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Partners speak, ORBP listens

Special meetings provide a forum for research partners to voice concerns about new research process

Involvement is one thing; enthusiastically supportive is quite another. MDOT Chief Operations Officer Greg Johnson and MDOT Engineer of Office of Research and Best Practices (ORBP) Calvin Roberts know and appreciate the difference. Johnson and Roberts, along with the entire MDOT executive team, want MDOT's research program to be among the best in the country. To get there, MDOT needs all research partners — project managers within the department and principal investigators at Universities — to be enthusiastically supportive, not just involved. That is why they arranged a series of listening sessions with internal and external research partners during the first week of September.

Growing concern

The purpose of the sessions was to let partners share with MDOT and each other their experiences (and frustrations) with the new process that MDOT recently adopted for managing SPR, Part II, Program research. The need for the sessions became clear when several research project managers from MDOT and principal investigators from Universities expressed concern about key aspects of the new process. "Based on comments from several of our research partners over the past month, it became obvious that the first time through the new research cycle was not as smooth as it could have been," Roberts said. "Our partners were involved, but they weren't excited to be a part of the process. We arranged the meetings to provide a means for them to voice their concerns. In response, we are making adjustments before the next cycle begins."

It starts with vision

MDOT Chief Operations Officer Greg Johnson opened the meetings with a brief summary of MDOT's vision for the research program. "We need research to address real problems that MDOT faces," Johnson said. "Projects have to be managed efficiently like any other business operation, and the results must be implemented promptly whenever possible."

Johnson went on to explain that MDOT understands the new vision is a departure from the way research was conducted in recent years, and that it is different from the world of academic research in colleges and universities, "But this is the kind of research

program that MDOT wants and needs right now," he said. "And frankly, this is what [the Federal Highway Administration] requires."

Being good listeners

MDOT Performance Consultant Mark Becker facilitated the sessions and is continuing to assist the ORBP through process improvements until the issues are resolved. Inadequate communication and misunderstanding was at the root of the concern expressed by partners, Becker explained. "The ORBP moved ahead with the new research process thinking that all partners were in agreement and were ready to head in the same direction," Becker explained. "At some point the clarity and understanding necessary to maintain a healthy and effective partnership was lost. As with any relationship, when you get out of sync with someone you're trying to partner with, all you can do is stop, back up and figure out what you have to do to get back in sync. The listening sessions were a first step toward reestablishing understanding, refreshing the partnerships and getting all parties back in sync with each other."

Concerns heard, information collected

Participants were asked to submit topics for discussion via e-mail before the sessions, or as they arrived at the sessions. After assembling a list of topics, Becker employed an electronic polling system that allowed the participants to identify and prioritize the most important. Ultimately, participants identified 32 different areas of concern. For

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From Calvin's Desk

In the last issue of this newsletter I shared how the words *engagement*, *responsiveness* and *collaboration* describe the transportation research community in Michigan. Shortly after the newsletter was published I witnessed another dramatic display of these ideas.

The listening sessions we held in September were another excellent example of our partners' willingness to engage, respond and collaborate to make the MDOT research program as good as it can possibly be. But I now need to add a fourth word to the list: *commitment*. After spending several hours listening to questions, concerns and ideas regarding the ORBP's handling of the new research program, I couldn't help but be impressed by the level of commitment demonstrated by all who participated. We at the ORBP are equally committed to make this process work for everyone.

Winston Churchill once said, "There's nothing wrong with change, if it's in the right direction." The research program continues to change, and we're all still headed in the right direction. There is nothing wrong with that.

Calvin

Calvin Roberts, P.E.
Engineer of ORBP

Progress at the library

The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) library has been a busy place since Librarian Alexandra Briseno joined MDOT in March of 2007. When Briseno took over, she immediately set to work evaluating technologies and proposing upgrades. "My first order of business was to upgrade the library catalog to a more modern web-based system," Briseno said.



"Unfortunately, budget cuts have forced us to scale back the plan a bit. Right now I'm working with DIT [Michigan Department of Information Technology] to update the catalog to the newest version available through our vendor, while staying within the constraints of our current budget."

During FY 2008, the MDOT Library joined a pooled fund study to enhance connectivity between transportation libraries in the U.S. The study involves a total of 22 partners. Among other ac-

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Engaging with additional experts

New process for managing research provides opportunities to work with experts outside of traditional road and bridge disciplines.

All day on Tuesday, May 26, 2009, packages and boxes of research proposals arrived at the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) Office of Research and Best Practices (ORBP). The following day, the Executive Plaza conference room, located in the southeast corner of the fourth floor of the Van Wagoner Building in Lansing, was littered with proposals. ORBP staff members spent that day and the next two sorting through and organizing the proposals into stacks by project. Stacks for some projects were six inches high, others reached nearly two feet.

Sorting, evaluating, scoring

By the end of the day on Friday, May 29, all proposals were sorted, recorded, and sent to project managers who distributed them to research advisory panel (RAP) members for evaluation and scoring. RAP members spent the next two and a half weeks scoring each

proposal to determine the best one for each project.

By Wednesday, June 17, 2009, all RAPs had completed the scoring process and had recommended a principle investigator for each research project.

By October, the roomful of proposals that arrived at the ORBP offices just over five months previously had been turned into 22 very good research projects starting this year and next. The FY 2010–2011 research biennium is now underway.

Dramatic increase

For the past three research cycles, the MDOT ORBP has received an average of just over 20 research proposals per year in response to their annual request for proposal (RFP) process. For the research cycle beginning in October 2009, the office received a total of 85 proposals from 28 different organizations. Calvin Roberts, engineer of ORBP, is pleased with the increase.

"One of the objectives of restructuring the research program was to create a more open process for announcing projects and soliciting proposals," he explained. "We wanted to encourage more experts to participate. It has not been easy, but we're very excited about the results. In addition to the research partners that have been with us for years, we've attracted a number of new experts from organizations we have not worked with in the past. The new system is working well."

In addition to the more open RFP process, the ORBP expanded the focus of the research program to include new areas of interest. RFPs for the FY 2010–2011 research biennium included the traditional pavement, bridge, and materials categories and a new category that includes intelligent transportation systems (ITS), safety, and operations topics. "Our new emphasis on the softer

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Library (cont.)

complishments, the study has created The Transportation Librarian's Toolkit, which is a manual of resources, procedures and best practices for establishing and managing a transportation library.

Through participating in the study, Briseno was also able to attend the Special Library Association (SLA) annual conference in Washington DC this past June. "It was great to spend a couple of days with librarians from all over the country. It was very helpful to hear how others are dealing with the various issues involved in managing large collections of resources," Briseno said.

In July she submitted a proposal to extend participation in the study through FY 2010.

The MDOT Library is also a member of the Midwest Transportation Knowledge Network (MTKN). The network is a forum for pooling resources and sharing expertise and best practices. It includes transportation libraries in Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, and South Dakota.

In addition to "big-picture" planning activities and establishing relationships with other librarians, Briseno and her staff of three part-time student assistants have used the MDOT Library to support researchers and other members of the ORBP team. For example, during the evaluation of proposals for the upcoming research biennium, they provided background searches and found relevant documents and information to assist in evaluating 35 different research projects. Briseno and her team were typically able to conduct two searches per day. "The pace was pretty intense for awhile, but it was a great use of our resources. I was pleased that we were able to help," she said.

The library is located in the south east side of the first floor of the Murray D. Van Wagoner transportation building. For more information, see "About the MDOT Library," below.



About the MDOT library

Librarian

Alexandra Briseno

Hours of Service

7:30–11:45 AM/12:45–4:30 PM
Monday – Friday

Contact Information

Front Desk: 517-241-1809
Librarian: 517-373-8548
Fax: 517-241-3194

Available Materials and Services

Transportation Research Record, 1946–Present
ASTM Standards
NCHRP, TCRP, ACRP Reports
PE Exam Materials
State and County Maps
MI State Highway Commission Biennial Reports, 1905–1946
MI State Highway Department Progress Reports, 1951–1987
MDOT Employee Newsletters, 1950–2004
Code of Federal Regulations – Transportation
Interlibrary loan for special materials
Various publications on transportation topics



Listening (cont.)

each area, Becker asked clarifying questions to identify specific issues and to make sure everyone understood and agreed upon them. Through clarifying questions and the discussions that resulted, six of the 32 areas of concern resolved themselves during the meetings. For the remaining 26 areas, Becker led the group to offer suggestions on how to deal with each.

Becker explained that the listening sessions were structured to make sure everyone who wanted to speak was provided a chance to do so, and to make sure that the resulting information was captured and recorded so the department, and particularly the ORBP team, could make changes to improve the process. "The intent was not to solve problems," Becker said. "We were there to make sure we understand where our partners are encountering problems. Solutions are the next step."

Major areas of concern included:

- Unclear or confusing language in the new research and implementation manual and the new contract;
- Cumbersome requirements in the new contract;
- Awarding of contracts to researchers outside of Michigan;
- Fairness of the process for evaluating and scoring proposals;
- Lack of timely communication from the ORBP to research partners;
- Various issues related to billing and payments.

Voices heard

Participants left the sessions confident that their concerns were communicated and hopeful that the ORBP would be able to make adjustments to improve the process. One university researcher who declined to be identified, said, "The meeting provided us an opportunity to voice our concerns in a way that ensured the ORBP would hear us. We're hoping they're able to make the changes necessary to solve the problems.

"There's no question that their new vision for research is a good one," the researcher continued. "The issues we identified are more on the operational side."

Communication is key

ORBP's Roberts appreciated the process undertaken in the meetings, and the results from them. "The meetings were very productive," he said. "The information gathered will help a great deal in our continuing effort to transform our research program.

"We can solve many of the problems simply by improving how we interact with our partners. In this, our first research cycle using the new process, we neglected communication to take care of more immediate concerns. As a result, our relationships suffered, misunderstanding grew and frustration set in. We won't make the same mistake again."

The ORBP team has been working hard since the listening sessions to resolve many of the problems identified through the listening sessions. The next issue of this newsletter will cover the changes they made to improve the process.



Additional experts (cont.)

sciences has helped us engage a new group within the department and an entirely new pool of experts at research institutions,” Roberts said.

New areas, new experts

Kimberly Lariviere, senior mobility specialist in MDOT’s operations division, is one of these new experts within the department. She is working as a research project manager with a new research partner at Central Michigan University’s (CMU) Driving, Evaluation, Education and Research (DEER) center on a project that deals with distracted driving driver behavior. The principal investigator is Richard Backs, PhD. Dr. Backs is the director of the DEER center and a Professor of Psychology at CMU. The project, “Improving Driver Safety with Behavioral Countermeasures,” has four main parts:

1. Identify the major causes of distracted driving driver behavior crashes (such as cell phone use, texting, aggressive driving, drowsy driving, and others).
2. Collect countermeasures from within Michigan and from other states.
3. Evaluate the results of each countermeasure.
4. Determine if each countermeasure is viable for use in Michigan.

“Working with CMU’s DEER Center helps us understand more about the cultural forces behind a lot of what happens on the road,” Lariviere said. “Projects like this go way beyond the physical end of things that we’re used to dealing with. They’re helping us appreciate attitudes, perceptions, motivations and other psychological influences on drivers. It’s fascinating stuff.”

More is definitely better

“Projects like this are fascinating and exciting,” Roberts explained, “because they provide information from perspectives that we have not had access to in the past. This new information helps us better understand the problem, which leads to a more thorough research project, and ultimately more complete results.”



About the

Office of Research and Best Practices



Our Mission

The ORBP’s mission is to:

- Coordinate and manage research programs for the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT)
- Monitor learning and innovation in development and operations of integrated transportation systems
- Promote implementation of learning and innovation throughout MDOT
- Encourage research that supports integrated multi-modal transportation and MDOT’s strategic goals.

Our Vision

The ORBP’s vision is to be a recognized leader in coordinating applied research and implementing results. We will accomplish this by:

- Identifying cutting edge research topics
- Coordinating development of research projects
- Implementing research results

Our core strength results from a highly integrated network of dynamic partnerships among transportation professionals.

Our Values

The ORBP’s values include:

- Quality
- Teamwork
- Customer Orientation
- Integrity
- Pride
- Determination
- Innovation
- Partnership

The ORBP Team

Main ORBP Office

Calvin Roberts, Engineer of ORBP
Trudy Schutte, Executive Secretary
Wen-hou Kuo, Statistician
Angela Nelson, Department Analyst

MDOT Statewide Library

Alexandra Briseno, Librarian

Best Practices/Legislative Initiatives

Andre Clover, Administrative Engineer

Transportation Research Program

Michael Townley, Research Manager
Annette Nealey, Research Admin. Asst.
Nancy Crider, Research Analyst
Homer Sprague, Statistician

Contact us

Hearing from you is very important to us. Your questions and comments provide opportunities for us to improve our processes for managing research. Please use one of the methods below to let us know what you’re thinking.



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Web site: www.michigan.gov/mdotresearch

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