

New roads data base taking shape

WisDOT's 20-year-old database of road information, with its piles of unhelpful paper reports, will soon be history. By January the agency will begin accepting data into a new state-of-the-art data base. The system will, for the first time, include Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping capabilities and data on local road conditions.

While the old system was only good for counting roads to report them to the Federal highway agency, or to distribute state aids, the new one will provide more useful information. By collecting and analyzing road conditions and quality measures, it can help local officials identify needs and plan maintenance and reconstruction projects.

The project began in 1995 with the Local Roads and Streets Council, which advises the Transportation Secretary. Council members were frustrated because there was no good way to analyze the conditions of local roadways.

"With all the money going into local roads—at least \$300 million a year in state funds, and much more counting local property taxes—they couldn't connect that investment to road condition," says Mailei Pa'alani, analysis unit leader for WisDOT's Bureau of Transit and Local Roads and spokesperson for the WisDOT database project. "We are getting questions from legislators about what we're getting for all this money."

Locals have concerns

Local municipalities, especially towns, are concerned about taking responsibility for supplying information to the database. Although the state did all the data collection for the old database, it now will act mostly as a custodian and will work to assure quality and accuracy.

"Locals really do know about their roads," says Pa'alani. "The main added responsibility will be to rate their roads and that is something many already do anyway." In the future condition ratings will be required.

Most existing data can be imported or converted to the new system, including the majority of data stored in the

T.I.C.'s PASERWARE road condition rating software. The database system is being designed to accommodate as many data elements as local officials ask for, Pa'alani says.

"PASER is what is being recommended for towns to rate their road conditions," Pa'alani says. "It is simple and relatively quick, and it offers the information we want. It's not adequate for re-engineering a road, but will give them what is needed for setting priorities, assessing progress, and analyzing costs and benefits."

Liability is another local concern. Proposed legislation will relieve municipalities of liability responsibilities, says Pa'alani. Fears that the system will be used to see if money has been spent and to impose penalties are also unjustified.

Benefits and help

One of the biggest benefits for small local governments is safe record keeping. With a 25 percent turnover in elected officials every year, vital records are often lost. The database will provide secure storage and will be easier to retrieve than a box of papers left in somebody's attic.

Finding and sharing more efficient maintenance practices is another benefit. Communities will be able to review what neighboring towns and villages are doing and share best practices on how to maintain roadways. Right now there is no way to do such analysis.

Supporting funding requests will also be easier. "When locals go to the Legislature to lobby for more money, right now they don't have anything to show for what they've done already," says Pa'alani. "The legislators want qualitative and quantitative data, and this system will let us give it to them."

Local officials and staff with little or no computer experience will still be able to supply and receive information in hard copy form, at least at first. "My recommendation is for local governments with computers or Internet access to become proficient as soon as possible," Pa'alani, says. "Starting now to rate their roads would also put them a step ahead. Several systems for supplying computer help are being evaluated, and training and support will be widely available."

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