

South Dakota  
Department of Transportation  
Office of Research

## SD2010-03 Executive Briefing SDDOT 2011 Statewide Customer Satisfaction Assessment

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### STUDY PURPOSE

In 2011, the South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) conducted a Customer Satisfaction Assessment of residents and key customer groups, including senior citizens, shippers/truckers, farmers/ranchers, emergency vehicle operators, and state legislators. The purpose of the assessment was to gather statistically valid data from residents and groups who impact transportation decisions in South Dakota to help identify short- and long-term transportation priorities for the Department. SDDOT will use the findings in its ongoing strategic planning process. SDDOT previously completed statewide Customer Satisfaction Assessments in 1997, 1999, 2002, 2004, and 2006.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this investigation, entitled *SDDOT 2011 Statewide Customer Satisfaction Assessment*, were to:

- assess the opinions of the public and key customer groups regarding the composition, importance, and delivered quality of SDDOT's key products and services.
- assess the opinions of key business partners regarding the effectiveness of SDDOT's business practices and relationships.
- assess progress in addressing customer concerns through SDDOT's ongoing efforts to develop and execute strategic plans.
- identify specific actions SDDOT can take to improve its performance and the perception of customer groups and business partners regarding its performance.

### RESEARCH APPROACH

The assessment, which was performed by ETC Institute, involved several data collection elements. The survey design process included interviews with internal and external stakeholders and focus groups with residents and key customer groups. Quantitative input was obtained through statistically valid surveys of farmers/ranchers, shippers/truckers,

**Key Findings**

- SDDOT conducted a Customer Satisfaction Assessment of residents and key customer groups, including senior citizens, shippers/truckers, farmers/ranchers, emergency vehicle operators, and state legislators
- Overall satisfaction with SDDOT is high and continues to improve
- SDDOT is outperforming other state departments of transportation in the region
- South Dakota residents feel safer driving on state highways than they did five years ago
- SDDOT's new methods for managing winter maintenance have been effective
- 511 and SafeTravelUSA.com are meeting the needs of residents
- Contractors are generally satisfied with SDDOT, but opportunities to strengthen business relationships exist
- Recommendations based upon survey findings include:
  - Emphasizing maintenance, preservation, and safety
  - Strengthening interaction with contractors
  - Enhancing external communication
  - Communicating SDDOT's roles regarding local road funding and transportation for seniors and persons with disabilities

emergency vehicle operators, senior citizens, and state legislators.

### Stakeholder Interviews

A total of 40 internal and external stakeholder interviews were conducted in late 2010 to assess perceptions of senior SDDOT managers and external stakeholders about the delivery of services provided by SDDOT. Information from the interviews was used to develop questions for the focus groups administered in January 2011.

**Focus Groups**

In January 2011, ETC Institute facilitated a total of 12 focus groups with residents and key customer groups of SDDOT. Three focus groups were conducted with transportation stakeholders at each of four locations—Aberdeen, Pierre, Rapid City, and Sioux Falls. The purpose of the focus groups was threefold:

- to identify the core expectations residents and key customer groups have with regard to the delivery of transportation services;
- to understand how residents and key customer groups evaluate SDDOT’s performance; and
- to identify ways that residents and key customer groups think SDDOT could improve its delivery of specific services.

**Customer Surveys**

During the spring of 2011, ETC Institute administered surveys of residents and key customer groups to gather statistically valid data and objectively assess the relative importance of the wide range of topics identified during the survey design process.

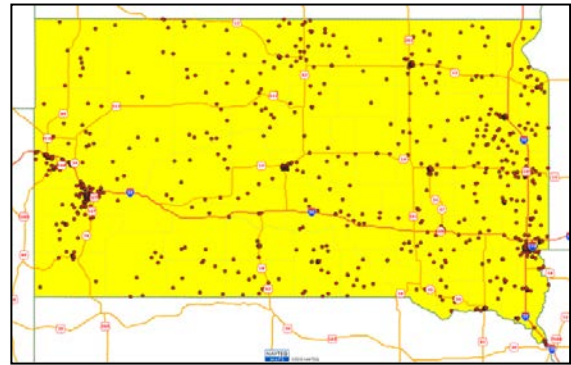
- *Stakeholder Surveys* were administered to a stratified random sample of persons who influence transportation decisions in the State of South Dakota. The sample was designed to obtain data from five major customer groups, including senior citizens, truckers/shippers, emergency vehicle operators, farmers/ranchers, and state legislators.

The goal was to obtain a total of 750 completed surveys from persons in these five groups. The actual number of completed surveys and resulting survey precision (at a 95% level of confidence) for each group is shown in the following table.

Stakeholder Group	Completed Surveys	Precision
Senior Citizens	423	±4.8%
Truckers/Shippers	289	±4.8%
Farmers/Ranchers	433	±4.7%
Emergency Vehicle Operators	141	±6.2%
State Legislators	50	±9.8%

- A general *Resident Survey* was administered to a random sample of 1,134 South Dakota residents during the months of April and May 2011. The sample was stratified to ensure the completion of at least 250 surveys in each of SDDOT’s four geographic regions. The survey, which was administered by phone, took approximately 20

minutes to complete. The statewide sample has a precision of ±3.0% at the 95% confidence level.



**Location of Resident Survey Respondents**

- In addition, ETC Institute conducted a *Regional Benchmarking Survey* of residents of other North Central States, including Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming. The survey contained many of the same questions that were asked of South Dakota residents to allow valid comparisons between results of the 2011 resident survey and results from other states.
- A separate *Contractor Survey* was administered to construction contractors who do business with SDDOT. The survey was specifically designed to gather quantitative input on perceptions of working with the Department. A total of 266 contractors and suppliers completed the survey.

**Executive Team Workshop**

In July 2011, ETC Institute facilitated a consensus-building workshop with members of SDDOT’s Executive Team. The workshop included a presentation of survey findings and a discussion of issues that should be prioritized as a result of the surveys. Recommendations developed by Executive Team members influenced the implementation recommendations offered later in the study’s final reports and presentations.

**Executive Presentations**

In August 2011, ETC Institute presented results to SDDOT’s Research Review Board and the South Dakota Transportation Commission, focusing on survey results, recommendations for action, and implications that the survey results have for the Department’s Strategic Plan.

**Final Reports**

Findings, conclusions, and recommendations are published in a final report and executive summary.

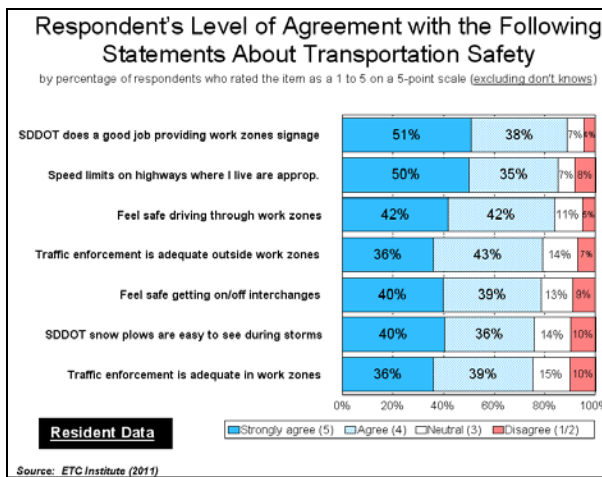
Separate appendices contain detailed results of the stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and surveys.

## SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Major findings of the 2011 Customer Satisfaction Assessment follow, grouped according to the topic areas addressed in the surveys.

### Highway Safety

- Thirty percent (30%) of residents surveyed indicated that South Dakota highways were “much safer” or “somewhat safer” than they were five years ago; 55% rated highways safety “about the same”; 12% thought highways were “more dangerous”; and 3% did not have an opinion.
- Forty-two percent (42%) of residents surveyed thought that “winter conditions” was one of the biggest safety concerns on highways. In 2006, forty-eight percent (48%) of the residents thought it was a concern. “Rough roads” was second, increasing to 24% from 13% in 2006.
- Eighty-nine percent (89%) of residents surveyed thought SDDOT does a good job of providing signage in work zones on state highways. This rating significantly increased since 2006 when eighty-five percent (85%) of residents surveyed felt SDDOT did a good job of signage.



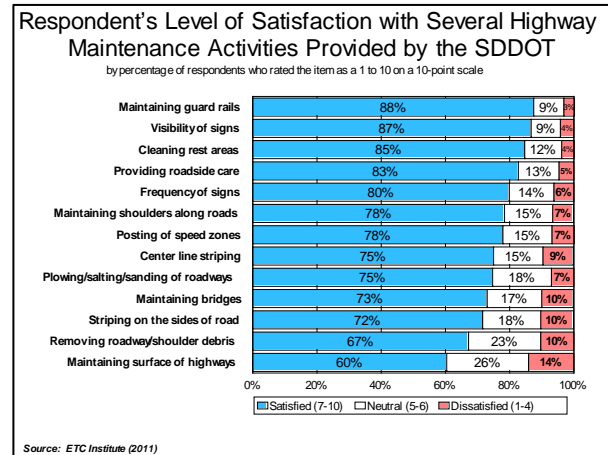
### Transportation Safety Areas

#### Highway Maintenance

- Overall satisfaction with the quality of maintenance on state highways increased significantly from 2006. Satisfaction increased in 9 of the 13 highway maintenance areas assessed on the survey.
- The highway maintenance activities that had the highest levels of satisfaction were maintaining

guard rails, visibility of signs, cleaning rest areas, and providing roadside care.

- The areas that had the lowest levels of satisfaction were removing roadway and shoulder debris, maintaining the surface of highways, striping on the sides of road, and maintaining bridges.

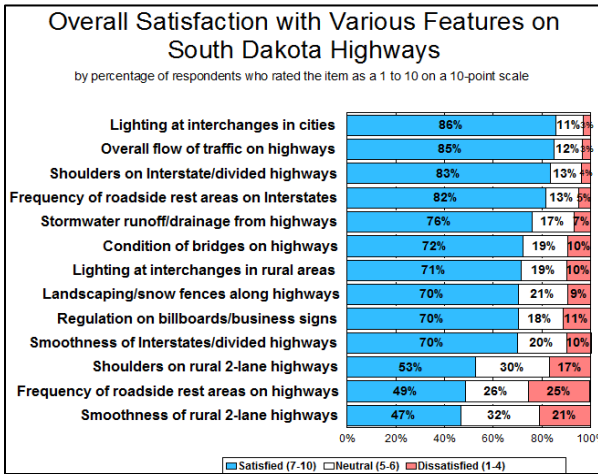


### Highway Maintenance Activities

- Areas of maintenance that residents thought should receive the most emphasis over the next two years were: maintaining road surfaces; removing roadway and shoulder debris; maintaining bridges; and striping on the sides of roads.
- Residents of South Dakota were more satisfied than residents of other regional states with 9 of the 13 maintenance areas.

### Highway Design

- Overall satisfaction of residents increased significantly in 4 of the 12 highway design attributes assessed in the survey. The only significant decrease involved satisfaction with smoothness of rural two lane highways.
- Highway features that had the highest levels of satisfaction from residents were the adequacy of shoulders on Interstate, overflow of traffic on highways, and the adequacy of lighting at interchanges along Interstates in urban areas.
- Highway features that had the lowest levels of satisfaction among residents were the frequency of roadside rest areas on non-Interstate highways, the adequacy of shoulders on rural 2-lane highways, and the smoothness of rural 2-lane highways.



**Highway Design Features**

- The two highway features that residents thought should receive the most emphasis over the next two years were: (1) adequacy of shoulders on rural 2-lane highways; and (2) smoothness of rural 2-lane highways.

**Transportation System Priorities**

- The transportation system priorities that residents thought should receive the most emphasis over the next five years were: maintaining existing highways (51%), expanding transportation services for seniors and persons with disabilities (28%), adding shoulders to highways (23%), and adding passing lanes to highways (22%).
- Some customer groups placed significantly more importance on certain transportation priorities than other groups. For example, expanding transportation services for seniors and persons with disabilities was significantly more important to seniors. Widening highways and adding passing lanes were significantly more important to farmers/ranchers and truckers/shippers.
- Residents were much more likely to think that rural two-lane highways should receive priority for additional funding (57%) than they were to think Interstate highways should receive priority for additional funding (23%).
- State legislators placed more importance on repairing and maintaining existing highways than any other customer group.

**Communication**

- Three-fourths (76%) of residents surveyed thought SDDOT adequately involves their

community during the planning of highway improvements in their area.

- Eighty-two percent (82%) of residents surveyed are satisfied with SDDOT’s efforts to keep them informed about road conditions.
- More than four-fifths (85%) of residents surveyed are familiar with the *511 Traveler Information Service*. Of residents who were familiar with *511*, 60% indicated that they have actually called the service.
- Four-fifths (84%) of residents surveyed had seen variable message boards along Interstate highways in South Dakota.
- The ways residents surveyed preferred getting or receiving information from SDDOT were television (38%), radio (32%), and internet/webpage (29%).

**Construction and Detours**

- Forty percent (40%) of residents surveyed indicated they had experienced a delay due to road construction.
- Most (87%) of the residents who had experienced a delay reported that the length of the work zone was acceptable.

**Travel Behavior of Residents**

- Thirty-eight percent (38%) of residents surveyed indicated they drove 15,000 miles or more each year compared to 62% of truckers/shippers, 64% of farmers/ranchers, and 68% of emergency vehicle operators.
- Only 5% of residents surveyed indicated they had used public transit, such as buses, for mobility within South Dakota during the past 12 months.

**Environmental Stewardship**

- Eighty-three percent (83%) of residents surveyed indicated that it was “very important” or “somewhat important” that SDDOT consider the impact transportation improvements will have on the environment.
- Seventy-five percent (75%) of residents surveyed thought SDDOT was a good steward of the environment, and 21% did not have an opinion. Only 4% did not think SDDOT was a good steward of the environment.

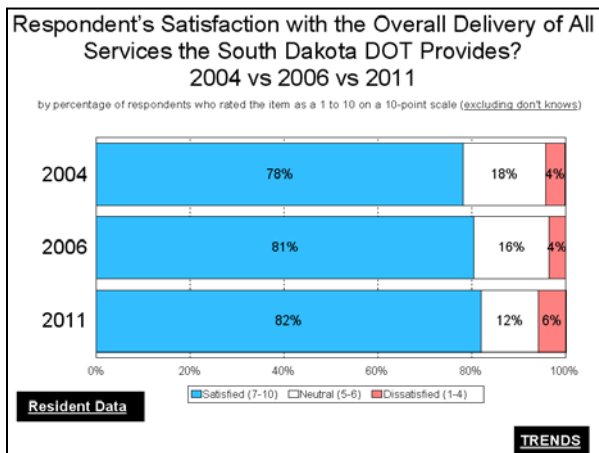
**Customer Service**

- Among residents who had contacted SDDOT during the past two years, 81% indicated that it was “easy” or “very easy” to contact the right

person the last time they contacted SDDOT. Over 80% also reported that they were able to get their question answered or get the information needed the last time they contacted SDDOT.

### Overall Perceptions of SDDOT

- The percentages of each customer group who thought SDDOT designs safe highways were: 94% of state legislators; 88% of farmers/ranchers; 88% of residents; 88% of emergency vehicle operators; 88% of seniors; and 81% of truckers/shippers.



### Overall Satisfaction with SDDOT Services

- The percentages of each customer group who thought SDDOT does a good job planning for future needs were: 78% of seniors; 74% of farmers/ranchers; 72% of emergency vehicle operators; 69% of residents; 65% of state legislators; and 64% of truckers/shippers.
- The percentages of respondents in each customer group who thought SDDOT is an efficient organization were: 81% of seniors; 74% of emergency vehicle operators; 73% of residents; 72% of farmers/ranchers; 69% of state legislators; and 62% of truckers/shippers.
- The percentages of respondents in each customer group who were satisfied with the overall quality of all services provided by SDDOT were: 92% of state legislators; 88% of seniors; 83% of emergency vehicle operators; 82% of residents; 82% of farmers/ranchers; and 76% of truckers/shippers.

### CONTRACTOR SURVEY FINDINGS

The results of the contractor survey showed that most contractors are satisfied with SDDOT. In fact, 80% of contractors surveyed were “extremely

satisfied” or “satisfied” with SDDOT’s overall performance; 13% rated the Department’s overall performance average and only 7% were dissatisfied. Contractors were also asked to rate the Department’s performance in 23 specific areas. More than two-thirds of the contractors gave positive ratings in the following nine areas:

- SDDOT's overall construction process produces a high-quality product (89%)
- SDDOT does a good job enforcing traffic control requirements and ensuring a safe environment for workers (88%)
- SDDOT does a good job educating the public about highway work zones (86%)
- SDDOT treats my organization fairly (81%)
- SDDOT does a good job developing employees for senior positions (73%)
- SDDOT employees have the knowledge and experience required to manage contracts effectively (72%)
- SDDOT is a customer-oriented organization (72%)
- SDDOT inspectors are adequately trained (69%)
- SDDOT provides opportunities for contractors to provide input on project concepts prior to bid letting (68%)

Of the 23 areas, only three received positive ratings from fewer than half of the contractors surveyed:

- SDDOT provides opportunities for contractors to suggest alternative approaches during construction (49%)
- The amount of paperwork required by SDDOT is reasonable (45%)
- The Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) Solicitation Process is convenient/efficient (43%)

### CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions are based on the results of the 2011 Customer Satisfaction Assessment.

- *Overall satisfaction with SDDOT is high and continues to improve.* Eighty-two percent (82%) of the residents surveyed in 2011 indicated that they were satisfied with the overall performance of SDDOT compared to 81% in 2006 and 78% in 2004.
- *SDDOT is outperforming other departments of transportation.* Its overall satisfaction rating of 82% was significantly higher than other departments of transportation in the North

Central United States, including the states of Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wyoming. The average overall satisfaction rating for these North Central states was 75%. In addition, SDDOT rated better than the other DOTs in all 12 of the highway design attributes rated.

- *South Dakota residents feel safer driving on state highways than they did five years ago.* The percentage of residents who indicated they felt safe driving through work zones increased from 80% in 2006 to 84% in 2011. Overall, 85% of those surveyed thought South Dakota highways were as safe as or safer than they were five years ago.
- *SDDOT's new methods for managing winter maintenance have been effective.* Overall satisfaction with SDDOT's winter maintenance operations (plowing, sanding, and salting of roadways) increased from 74% in 2006 to 75% in 2011. Although this increase is small, the increase occurred even though SDDOT significantly reduced the number of hours that it provides snow and ice removal in winter storms.
- *511 and SafeTravelUSA.com are meeting the needs of residents.* Eighty five percent (85%) of those who had visited SafeTravelUSA.com thought the website was "very easy" or "easy" to use, and only 2% thought the information provided was "not accurate." In addition, 85% of those surveyed who had called 511 thought the service was "very easy" or "easy" to use, and only 4% thought the information provided was "not accurate".
- *Contractors are generally satisfied with SDDOT.* Eighty percent (80%) of contractors surveyed were "extremely satisfied" or "satisfied" with the overall performance of SDDOT; 13% rated the Department's overall performance as average and only 7% were dissatisfied. In addition, 72% thought SDDOT was a customer-oriented organization; only 13% did not, and the remaining 15% held a neutral opinion on the issue.

## **IMPLEMENTATION RECOMMENDATIONS**

Results of the stakeholder interviews, focus groups, and surveys provided SDDOT with comprehensive information to identify and manage customer-oriented improvements over the next few years. ETC Institute recommended the following actions

based on the results of the assessment and input from members of the Executive Team.

### **Enhance External Communications**

SDDOT should consider enhancing the quality of external communication with customers. Specific actions that should be considered in support of this recommendation include:

- Proactively educating the public and key customer groups about initiatives that have been or will be implemented in response to concerns identified on the survey. For example, many highway resurfacing projects and shoulder improvements are planned for 2012-2016.
- Promoting the success and cost savings that resulted from the changes the Department made in winter maintenance services.
- Using external communications to shape and manage customer expectations regarding the Department's ability to deliver core services, particularly with regard to the smoothness of highways, bridge condition, and shoulders along rural 2-lane highways.
- Increasing awareness and use of the Department's website.

### **Emphasize Maintenance and Preservation**

SDDOT should emphasize the maintenance and preservation of the existing highway system because "repairing and maintaining highways" was clearly residents' top priority in the 2011 survey. Specific actions that should be considered in support of this recommendation include:

- Educating the public about the amount of resurfacing that has taken place on state highways over the past two years.
- Informing the public and key customer groups about how SDDOT is planning to maintain and preserve the state highway system in future years.
- Ensuring that projects that support the preservation of the existing highway system are given a high priority in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program.
- Continuing to emphasize the importance of maintaining the surface of state highways to all SDDOT employees so the organization will continue to be responsive to customer expectations in this area.

### **Emphasize Safety**

SDDOT should continue to emphasize operational investments and activities that support travel safety on state highways in South Dakota. Specific activities that should be considered include:

- Enhancing the quality of centerline and roadside striping. Although satisfaction levels with roadside striping increased from 2006 to 2011, satisfaction with centerline striping decreased slightly. Both types of striping continue to be priorities for residents and key customer groups. Residents placed significantly more importance on centerline striping in 2011 than they did in 2006.
- Removing debris from state highways. Although this issue is significantly less important than it was in 2006, it is still one of the most important maintenance services to residents and key customer groups.

### **Improve Interaction with Contractors**

SDDOT should continue to improve how it works with contractors. Specific actions that should be considered could include:

- Reviewing the process for developing and reviewing construction plans with contractors to ensure it is as efficient as possible.
- Doing more outreach with all contractors, including those who are not members of the Associated General Contractors. This could begin by sharing the results of the survey and how the Department plans to use the results.

### **Communicate Role in Transportation for Seniors and Persons with Disabilities**

SDDOT should clearly define and communicate the Department's role in supporting transportation services for seniors and persons with disabilities. These services were identified as the second most important transportation priority, second only to repairing and maintaining existing highways. Given the importance of this issue, the Department needs to clearly define and externally communicate what its role in this area will be. If the Department does not take action to manage expectations in this area, residents and other key customer groups may develop unrealistic expectations for the Department, which could have a negative impact on overall satisfaction in future years.

### **Communicate Role in Funding Local Projects**

SDDOT should clearly define and communicate its role in funding local projects. Several focus group

participants and external stakeholders suggested that SDDOT provide more funding to support local transportation projects. Although SDDOT is not responsible for maintaining local systems, customers may expect the Department to provide more support for local transportation projects if the condition of these systems continues to decline. In order to manage expectations, the Department should clearly define what, if any, role SDDOT will have in providing funding for local projects over the next three to five years. If the Department does not take action to manage expectations in this area, residents and key customer groups may develop unrealistic expectations for the Department, which could have a negative impact on overall satisfaction in future years.

### **IMPLEMENTATION PLAN**

In response to the recommendations ETC Institute offered, SDDOT has developed and is pursuing a formal implementation plan that includes these elements:

#### **Communicate Customer Assessment Results to SDDOT Employees**

In mid-December 2011, the principal investigator from ETC Institute presented assessment results to SDDOT employees at several venues, including:

- two half-state meetings of SDDOT staff involved in construction activities;
- presentations to staff based in the Pierre central, region, and area offices;
- a videoconference presentation broadcast to all 12 SDDOT area offices and concurrent webinar accessible to maintenance shops throughout the state.

The webinar was recorded and remains available to SDDOT employees.

#### **Influence SDDOT's 2012 Strategic Plan**

SDDOT's Executive Team has begun developing its 2012 Strategic Plan, to be completed by Summer 2012. Findings and recommendations of the Customer Satisfaction Assessment will influence the plan's strategic initiatives and help determine areas to be emphasized through capital investment, ongoing operations, and external communication with the public and key customer groups.

#### **Develop External Communications Plan**

To address the need to strengthen communication to the public and key customer groups, and to shape and manage their expectations for services, SDDOT

will develop a formal external communications plan. The plan, to be completed by Summer 2012, will define key messages, target specific recipient groups, identify communication media appropriate to each combination of message and recipient group, assign responsibility for accomplishing the communication, and track progress. The overall intent of the plan is to ensure that SDDOT's customers receive important messages, such as SDDOT's plans and accomplishments regarding preservation of the state highway system and safety improvements.

**Strengthen Outreach to Contractors**

To take advantage of insights gained from the Contractor Survey, SDDOT will work to strengthen relationships and business processes with the contracting community. The Department has already scheduled a meeting with contractors in February 2012 to discuss assessment results and other common concerns.

Opportunities to improve business processes related to bid letting and contract administration will be explored.

**Consider Another Assessment**

Late in 2012, SDDOT will evaluate progress in acting upon the results of the 2011 Customer Satisfaction Assessment and consider initiating another assessment in calendar year 2013 or later.

**BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH**

Although the short-term benefits of customer surveys and strategic planning initiatives are difficult to measure, they can have a dramatic and lasting impact on an organization. The results of the 2011 Customer Satisfaction Assessment clearly demonstrate that SDDOT's ongoing efforts to gather input from customers have had a very positive impact on public perceptions of the Department. The Department's priorities are generally aligned with the needs of its customers, and overall satisfaction ratings have improved in almost every area that has been rated over the past five years.

Despite significant progress, the Department still has room for improvement. To continue achieving success, SDDOT plans to respond to the results of this survey and be prepared to respond to new issues that will emerge in the years ahead.

**FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

Complete results of SDDOT 2011 Statewide Customer Satisfaction Assessment are available from SDDOT's Office of Research. Please call 605.773.3292.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This work was performed under the direction of a project technical panel representing the South Dakota Department of Transportation and other organizations.

**Project Technical Panel**

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