

THINK

● INFRASTRUCTURE SOLUTIONS

HNTB



Effective streamlining involves reinventing core practices at DOTs

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Defining streamlining

The term streamlining is used in several ways, whether it involves environmental reviews, construction techniques or organizational change. Effective streamlining essentially encompasses two related endeavors:

Improving individual *processes* - The focus here is on streamlining each phase of a project. This means finding faster, more efficient ways to conceptualize a project, gather stakeholder input, secure short- and long-term funding sources, handle permitting, complete design and construction, and employ advanced delivery techniques such as design-build or public-private partnerships.

Reinventing traditional *practices* - This focus is on making fundamental changes to how a department of transportation operates, with the intent of enabling not only those vital process improvements, but also creating the capacity for a quantum leap in both efficiency and quality. This requires changing the ways a DOT engages its internal teams, forges partnerships across the transportation industry and political boundaries, and generates creative solutions to seemingly permanent problems.

Much of the current focus is on streamlining around process improvements. Agencies are looking for ways to cut costs and get projects done quicker. This doesn't always mean tossing out current methods and processes and replacing them with novel techniques. It may simply be rethinking the way things currently are done. Reinvention can multiply the effects of process streamlining by removing barriers to success and institutionalizing innovation and cooperation.

Slow is smooth, smooth is fast

This phrase – used by elite military forces to describe the idea that quickly charging ahead toward an objective may be riskier and less effective than carefully forming, tempering and then executing your plan – also can apply to DOTs. In the DOT context, this phrase is particularly meaningful because speed is the driver of an array of benefits in any given project: lower construction costs, reduced risk of shifting political winds that could disrupt progress, less frustration and safety risks for the public, and many others. Here are three ways a “slow, smooth” approach can drive faster and better results, which ultimately can become institutionalized.

1. Involve all interested and impacted parties

Once an idea for a project or program is generated, there is immediate outreach to bring stakeholders and operators together. The more dialogue between the parties that will be involved across the lifecycle of a project, the greater the chance of achieving a more efficient outcome. This takes time up front, but pays off every day thereafter.

2. Collaborate for win-win outcomes

Agencies have been trying to get more done with less for several years. Demands continue to increase while funding is not. This means that local and state agencies have sought creative ways to get projects done. Many have successfully collaborated across boundaries to prioritize projects, seek local funding through ballot initiatives and assess alternative delivery methods to deliver projects more quickly.

3. Be willing to try something entirely new

Innovation is something we want to pursue, yet comes with risks, which lacks appeal when overseeing public safety and dollars. Again, innovation doesn't have to be a complete transformation. It can be finding ways to improve traditional processes or creating a more effective organization.

One such example is the Texas DOT, where the enormous flow of submitted plans from public and private parties across the state for US Army Corps of Engineers project reviews created excessive delays. Complex, multimillion-dollar projects had to wait in line behind sometimes hundreds of small projects every year. The timelines for approval were unpredictable, and the delays were expensive. So, TxDOT tried something entirely new. TxDOT offered to fund one dedicated USACE project review specialist who would focus only on TxDOT's projects. This arrangement was inked and now every year, TxDOT spends \$200,000 to support a dedicated USACE resource. This new arrangement already has saved TxDOT years of time across its projects, and countless funding dollars. In this case, clearly *smooth is fast*.

Make it stick

These are just three examples of how DOTs can reinvent their operating practices to derive greater value from *every* streamlining program across the enterprise. Importantly, as the successes pile up, they also must be analyzed to determine *how* success was achieved. By capturing data and insights into the most effective practices, DOTs can

institutionalize these practices and refine them further through continuous improvement.

In this way, no matter how they define streamlining, the result is a DOT that moves projects more quickly, spends tax dollars more wisely and engages its professionals and other stakeholders in creating and maintaining a world-class transportation system.

About the Author

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