

NCHRP 20-68 – “US Domestic Scan Program”
Domestic Scan 21-03 “Successful Approaches to Setting Project Development Budgets”

A perpetual challenge facing state transportation agency planners formulating the state’s transportation capital program is developing a reliable project development budget for each candidate project. While years of experience and analytical tools inform estimation of projects’ construction costs, current practices for estimating costs of internal staff salaries and external consultant services for pre-construction activities such as scope development, environmental documentation, site investigation and analyses, preliminary engineering and plan development, public engagement, and project management tend to be much more susceptible to uncertainty and therefore much less reliable. The uncertainties and unreliability of estimates can have substantial impact of an agency’s ability to communicate effectively with stakeholders and decision-makers, as well as to ensure that budgets can be met and capital program’s formulated to yield the greatest benefit for available resources.

Some agencies are viewed by their peers as having developed more successful procedures for setting project development budgets, for example Georgia Maine, Minnesota, Nevada, and Utah. The objective of this scan is to document the experience of such leading agencies and extract lessons that may be adapt to other agencies and applied to direct further improvements of budget estimation practices nationwide.

This scan team will examine how project development budgets are set for activities occurring during a project’s development phase, such as the NEPA clearance process, surveys, preliminary traffic studies, preliminary engineering analyses and design, preliminary plan preparation, associated project management, site investigations, and the right-of-way acquisition process. Projects funded by government programs as well as innovative funding strategies (e.g., PPP, Design-build, DBOM) will be examined.

Key factors to be investigated include:

- How agencies address budgeting project development
- tasks/elements are included in the pre-construction budget
- Process for final project scope development and approval (including budget)
- construction project size impact the approach to setting project development budgets?
- Approach to addressing pre-construction risks in the process
- Assessment of accuracy of budgets developed using agency practice and Lessons
- Comparison of practices of public and toll agencies

The scan is envisioned to be conducted as a virtual peer exchange (Type 4). It will provide an opportunity to examine how leading states have been successful in providing accurate total capital investment project cost estimates. This will provide stakeholders and decision-makers an accurate picture of the true cost of a project allowing a more informed decision regarding a proposed project. The scan will provide significant information for the AASHTO Committee on Design, Committee on Planning and the Council on Highways and Streets.

Original Scan Proposal Title: Tools, Methods, and Strategies for Setting Project Development Budgets – U.S. Best Practices

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