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ASSESSING OREGON'S CONTINUING TRANSIT FINANCING SYSTEM

VOLUME III: CONSTRUCTING THE 1990 PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION STUDY PROCESS:

REFLECTIONS OF THE 1988 RESEARCH TEAM

by

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CONSTRUCTING THE 1990 TRANSPORTATION STUDY PROCESS

The 1988 Oregon Public Transportation Study provided a solid foundation of information about Oregon's transportation providers. In particular, it furnished information on which revenue sources members of the industry are utilizing, expenditure patterns, capital and operating revenue needs, the projected increased demands for public transportation, and the ability of providers to make use of available resources in their strategic planning. The study also substantiated that many members of the industry do not identify themselves as transportation providers, particularly the Special Need Transportation providers. The research process also revealed several additional factors about the process of collecting information that should be taken into account in future studies of Oregon's Public Transportation community. Hence, this report is aimed at suggesting an approach to future research efforts to improve the information collected both substantively and in terms of reliability. In particular, some of the issues that should be dealt with include:

- public transportation providers need to be identified and classified by clearly articulated standards, and definitions;
- the size and complexity of the questionnaire should be reduced,
- there was some "double reporting" which was not detected until the analysis of the SNT providers and there. was difficulty in distinguishing contracting agencies from direct providers,
- the response rate was lower than ideal,
- data furnished by the providers did not always relate only to their transportation program, and
- some of the budget numbers the providers reported have proven to be inaccurate.

Before the next Oregon Public Transportation Survey is undertaken, Oregon's population of transportation providers needs to be more accurately defined. When the 1988 study began, the Center for Urban Studies was provided three lists of prior grant recipients and known agencies. The lists were duplicative, the recipients were not identified by their size or the type of service they furnish (i.e., Small City and Rural versus Special Need

Transportation), and transportation providers were not differentiated from the agencies who solely administered funds or contract for service with the monies they receive. These lists were predictable given the prior lack of state legislative policy mandate to monitor the industry. During the next two years, the Public Transit Division should develop a program, involving representatives of the industry, for categorizing these agencies by standard criteria for both monitoring and financial management purposes.

The purpose of the 1990 study should be more tightly defined to permit better specification of research instruments. The Public Transit Division (PTD) originally advised the research team that a long survey instrument would be difficult for some agencies to complete. The reasons were compound, including a lack of historical information gathering by agencies, staff and expertise. The research team in trying to accomplish an academically rigorous information base erred on the side of too rigidly specifying data needs and collection techniques. The primary issue is the balance between establishing the overall credibility of the product and the usefulness of the data collected for analysis. A more extensive process of consultation on data needs, building on the already established credibility of the most recent study, may identify more practical means for achieving the same legitimacy and analytical goals.

As a beginning, more extensive background information (i.e., number and condition of vehicles) should be gathered as a regular part of PTD's monitoring and oversight responsibilities. This should also include information on future capital needs because they can require providers to supply continuous projections that can provide a more accurate basis for approximating and estimating future needs. That information could then be incorporated into the biennial report with less dependence on one shot estimates.

The public transportation industry in Oregon is a diverse enterprise, In order to identify and understand the various components, separate survey instruments should be designed for each category of provider. Because many of the SNT agencies provide transportation for their clients while they fulfill their primary mission as social service agencies, a portion of the study should allow each agency to identify its purpose and how transportation relates to fulfilling their mission.

To eliminate "double reporting," two different surveys should be designed. A cover letter should ask agencies which only administer STF monies or contract for the provision of service to return an enclosed postcard. A questionnaire requesting the name(s) of contractor(s) and the dollar amounts of their contracts or grants can then be mailed to these agencies. A different form would be mailed to contractors or fund recipients that would also provide verification of numbers sent by contracting agencies. Questions should also be added to the survey which allow providers to identify themselves as contractors, request the names of all of the agencies they have contracts with, and ask the size of each of their contracts. Contacts for phone or written verification of information should be required information.

The majority of the agencies who provide door-to-door service for their elderly and/or handicapped clients require reservations. As a gauge of the need for additional support for SNT programs, this requirement should be more thoroughly investigated. Questions which should be asked include:

- how agencies prioritize their rides;
- if clients are perceived as being aware of reservation systems and as a result, schedule ahead,
- are agencies having to turn away users;
- do they tally the number of requests they receive for rides;
- are there income level requirements clients must meet;
- the names of other agencies and contacts that deliver similar services in their service area.

Although standardized questionnaires produce quantifiable, comparable data, the information which is gathered is limited by the questions asked. A portion of the next study's participants, either randomly selected or chosen by stratification should be contacted by phone or in person to provide a superior profile of Oregon's transportation providers. Alternatively a series of focus groups could be established to provide overall impressions of the industry's status.

The **1990** study should begin in January rather than in June. There were a number of agencies who phoned to apologize for their lack participation in the **1988** survey because they were too busy with their end of the year reports. This should also result in the report being prepared earlier and available to provide data at the beginning of the legislative session.

There were problems gathering reliable budget numbers. While the research team used a standardized method for collecting information, the lack of experience with this kind of reporting system lead to confusion and inaccuracies. Only the experience of the PTD staff lead to cleaning up of the data. The process of data collection should be designed to help agencies learn to gather accurate revenue, budget, and capital needs estimates. Through experience, reporting requirements would reduce errors and poor estimates. For example, ***Tri-Met's*** reported budget amount for **1988-89** was off by **$90** million. The communication process of routinely reporting data would reduce **errors** such as this.

Before the next major study, several smaller studies could be performed to provide a good understanding of the members of the industry. **A** data base should be established to corroborate and support any findings. Short questionnaires which deal with specific areas of interest could be mailed to providers with a stamped, self addressed postcards offering a choice of times it would be convenient for the agency to receive a phone **call** and respond to the questions posed on the survey. This technique would allow them the time to review the questions and retrieve any data necessary to respond. It should increase the response rate because it eliminates the time consuming process of filling out the questionnaire. By dividing the survey into several smaller parts, a large amount of information could still be gathered.

Additionally, the PTD staff would profit from an annual seminar on industry performance standards and characteristics. Using an outside facilitator, the staff would be asked to review and comment on the previous transportation study and the results of their other data collection efforts during the year. This information could be compiled as a basis for critiquing the next biennial public transportation study and to correct and improve the staff's collective understanding of their constituency.

In the context of financial data, there is a lack of industry continuity in the identification of revenue sources. Particularly among the small, special need providers, there is a tendency to confuse revenue sources with agency mission. Hence, if the predominant resource provider is a social service agency, the recipient defines itself more in those terms. Conversely, if the predominant resource provider is a transportation agency, the recipient orients to that context. This leads to inconsistent responses from different agencies which may fundamentally accomplish the same tasks and functions. Seminars and workshops oriented toward establishing a common understanding of accounting practices and experience with different approaches to revenue management will help recipients appreciate more fully the diverse context within which they operate.

CONCLUSION

The 1988 Oregon Public Transportation Study is fundamentally a sound report on the respondents who submitted the survey material. In only a couple of instances were real, substantial data inaccuracies revealed. The basic problem was in getting the agencies receiving the survey instrument to respond. In some cases old mailing lists were a problem. In others, the complexity of the instrument deterred completion. In yet others, the respondents failed to identify themselves with the constituency the research instrument sought to poll. To resolve these fundamental communication patterns, the PTD staff should develop a series of training and information seminars intended to create a greater sense of collective identity in the industry. Using a training instrument as a facade, the staff can develop greater common understanding of the importance of the data collection function and the relevant terminology. Over time, aggregate data trends will provide a basis for gauging the inherent reliability of any one annual or biennial data collection effort.