



Small Starts Demand a Strong Team

Experience, relevant expertise and sound decision-making will drive success

Any transit project can involve a countless number of twists and turns between planning and completion. Combine that with a project that involves Federal Transit Administration Small Starts dollars, and it can be easy to get thrown off course by the added complexities and requirements involved.

These challenges require that transit agencies quickly determine the skills and costs involved in successfully completing projects that leverage funds from federal programs such as Small Starts.

Faced with such challenges, transit agencies that haven't managed large capital projects must quickly determine: What skills will we need? How can we acquire those skills? And, particularly, what will it all cost?

Here are three different approaches agencies should consider when taking on such a project:

- 1. Moving forward with existing staff.** Agencies should make a careful determination on whether existing staff members have the skills and time that are needed to implement a Small Starts project. An honest and open evaluation of current staff and their capabilities could lead an agency to make a different choice or support their choice of utilizing staff.
- 2. Hiring additional full-time staff.** There may be instances where an agency will need to expand their team to acquire the requisite skills for success. This must include an understanding of how much time staffing up for the project will take and when key positions should be in place. To do this, it is important to determine the total number of new staff positions, and developing job descriptions before going into the market to seek the best talent to match the positions and salaries that an agency is equipped to offer.

- 3. Supplementing staff with outside specialists.** Hiring outside specialists can bring experience and knowledge quickly to the project while existing staff can maintain focus on daily operations. Note that this approach may result in project costs that exceed original estimates. If such specialists are brought in, it is critical that they meld well with the core team. An agency also should always maintain control of the project through consistent oversight of the outside talent.

To engage the right inside or outside talent while avoiding the pitfalls, many agencies invest up front in a project management firm that has helped similar agencies successfully manage complex, federally funded capital projects. Based on its experience, such a firm can assess the agency's current talent depth in light of the project requirements, offer realistic estimates of the cost of hiring or contracting for vital new skills and the schedule impacts and assist with securing the necessary talent.

Making an investment in a project management firm at the beginning of a project will usually pay for itself by the end. Not only will the project manager help to navigate the FTA's process, it also will assure the agency stays within its budget and gets top value from everybody on the team. Agencies can also gain valuable takeaways that expand the depth and breadth of inside staff's knowledge and establish greater technical capacity for future projects.

Large capital projects are challenging even for the most successful transit agencies. Success hinges on having the right skills and experience on your team. The right combination of FTA professional resources, consulting expertise and agency insight can ensure Small Starts projects start well and complete successfully. ■



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