesized the findings into a series of topical guidebook chapters (with an accompanying toolkit of 10 unique tools).
- Used the guidebook to develop an instructor-led workshop (with supporting handouts, exercises, and other materials).
- Used the instructor-led workshop to develop an online course containing a series of 21 10-to-40-minute YouTube videos that allow learners to consume workshop contents at their own pace.

Research Performed by:

Texas A&M Transportation Institute
Texas A&M University–Kingsville

Research Supervisor:

Michael J. Walk, TTI

Researchers:

Suzie Edrington, TTI
Roya Etminani-Ghasrodashti, TTI
Kelly Blume, TTI
Will Rodman, TTI
Amir Hessami, TAMUK
James Cardenas, TTI
Todd Hansen, TTI
John Overman, TTI
Li-Wei Tung, TTI

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All products (guidebook, workshop, and online course) were pilot-tested and evaluated by Texas rural and small urban transit managers. Final improvements to the products were made after pilot testing was completed.

What They Found

Rural and small urban transit systems' operational costs are mainly driven by only a handful of cost categories (e.g., labor, fuel, parts, and insurance). On the other hand, rural and small urban transit systems' capital costs are mainly driven by revenue vehicle acquisitions. These cost categories are the areas in which rural and small urban systems need the most guidance and tools supporting useful strategies; however, very limited resources are currently available.

Although time-intensive, instructor-led training (both in-person and remote) appears to be the most effective and most desired method for training rural and small urban transit systems on cost management. Online resources such as short videos and self-paced courses were the next most effective method. Static, paper-based resources appear to be the least effective and desired. Rural and small urban transit systems want resources that are easy to use, easy to search, and easy to access. These transit systems

also want the training and guidance materials to be up to date and to support not only transit system staff but also Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) public transportation coordinators (PTCs).

The three products developed by this project (guidebook, workshop, and online course) were found by Texas rural and small urban transit managers to be thorough, helpful, and comprehensive—providing managers with tools to understand, manage, and predict operational and capital costs to help them maximize every available dollar provided by federal, state, and local revenue sources.

What This Means

The products should be promoted and publicized by TxDOT and made part of the training resources regularly made available to transit managers and PTCs. The guidebook and toolkit form the foundation of the products, and updates and improvements can be made regularly. The workshop should be made available at least annually, and the online course should be kept fresh and available for continued use. Collecting ongoing evaluation data and comments from product users will help continually improve the products.

For More Information

Project Manager:

Katelyn Kasberg, TxDOT, (512) 298-9928

Research Supervisor:

Michael J. Walk, TTI, (512) 407-1135

Project Monitoring Committee Members:

Bolivar Bolanos, Michael Dietz, Nancy Hoen, Laura Morales, Vanessa Owens, Rebecca Smith, Debbie Tahari, Theodore Kosub, Joanne Steele (prior project manager)

Research and Technology Implementation Office
Texas Department of Transportation
125 E. 11th Street
Austin, TX 78701-2483

www.txdot.gov

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