

Performance Measurement at WSDOT

Overview and Lessons Learned

Agency wide performance reporting is a high priority at WSDOT. Data tracking, measurement, and reporting methods are continuously refined. The reporting approach is dynamic to adapt to changing public and legislative expectations, agency needs, and to provide timely performance information.

Measures, Markers, and Mileposts, also called *The Gray Notebook* (GNB) because of its gray cover, is the foundation for agency performance assessment and reporting, as well as public and legislative communication. The development of the GNB has influenced many related accountability and performance products. It also supports multiple performance measurement and reporting initiatives and requirements.

The Gray Notebook provides quarterly, in-depth reports on agency and transportation system performance. The purpose of *The Gray Notebook* is to keep WSDOT accountable to the Governor, Washington State citizens, legislators, and transportation organizations. It is also an important internal management and integration tool. The rigor and quality control involved in developing each performance report requires a hands on approach by staff and managers at all levels and across all programs.



A Short Overview of WSDOT's Experience

Data collection and analysis began with a series of legislative mandates in 1990 and transitioned into performance measurement over the course of the decade. When Secretary Doug MacDonald took office in 2001, he brought with him experience and success in performance measurement and accountability gained while serving as Chief of the Massachusetts Water Resource Authority. MacDonald instituted a comprehensive performance and accountability paradigm for WSDOT that involved frequent and accurate reporting of system and agency performance to support transparency and accountability.

Currently used performance measures build on WSDOT's legacy of accurate data collection and systems analysis. Performance measures focus on multi-modal system performance and include organizational performance reports for select topics such as project delivery and worker safety. Annually, WSDOT uses well over 100 specific performance measures in its accountability reporting that encompass all key agency mandates, functions, and transportation modes

How WSDOT Reports Results

WSDOT uses a style of reporting called 'Performance Journalism' created by the agency. Performance Journalism combines effective narrative writing with visual graphs, tables and measurements in order to provide a clear and accurate assessment to the widest possible audience. The analysis is compiled into the GNB, which is published quarterly in February, May, August and November every year.

WSDOT makes extensive use of its website for performance reporting, and the GNB is distributed in hard copy and electronically to a broad audience of 2,000 to 3,000 subscribers. Each edition is archived online and an electronic subject index allows access to every performance measure ever published. Each edition is accompanied by a press release to the media and is distributed to all legislators, the Governor, the Transportation Commission, interest groups, cities and counties, national academia and research organizations, national partners, AASHTO members, and international colleagues.

Benefits of Consistent Performance Reporting

The largest impact of measuring and reporting performance results has been the increased confidence of the Governor, Legislature and the public in the projects and programs managed by WSDOT. When Secretary MacDonald took office, the agency lacked public confidence and credibility and faced criticism for its lack of transparency. Within a short time of three to six months, this started to change. The

... Under his (MacDonald's) watch Washington State increased funding for state highway projects to an unprecedented degree. He consistently emphasized accountability to the people of Washington State. Seattle Mayor Gregory Nickels, April 2007

Press Clippings

"These reports are among the best I've seen in Washington state government for using performance measurement data to tell the agency's story." The Washington State Office of Financial Management, July 2001

"Accountability builds trust and candor, removes mysteries. . . The Gray Notebook. . . is as addictive in the same manner as a copy of the The World Almanac." Puget Sound Business Journal May 2002

"The Measures, Markers and Mileposts publication is education in action. If you are not checking this out, you are missing out." Washington Highway Users Federation, May 2002

"WSDOT's Gray Notebook is second to none in the country for reporting performance measures." Christine Johnson, FHWA Director of Field Services, November 2002

". . . The Gray Notebook, is one of the nation's leading examples of effective statewide performance monitoring. WSDOT continually improves The Gray Notebook to better communicate how it is addressing state transportation issues." FHWA, "Traffic Congestion and Reliability: Trends and Advanced Strategies for Congestion Mitigation," September, 2005

"Secretary of Transportation Doug MacDonald has put a sharp focus on accountability and efficiency . . . The Gray Notebook provides in-depth reports on agency and transportation system performance." Washington State House Democrats, "The Transportation Partnership Act of 2005: Saving Lives, Moving People, Delivering Goods" (Gas Tax Increase)

"MacDonald came from outside the state, injecting vital doses of accountability, openness and determination. As a result, the DOT is more widely trusted and better funded." Seattle Post-Intelligencer Editorial Board, April, 2007

first publication of *The Gray Notebook* (May 2001) resulted in positive media attention and by the second edition in July, the press and leadership applauded the agency's efforts (see sample press clippings above). The feedback continues to be positive. The analysis of performance measures follows a 'no surprises' philosophy for WSDOT's heads-up style of early and timely reporting of performance. Performance is assessed whether it's good or bad, no exceptions.

The frank and consistent performance reporting in *The Gray Notebook* supported two legislative transportation revenue packages (2003 and 2005), funding a total of \$16 billion worth of projects. This is the largest capital delivery program in the state's history.

In addition, a recent statewide initiative to repeal the 2005 gas tax increase was defeated by Washington State citizens. This seems to be a further public vote of confidence in the department's ability to communicate effectively using performance measures. Internally, the performance measures have

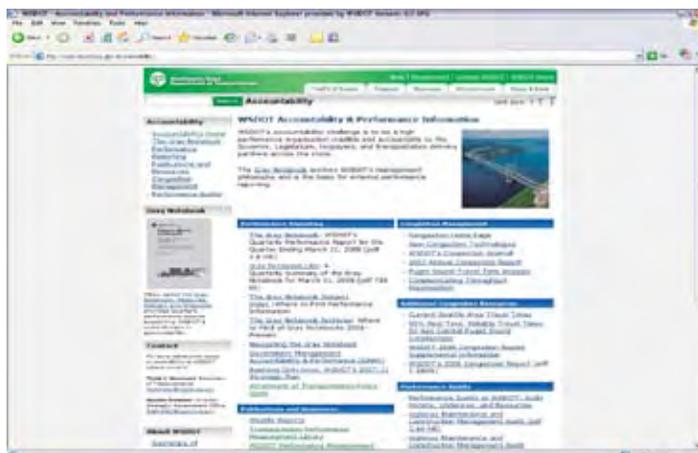
become a core management tool and cultural philosophy at WSDOT – the motto used often is, “What gets measured, gets managed”.

“. . .While *The Gray Notebook* is intended to communicate information to external audiences, perhaps one of its greatest strengths is how the preparation process stimulates internal discussions about performance. Precisely because a variety of management staff are engaged in producing *The Gray Notebook*, discussion about performance becomes part of the management process and not just a mechanical step of producing a report.” *State of Washington Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee, Performance Audit Results: Review of Accountability Mechanisms for Washington State Department of Transportation,* August, 2005

Best Practice Research

Prior to and ever since the first publication of *The Gray Notebook*, WSDOT staff reviews other state DOT and private and public sector performance reports and national and international research to adopt best practices and gain new insights. Staying current on national and international developments, conducting its own research, continuously learning from others, and adapting good ideas are key elements in WSDOT’s work. Frequent communications with international colleagues include the UK, VicRoads in Australia, and the Japanese Ministry of Transportation. For graphing guidance, WSDOT relies on the work of Edward Tufte, a Yale University professor whose research and publications on graphics have been widely adopted in business and government, and have proved to be valuable in delivering clear graphical interpretations of performance data at WSDOT. [Tufte, Edward: *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, 2nd ed. Graphics Press (Cheshire, Connecticut, 2001)].

WSDOT also created a web-based Performance Measurement Library that provides agency and external colleagues access to other state DOTs’ performance reports and relevant and updated national and international reports and research on performance topics. See <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/Publications/PerformanceDocuments>



WSDOT’s Accountability and Performance Reporting Website

Lessons Learned

- Measures will invariably change. They are and need to be dynamic to respond to changing political or fiscal environments. Performance measurement is an iterative process. Don’t be afraid to try something new.
- Don’t reinvent the wheel and stay current on national and international developments. Continuously learning from others and adapting good ideas are key elements in WSDOT’s work.
- Don’t measure for measures sake. Performance measurement is one of several decision-making tools available to management and policy makers. A means but not the end.
- Challenges include:
 - ◆ being able to analyze and understand what is happening on the system and finding ways to describe it
 - ◆ understanding what really matters to the public and policymakers and finding ways to measure and communicate it
 - ◆ demonstrating the effects of agency programs and what they provide for taxpayers’ money now
 - ◆ making an effective case for continued funding
 - ◆ providing the most timely performance information possible- at least for key areas. Timing is everything.
- Start small but report now - don’t delay until you have the perfect data, the right measurement framework or a sophisticated IT system. WSDOT’s 100 page GNB is published every quarter and is not automated. Pick a topic and start now.
- Create a sense of urgency and a real-time response culture.
- Lead –don’t follow. Use narrative reporting to tell your story before someone else tells it for you.
- Make communicating relevant and easy-to-understand measures, text, and graphs your number one priority not an afterthought once the data is collected.
- Hold regular problem-solving sessions with key management.
- Don’t tolerate silos. Everyone owns everyone’s performance. Strive for a “One DOT” mentality.
- Quality control of data and writing needs to become a religion. Apply strict standards of quality control involving all levels of management. Your data and analysis is your credibility.
- Drive for performance based resource allocation for strategies that work.
- Never miss an opportunity to report to the Governor, the Legislature, the media, the public and other key partners on performance. Keep material and reports up-to-date and ready to go.
- Recruiting and retaining staff with the ability to develop good performance reports is a big challenge. Intuition for data, analysis, and writing skills is one of the most in demand skill sets. The job is demanding and high profile and staff is often recruited away.
- Executive management support and hands-on involvement is paramount. Mid-level management might be sceptical but can be convinced once they see results.
- Think of yourself as an investigative reporter. Dig in, keep asking questions and understand the whys and hows of all agency operations and functions reported on.
- Show passion and enthusiasm. Have fun and find balance – it is a stressful job, but it is also one of the most rapidly developing and in-demand professional fields.

Inside The Gray Notebook

The GNB is organized into two main sections. The *Beige Pages* report on the delivery of the projects funded in the 2003 Transportation Funding Package, 2005 Transportation Funding Package and Pre-Existing Funds. The *White Pages* describe key agency functions and provide regularly updated system and program performance information.

Beige Pages

The *Beige Pages* are WSDOT's project delivery performance report on the Nickel, Transportation Partnership Account, and Pre-Existing Funds projects. It contains project details, narrative project summaries, detailed on-time and on-budget results, and financial information supporting WSDOT's "no surprises" reporting focus.

White Pages

The *White Pages* are WSDOT's transportation system and agency program performance report. Detailed annual and quarterly updates are provided based on regularly scheduled reporting cycles.

Annual reports include pavement, bridge, and rest area asset conditions, aviation, freight, maintenance, and congestion. Quarterly reports include incident response, traffic safety, workforce safety, passenger and freight rail, ferries, environmental, and project reporting.

WSDOT's Performance Journalism

The *Gray Notebook* uses a special style of reporting called "Performance Journalism." Performance Journalism is the combination of quantitative reporting using charts, tables, and measurements, and narrative storytelling. The goal is to share the performance of WSDOT's most complex and diverse programs and projects clearly and concisely in a format that everyone can easily understand and explain to their neighbors. A collaborative effort between the production staff, data analysts, and program experts across the agency is essential.

The Performance Journalism method embodies the following key principles:

How to Find Performance Information

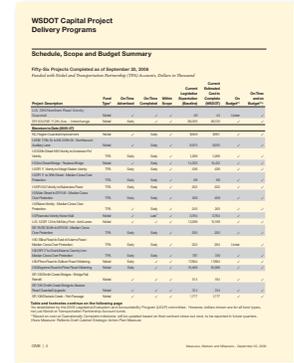
The *Gray Notebook* can be easily accessed online at WSDOT's Accountability website, <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/accountability>. The quarterly editions are archived by year, edition and subject.

The electronic subject index gives readers access to current and archived performance information. This comprehensive index is easy to use and instantly links to every performance measure published to date. Measures are organized alphabetically within program areas. A click on the subject topic and edition number provides a direct link to that page. A copy of the subject index is also provided in the back of each edition.

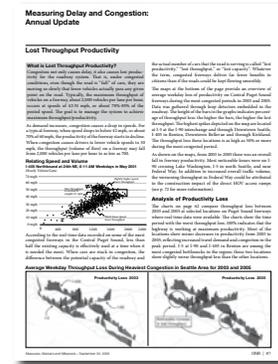
To access the index electronically, visit: www.wsdot.wa.gov/accountability/graybookindex.htm.



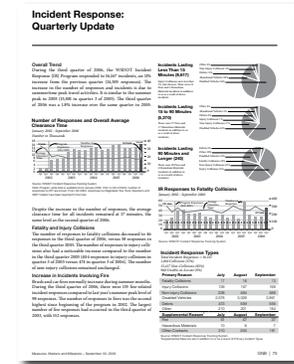
Beige Page sample, Project narratives.



Beige Page sample, Performance Report



Annual performance topic



Quarterly performance topic

Good Stories Combined With Good Graphics: Use narrative reporting to make it real and tell the story

Good Writing: Use a reader friendly approach

Good Data: Unyielding pursuit for data integrity and quality

Good Graphics: Every graph tells a story, every graph asks a question

Good Format/Presentation: Design should not distract from content

Quality Control: It's your credibility; it is part of every step in the analysis and report production

Good Timing: Lead, don't follow; provide frequent and timely information

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This folio (updated June 2008) can also be found at <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/Publications/PerformanceDocuments.htm#folios> under the heading "Folios"