

GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING PEER EXCHANGES OF STATE DOT RESEARCH PROGRAMS

General

The peer exchange is a practical and effective tool to foster excellence in R&T program management. It is extremely important to note that peer exchanges are not compliance reviews. The intent of the peer exchange is for both the host State and the visitors to exchange information. Peer exchanges are intended to benefit all participants through an open exchange of ideas, knowledge, and brainstorming. The visitors should expect to gain as much from the experience, if not more, than the host State.

The objective of a peer exchange program is to give State DOT's a means to improve the quality and effectiveness of their research management processes. A peer exchange is appropriate for agencies of any size, mission, discipline, or responsibility.

The program is designed to send an outside team of invited top level managers to meet with the host agency to discuss and review its RD&T management process. Information on the host agency and team members' RD&T policies and procedures are exchanged with the intent to improve the overall RD&T management process. Peer exchanges provide an opportunity for participants to share best practices and management innovations with each other. The information gathered from the exchange is presented to agency management.

These guidelines are intended to be used to guide discussions, meetings with upper level management, preparation of a report, and follow-up activities. Additional details on peer exchanges may be found in Section 4.3 of the NCHRP Report "Guide for Developing a State Transportation Research Manual."

It is the State's responsibility to initiate its peer exchange. The composition of the peer exchange team, the breadth of the issues covered, the duration of the peer exchange, and other issues are at the States' discretion.

Prior to the Visit

Host State—

- Select prospective members of the visiting team. At least two of the members must be from among those in the RAC membership who have participated in an earlier peer exchange. The host State is also encouraged to include a participant from FHWA in the group.
- One of the visitors must be designated as the Team Leader.
- Personally contact each of the prospective team members by telephone to establish availability and tentative dates.
- Send each team member a copy of the State Transportation Research Manual for exchange at least 2 weeks prior to the visit.
- Along with the manual, the host State Research Program Manager should identify focus areas considered desirable for discussion during the visit.

Visitors—

- Agree to participation in the team only if you do so voluntarily and with a desire to both offer and receive new ideas.
- Review the materials sent by the host State. Do not try to compare the host State's documentation with either the FHWA regulations or guidance, or the NCHRP "Guide for Developing a State Transportation Research Manual." Remember, the purpose of the visit is not to check for compliance with requirements; that is the responsibility of the FHWA Division Office.
- Prepare to discuss your own program and your successes and failures and to participate in open discussions

During the Visit

The duration of the peer exchange is at the discretion of the host State. Generally, the visit should be scheduled to last at least 3 days, and preferably a little longer to allow for time to prepare a team report and conduct a "close-out" discussion.

The host State should prepare an agenda for the visit. The agenda should include:

- Opportunity for the team to look at example projects as they have advanced (and are advancing) through the system from solicitation to implementation. Both "good" and "bad" examples should be shared. If appropriate, examples of in-house, university, and consultant research should be provided.
- Discussion with both contract and staff researchers.
- Some historical perspective of staff and financial resources.
- Staff training.
- The contracting process, including RFP's, selection, monitoring, etc.
- Technology transfer and implementation techniques.
- Discussion of the Research Manual and Work Program.
- Committee structure.
- Time for the visitors and host State to prepare a Team Report. The content of the report is discussed later.
- A scheduled "close-out." The "close-out" activity is described in the Report Section.

Report

If at all possible, the report should be written before the close-out conference. As a minimum, the report should be prepared before the visitors leave. The report is to be considered a team effort that involves all of the visitors and the host State Research Program Manager.

The "close-out" has the potential for the greatest benefit if it is conducted with upper management of the host State and/or the uppermost Research Advisory Committee. The "close-out" should highlight the most positive aspects of the host state research program and the aspects of the host state program that

the visitors intend to incorporate into their own programs. Of course, any suggestions agreed to by the team, should also be highlighted to the host State upper management, with the understanding that upper management support is necessary to make significant changes.

The report should include a brief introduction that identifies all of the participants on the team and describes the purpose and intent of the activity. The body of the report should briefly discuss those aspects of the Research Program that were looked at by the team.

The conclusion section of the report should reflect the highlights of the open discussions and written as a team using a “team consensus” approach. It is expected that the report will reflect the aspects of the host State’s program that the visitors desire to incorporate into their own programs as well as (1) the desirable features of the host State’s program that should be emphasized and (2) those aspects of the host State’s program that appear to warrant a new or expanded approach.

The report is most likely to be of value if it is kept brief and to the point. The use of “bullet” phrases and other outlining techniques should be used to help avoid the need to “wordsmith” the report and minimize the time needed to review the document.

The report should include an endorsement by all of the members of the team. Since the host State is considered a member of the team, this would preclude the need for a separate written response to the report by the host State. A copy of the report should then be forwarded to the FHWA Division Administrator. If the host State elects to not endorse the report, a separate written response should then also be forwarded to the FHWA Division Administrator.

Follow-up

One additional activity that appears to have substantial merit involves some effort to follow-up on the consensus reached during the peer exchange. About a year after the visit, the host State should initiate a “Round Robin” report that identifies any changes that have occurred and that were introduced as a result of the visit. Each of the visitors should add to the report those activities that were enhanced in their respective programs as a result of their participation in the peer exchange. The report would be circulated among all members of the team until everyone has had an opportunity to review everyone else’s comments. This is a completely optional activity. Its initiation is dependent upon the desires of the host State.