

Independent review of WSDOT mega projects released

Local News

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Posted on : October 10, 2013 at 7:38 am

OLYMPIA — An independent review of the Washington State Department of Transportation's management of its largest projects recommends improvements that the DOT says will strengthen the agency's delivery record and ensure better stewardship of taxpayer dollars.

The report was commissioned in March 2013 by Washington state Secretary of Transportation Lynn Peterson to provide specific recommendations on how the agency can learn from recent errors and prevent them from occurring on future projects.

"WSDOT is charged with building and maintaining a safe, reliable, and efficient transportation system for our state. When I joined the agency, I requested a review of how WSDOT conducts business to ensure we are delivering all of our projects on time and on budget," said Secretary Peterson. "I wanted to know, 'What lessons can we learn from recent mistakes to ensure that similar situations don't happen again?'"

The assessment of WSDOT mega projects makes recommendations on organizational structure; capturing lessons learned and translating that knowledge to other projects; developing workforce and project staffing; applying quality assurance protocols; conducting oversight and review; modifying WSDOT's internal procedures; and assessing risk and choosing the correct contract method for each project. In particular, the report recommends WSDOT consider the general contractor/construction management delivery approach, which other state DOTs are using successfully to encourage innovation, accelerate delivery, decrease traffic impacts, and establish a fair price for taxpayers and the contractor.

The independent review found that while there are existing procedures and systems within WSDOT to appropriately manage these large projects, they were not consistently used, risk-management decisions were not always fully evaluated, and resources were limited in several key positions so that the level of oversight required did not occur. The report also found that more work is needed to ensure that staff with experience on the large projects is sharing lessons learned within the agency and being provided opportunities to apply that experience to other projects across the state.

Secretary Peterson received weekly updates on the report progress, and in some cases, moved quickly to implement changes as the authors shared their interim findings with her. Some of the recommendations already implemented or underway include:

A new chief engineer with mega project experience has been appointed, and a deputy chief engineer position has been created to ensure there is capacity to provide oversight of the mega projects. A more robust analysis of how the agency contracts for work and how risk is shared with contractors is

being developed. A new quality assurance manager position is being created that will report directly to the chief engineer to ensure that quality assurance protocols are followed across the agency. Opportunities will be created for agency staff to gain mega project experience, so that lessons learned on current projects can be applied to future programs. In addition to those changes, Secretary Peterson earlier this year appointed a new bridge and structures engineer with 29 years of experience at WSDOT to lead the agency's bridge office.

The agency, as part of Governor Inslee's Results Washington Initiative, is currently developing a broader set of reform recommendations to improve WSDOT performance.

The review made several recommendations that would require legislative action, including enabling the use of a general contractor/construction management delivery approach described above. The report also recommended establishing a pilot program for a limited number of public/private partnerships in order to more fully evaluate the effectiveness of this delivery approach.

The review was conducted by Ron Paananen, CH2M Hill, and John Njord, Tom Warne & Associates, who have experience managing large transportation projects in Washington state and across the country. The report can be found at: www.wsdot.wa.gov/Secretary/MegaProject.htm.