

statenews

Vol. 51, No. 10

The Council of State Governments

November/December 2008



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Online Dashboard Adds Transparency to Washington Transportation Projects

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

Just a few years ago, Washington state Sen. Mary Margaret Haugen wanted to do away with the state's Transportation Improvement Board.

"There was a huge backlog of projects that never got completed, so they had all this money in essence just sitting there, not working," she said. "The money was given out without any accountability."

The Transportation Improvement Board, known as TIB in Washington, is a small state agency that funds and administers local transportation projects with cities and counties throughout the state. In 2001, it had 976 approved projects pending, but only enough funding for 550 of them.

"There was a lack of accountability. You couldn't really identify what the project would be," Haugen said. "The city would come in and say 'we have this wonderful project,' and there was no way to really track what the project was or how the money was spent."

So Haugen, chair of the Senate Transportation Committee, wanted to shut down TIB and absorb it into the state Transportation Cabinet.

A lot has changed since then. Haugen is now one of TIB's biggest supporters, and she attributes that to a new executive director, Stevan Gorcester, and a new **Dashboard Management System** that offers the transparency for not only project funding but also for project development. The system is one of eight national winners of CSG Innovations Awards.

Gorcester brought that innovation to the agency, which was fraught with problems when he arrived.

"There wasn't the kind of fi-

nanacial control that's necessary in an agency that at the time was giving out about \$10 million a month," Gorcester said. "I found out on the fourth day we couldn't pay anybody for five months."

The performance management program he developed—the Dashboard—was aimed at not only helping the program recover but also to ensure problems wouldn't reoccur. Here's how it works: Information from the agency is fed into a data warehouse and is then instantly converted into easily read charts and posted to the TIB Web site at <http://www.tib.wa.gov/performance/Dashboard/>.

The Dashboard, which began internally, was initially about 25 Web pages deep, Gorcester said. It is used to develop performance and financial reports for the board, which can help board members make better policy decisions. The program went live externally in May, allowing public access.

Gorcester said every Washington resident won't need all the information on the Dashboard, but when it comes to projects that affect them, individuals are keenly interested.

"Our system is not something the average citizen would use every day," he said. Instead, Washington's cities and counties, as well as state legislators, may use it regularly. But, Gorcester added, "the average citizen would need it when they have an interest in a project one way or another and they want to find out what's going on."

The site includes a compendium of photos, maps, details and progress of each project.

"What we intended was to make sure that our board knew what was going on with the programs, projects and money



Stevan Gorcester, executive director for the Washington state Transportation Improvement Board, explained how the Dashboard Management System works to the Innovations Committee at the CSG-WEST annual meeting in July. Photo by Mary Dusenberry

so they would be empowered to make business decisions that were in turn sustainable and would strengthen the agency rather than overallocate the funds," he said. "It's gone so far beyond that."

Gorcester said the dashboard system is easily transferable to other agencies and states. In fact, Washington state officials are looking at a statewide program based on the Dashboard, according to Gorcester, who has traveled around the country to explain the system.

His primary advice is that anyone looking to adopt a similar monitoring system should not overlook the need for good data.

"This type of work perfor-

mance management starts with good quality data that's accurate and warehoused well," he said. "People don't treat the data sometimes as a work effort in and of itself."

It's important to begin such a system with a data readiness assessment, determining the status of the data, where it's housed, whether it's accurate and whether it's sufficient for what is being monitored. Then an agency or state would need to decide on a single database that can be used to produce the dashboard system.

The system, Haugen said, addresses one key need: "Transparency is absolutely something we have to have in government today," she said.

FAST FACTS

- Washington's Dashboard Management System cost \$40,000 in new equipment and approximately 400 staff hours, including training, to become fully operational.
- Annual operational costs are less than \$50,000, depending on upgrades and the amount of time spent on new projects.
- The Transportation Improvement Board is funded by 3 cents per gallon portion of Washington's state gas tax; that revenue totaled \$185 million in 2007.