

TAM Plan Peer Exchange: Summary and Key Takeaways

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Summary

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Office of Budget and Policy (TBP) hosted a Transit Asset Management (TAM) peer exchange on June 6-7, 2018 in Chicago, IL. The purpose of the peer exchange was to bring together three transit agencies from around the country to discuss their draft TAM plans, one of the central requirements of TAM Rule. The group was composed of finance, executive, and maintenance practitioners representing the following three organizations:

- Chatham Area Transit (CAT), a Tier II agency based in Savannah, Georgia;
- San Joaquin Regional Transit District (SJRTD), a Tier I agency based in Stockton, California;
- Spokane Transit Authority (STA), a small Tier I bus-only agency based in Spokane, Washington.

These agencies have a number of characteristics in common that allowed for effective peer to peer knowledge sharing: they each operate bus-only service in a small or medium sized metropolitan area, they manage fleets that fall between a large Tier II and small Tier I agency in terms of TAM requirements, and they had a draft TAM plan ready to discuss at the time of the June meeting.

Each agency brought a unique perspective on how best to integrate TAM into day to day activities, reach compliance, and make progress toward a state of good repair (SGR). The experiences they shared during the peer exchange reflected different political and funding environments, as well as differences in the asset maintenance and investments needs they face today and anticipate facing in the future.

The peer exchange was designed to facilitate both a self-assessment and peer review of each agency's draft TAM plan. Agencies contributed draft plans that were nearly complete; the timing of the event ensured that participants would have an opportunity to ask questions, clarify requirements, and incorporate feedback and revisions prior to FTA's October 2018 completion deadline.

Central to the peer exchange agenda was a round robin peer review – prior to meeting, each participant received a digital copy of another agency's draft TAM plan and conducted a thorough review that included a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats (SWOT) analysis. Each agency presented the findings of its review to the group on the first day. The round robin review process provided for an open dialogue that ranged from high level strategic approaches to TAM, to very specific details about individual TAM plan elements. This summary document provides a collection of key takeaways from the conversations at the peer exchange.

Key Takeaways

TAM plans can be a useful tool for communicating asset investment needs and building support for asset maintenance and replacement programs.

Agencies discussed how TAM plans can serve as a tool in communicating the benefits of sound asset management to key stakeholders, such as executive board members, political leaders, and the traveling public.

- SJRTD noted that their TAM plan provides a great way to tell the agency's story and communicate investment needs.
- CAT described how they were able to link their TAM plan to the agency's broader strategic planning efforts in order to communicate a cohesive strategic approach to key stakeholders.
- At STA, agency leadership had used the TAM plan to show improvement in asset condition and progress toward SGR goals. The data-driven nature of their TAM plan allows them to demonstrate responsible stewardship of the assets they are in charge of managing.

Similarly, attendees discussed how the TAM plan can be useful in securing discretionary funding from State and MPO partners.

- SJRTD noted that the wealth of asset inventory and condition data generated through their TAM plan development process is useful in demonstrating how competitive grants are tied to an overarching investment program.
- Agencies expressed concern that progress toward reducing the maintenance backlog, especially as reflected in metrics that drive grant decisions, may make funding a broader asset management program more difficult since effective TAM practices may eventually signal a lesser need for investment support. To mitigate this possibility, agencies recognized the need to communicate a longer-term vision for TAM activities that require ongoing commitments even if the agency is not in a position of being "broke with buses that do not run."

There are a range of perspectives and approaches to TAM, which may be reflected in tone and structure of the TAM plan.

Participants from all three agencies noted that even within their individual organizations, the interpretation and integration of TAM into daily practices can take different forms depending on whether practitioners come from a maintenance, planning, or accounting background. FTA intentionally does not dictate a specific format or structure for the TAM plan, providing flexibility for each agency to structure it in a way that will be useful and meaningful for its own needs.

While TAM cuts across many if not all departments within an agency, each agency takes its own approach to where to house it. None of these approaches are incorrect, but the results may reflect the strengths, experiences, and perspectives of the group guiding its development.

- At STA the maintenance department led the agency's plan development – the resulting plan featured detailed data tables and included customized metrics based on extensive maintenance data. While other agencies may have left data and metric specifics to the plan appendices, STA's plan structure highlighted the role of data in guiding TAM priorities at the agency.

- AT SJRTD, executive leadership came to realize that existing TAM practices and procedures needed to be broadened agency-wide with strategic focus for the TAM Plan to be successful.
- At CAT the accounting department leads TAM, which provides an opportunity to use the agency's finance and accounting data systems as a foundation for the plan development process. CAT integrated planning and maintenance data with these existing sources to provide a more robust approach.

Agencies may wish to establish a strategic focus in constructing their TAM plan – identifying a certain division or specific leader who can champion the rollout of TAM across the agency – and designate responsibilities accordingly. However, it is important for the champion to foster ownership of TAM across all departments in order to encourage collaboration and coordination, and buy-in for TAM activities as part of a broader mission.

TAM plan development provides agencies with an opportunity to coordinate data collection and management practices across departments.

Participants discussed how TAM served as a rallying point for agency-wide conversations around data interoperability and information exchange.

- When strategizing ways to most effectively meet the TAM requirements, agencies were forced to take stock of both their data needs and available data sources. In some cases, these conversations facilitated data sharing across departments and were a basis for efforts to better align existing data systems.
- Representatives from CAT described how staff in the planning and accounting departments were able to reconcile 'missing' data during a kickoff conversation around TAM compliance. Planning staff became aware of data the accountants were already collecting, while the planners were able to direct the accountants to relevant data they managed within their department. This coordination prevented a need for additional data collection and led the agency to consider how they may foster more holistic data sharing approaches for general day-to-day operations.
- All three of the agencies had preexisting systems for organizing and storing financial, maintenance, and investment data. They took the TAM plan development process as an opportunity to revisit how these systems function, and to identify strategies for improving the quality and interoperability of the data. In some cases, the TAM requirements provided a catalyst for making the shift to new, more modern data management systems.

In order to reap the full benefits of asset management practices, it is useful to consider TAM implementation beyond compliance.

Although Tier II agencies are only required to include four core elements in the TAM plan in order to be compliant, the participants recognized that putting in the work to establish the additional TAM elements – a TAM and SGR policy, and implementation plan – left them better positioned to implement TAM practices and foster wider adoption of new policies.

- SJRTD and CAT both highlighted the importance of an implementation plan that outlines roles and responsibilities in terms of building political support for asset management, especially among board members.
- Without a policy and path forward on implementation, it's possible that the TAM plan could "sit on the shelf" and not be adopted into agency practices.

It is important to anticipate and identify potential barriers to successful TAM implementation and adoption.

Agencies cited a number of potential threats to implementing and adopting TAM practices that could undermine benefits in the long term. These potential threats included funding availability for TAM-related activities, changes in technology, employee turnover, and the uncertainty introduced by changing political climates.

- A successful TAM plan may be able to mitigate these effects by staying flexible and offering a general framework for decision making that can adapt to changes in the asset management landscape.
- In the context of IT resources, SJRTD described the benefit of creating a conceptual framework that outlines the role of the data, its uses and relevance in the TAM plan, and its connection to broader agency goals and principles. The framework acknowledges that the evolving nature of technology calls for flexibility and an ability to adapt, particularly as new data sources and systems emerge and old ones are rendered obsolete, but also looks to ensure continuity in terms of the agency's principles and practices around data use and data management.

Conclusion

The peer exchange offered an opportunity for practitioners to hear from other transit agencies actively working on TAM, and all of the participants indicated that they planned to bring back ideas with them to use in their own work. Participants validated their approaches to TAM and gained clarity on outstanding issues, were exposed to alternate methodologies that some plan to integrate into practice, and were able to share their visions of how TAM fits into and supports broader agency-wide goals.

By hosting the peer exchange, FTA was able to better understand how smaller agencies are faring in their TAM plan development process, particularly to understand the ways agencies are interpreting requirements and structuring their plans. FTA will use the insights from this peer exchange to shape technical assistance offerings, and the lessons learned will inform the development of future peer exchanges. FTA is committed to continuing to bring transit agencies together in a variety of settings to share experiences, and to use that discussion and learning to benefit the asset management community.