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SDDOT 2006 Statewide Customer Satisfaction Assessment

Study SD2006-03 Executive Summary

Prepared by
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16. Abstract <p>This report summarizes perceptions of the South Dakota Department of Transportation's performance in delivering services to residents and key customer groups across South Dakota. It is the fifth in a series of surveys that tracks and monitors attitudes and needs among SDDOT customers, including the general public, farmers, emergency vehicle operators, and trucker/shippers. The study includes opinions of 1,004 residents and 859 representatives of key customer groups.</p> <p>Key objectives that guided this research were to: assess the opinions of the public and key customer groups regarding the composition, importance, and quality of the Department of Transportation's key products and services; assess the Department's progress in addressing customer concerns; and identify specific actions the Department can take to improve its performance and the perception by the public and key customer groups regarding that performance.</p> <p>By objectively assessing the opinions of the general public and key customer groups, this research provides a framework to help senior SDDOT managers continually identify and to respond to the needs of its customers over time.</p>			
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE

In 2006, the South Dakota Department of Transportation (SDDOT) conducted a Customer Satisfaction Assessment of residents and key customer groups, including senior citizens, truckers, farmers/ranchers and emergency vehicle operators. The purpose of the assessment was to gather statistically valid data from residents and persons who impact transportation decisions in the State of South Dakota to help identify short-term and long-term transportation priorities for the Department. The assessment findings presented in this report will be used as part of SDDOT's on-going strategic planning process. SDDOT previously completed statewide Customer Satisfaction Assessments in 1997, 1999, 2002, and 2004.

OBJECTIVES

The 2006 SDDOT Customer Satisfaction Assessment had three primary objectives.

- to assess the opinions of the public and key customer groups regarding the composition, importance, and quality of the Department of Transportation's key products and services;
- to assess the Department's progress in addressing customer concerns;
- to identify specific actions that the Department can take to improve its performance and the perception its customers have of the Department.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The 2006 SDDOT Customer Satisfaction Assessment involved numerous data collection elements. The survey design process was composed of interviews with internal and external stakeholders and focus groups with residents and key customers groups. Quantitative input was obtained through statistically valid surveys that were administered to senior citizens, shippers/truckers, emergency vehicle operators, and farmers/ranchers. Qualitative input was obtained from contractors who do business with the Department via a short on-line survey.

The major components of the Customer Satisfaction Assessment are described below.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

The purpose of the internal and external stakeholder interviews was to assess the perceptions that senior SDDOT managers and external stakeholders have about the delivery of services provided by the South Dakota Department of Transportation. A total of 53 interviews were conducted during June 2006. The information from the internal and external interviews was used to develop questions for the focus groups that were administered in July 2006.

FOCUS GROUPS

During July 2006, ETC Institute facilitated a total of 12 focus groups with residents and key customer groups of the SDDOT. The focus groups were conducted with transportation stakeholders at four sites across the State of South Dakota including Aberdeen, Pierre, Rapid City, and Sioux Falls. Each city

hosted three focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was three-fold: (1) to identify the core expectations residents and key customer groups have with regard to the delivery of transportation services; (2) to understand how residents and key customer groups evaluate the SDDOT's performance in different areas; and (3) to identify ways that residents and key customer groups think the SDDOT could improve the delivery of specific services.

SURVEYS

The South Dakota Department of Transportation conducted a survey of residents and key customer groups during the fall of 2006. The purpose of the surveys was to gather statistically valid data from residents and transportation stakeholders to objectively assess the relative importance of a wide range of issues that were identified during the survey design process.

The methodology for each survey is briefly described below.

Stakeholder Survey

The 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 four major customer groups, including: (1) senior citizens (2) truckers/shippers, (3) emergency vehicle operators, and (4) farmers/ranchers. The goal was to obtain a total of 600 completed surveys from persons in these five groups. The actual number of completed surveys was 859, including 42 contractors, 145 truckers/shippers, 101 emergency vehicle operators, 215 farmers, and 356 senior citizens.

Resident Survey

The resident survey was administered to a stratified random sample of 1004 South Dakota residents during the months of September and October 2006. The sample was stratified to ensure the completion of at least 200 surveys in each of the four SDDOT regions. The survey was administered by phone and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. The statewide sample of 1004 residents has a 95% level of confidence with a precision of at least +/- 3.1%.

Benchmarking Survey

In addition to the surveys that were administered to residents and key customer groups in South Dakota, ETC Institute also administered a regional Benchmarking Survey to residents of other North Central States, including North Dakota, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Wyoming and Montana. The benchmarking survey contained many of the same questions that were asked of residents in South Dakota to allow valid comparisons of the results of the 2006 resident survey to the results from other states.

Survey of Contractors

A separate online survey was administered to contractors who do business with the Department. The survey was designed to gather qualitative input from contractors regarding the perceptions of working with the Department. A total of 42 contractors completed the on-line survey, which was not a scientifically valid sample. The results of the contractor survey are provided in Appendix I (published separately).

SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS

Major findings of the 2006 Customer Satisfaction Assessment are provided below. The findings are grouped according to the topic areas that were addressed on the survey.

HIGHWAY SAFETY

- Forty-seven percent (47%) of the *residents* surveyed indicated that South Dakota highways were “much safer” or “somewhat safer” than they were five years ago; 41% rated highways safety “about the same”; 8% thought highways were “more dangerous” and 5% did not have an opinion.

HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE

- Overall satisfaction increased significantly in 7 of the 13 highway maintenance activities that were rated. (Changes of 3% or more were statistically significant.) There were no significant decreases in any of the activities that were rated.
- The highway maintenance activities that had the highest levels of satisfaction were maintaining guard rails, visibility of signs, cleaning rest areas, and maintaining bridges.
- The maintenance activities that had the lowest levels of satisfaction were removing debris from roadways, maintaining the surface of highways, striping on the sides of road, and snow removal. Although these activities had the lowest levels of satisfaction, the Department’s performance in each improved significantly since 2004.
- Maintenance activities that residents thought should receive the most emphasis over the next two years were (1) removing debris from roadways, (2) maintaining road surfaces, (3) snow removal, (4) maintaining shoulders, and (5) striping on the sides of roads.

HIGHWAY DESIGN

- Overall satisfaction increased significantly in 6 of the 12 highway design features that were rated. (Changes of 3% or more were statistically significant.) The only significant decrease involved satisfaction with lighting at rural Interstate interchanges.
- Highway features that had the **highest** levels of satisfaction from residents were: the adequacy of shoulders on Interstate, flow 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, the smoothness of rural 2-lane highways, and lighting on rural Interstate interchanges.
- The two highway features that residents thought should receive the most emphasis over the next two years were (1) the adequacy of shoulders on rural 2-lane highways and (2) the 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 (48%), widening highways (32%),

expanding transportation services for seniors and persons with disabilities (31%), adding shoulders to highways (28%), and adding passing lanes to highways (26%).

- More than one-third (39%) of the residents surveyed thought that funding for state highways should be “increased”, 44% thought it should “stay the same,” and 14% did not have an opinion. Only 3% indicated that the current level of funding should be “reduced”.

COMMUNICATION

- Nearly three-fourths (71%) of the residents surveyed thought that SDDOT considers and values the opinions of the public.
- Three-fourths (74%) of the residents surveyed thought SDDOT adequately involved their community during the planning of highway improvements in their area.
- Less than half (49%) of the residents surveyed knew that SDDOT had a website. Among those who knew about the Department’s website, 39% indicated that they had used the website in the past year. The percentage of residents who had used the Department’s website was up 7% from 2004.
- Four-fifths (81%) of the residents surveyed are familiar with the *511 Traveler Information System*. Of those residents who are familiar with *511*, 47% indicated that they have actually called the service.

CUSTOMER SERVICE

- Among residents who had contacted SDDOT during the past two years, 84% indicated that it was “easy” or “very easy” to contact the right person the last time they contacted the SDDOT.
- Among residents who had contacted SDDOT during the past two years, 80% reported that they were able to get their question answered or get the information needed the last time they contacted the SDDOT.

OVERALL PERCEPTIONS OF SDDOT

- Eighty-four percent (84%) of the residents surveyed thought that SDDOT designed safe highways.
- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of the residents surveyed thought that SDDOT does a good job planning for the future.
- Nearly three-quarters (71%) of the residents surveyed thought that SDDOT is an efficient organization.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions were made based on the results of the 2006 Customer Satisfaction Assessment. The supporting evidence and rationale for each conclusion is provided in the main body of this report.

- SDDOT has made substantial progress in the overall maintenance of the state’s highway system.

- SDDOT’s capital improvement program has generally been responsive to the needs of residents, but the Department will need to continue assessing customer expectations to ensure future investments are targeted in the appropriate areas.
- SDDOT has enhanced perceptions of highway safety, but there are opportunities to enhance perceptions of travel safety, particularly in rural areas.
- Although most customers think SDDOT is easy to contact and responsive to their needs, the Department should continue to identify ways to enhance its ability to be responsive to the public and key customer groups.
- SDDOT efforts to communicate with the public have improved, but there is a need to do more and target information to specific customer groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

The results of the surveys, focus groups, and stakeholder interviews provide SDDOT with a comprehensive set of information to identify and manage customer-oriented improvements over the next two years. Although there are many applications for the data from the 2006 Customer Satisfaction Assessment, the Executive Team identified four “Priority Areas for Action” based on the results of the survey and feedback from members of the Executive Team. The four “Priority Areas for Action” are listed below.

MAINTENANCE & PRESERVATION OF EXISTING HIGHWAY SYSTEM

SDDOT should emphasize the maintenance and preservation of the existing highway system. Specific actions that would support this recommendation include:

- Completing the pavement management research project that is currently being conducted by the Department and implementing the recommendations.
- Increasing funding for resurfacing projects.
- Ensuring that projects that support the preservation of the existing system are given a high priority in the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program.

LONG-RANGE SAFETY PLAN

SDDOT should develop a long-range plan to address safety concerns related to travel on highways in rural areas of South Dakota. Specific issues that should be addressed in this plan would include:

- Ways to address and fund investments related to the public’s concern about the lack of lighting at interchanges in rural areas and the need for night-time visibility enhancements at rural Interstate interchanges.
- Ways to address and fund improvements that will address the public’s concern about narrow lanes and the lack of shoulders on many two-lane highways in rural areas.
- The need to give SDDOT Regions some flexibility in the planning and implementation of safety-related projects, such as the ability to make some shoulder improvements.

OPERATIONAL SAFETY INVESTMENTS

SDDOT should continue to make operational investments that support travel safety on all highways in South Dakota a top priority. Specific operational activities that should be emphasized by the Department include:

- Removing debris from state highways. The Department has made significant progress in this area, but there is still room for improvement.
- Clearing snow and ice during winter storms. Overall satisfaction with snow and ice removal efforts was high among all customer groups, but the Department's ability to respond to major storms could be enhanced with (1) the development of a plan for extended hours during major storms and (2) the enhancement of the Department's winter reserve program that recruits and retains additional operators who can assist with snow removal operations during a major storm.
- Enhancing the quality of roadside striping. Although satisfaction with roadside striping increased significantly from 2004 to 2006, this issue continues to be a high priority of residents and key customer groups.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

SDDOT should enhance the quality of external communication with customers. Specific actions that would support this recommendation include:

- SDDOT should proactively educate the public and key customer groups about initiatives that have been implemented to respond to concerns that were identified on previous customer satisfaction surveys, such as the debris removal initiatives that were started in response to the results of the 2004 survey.
- The Department's should enhance efforts to communicate SDDOT priorities and the rationale for these priorities to the public and key customer groups. This should include information about the costs associated with major investments and the tradeoffs between investments.
- Increasing awareness and use of the Department's website. Although use of the Department's website increased from 2004 to 2006, fewer than half of the residents surveyed knew that SDDOT had a website.
- SDDOT should review its process for assigning communication responsibilities during major construction projects. The person who is responsible for communication efforts should be clearly identified at the beginning of each project.
- SDDOT should continue to actively communicate with key customer groups. As part of this effort, the Department should begin tailoring both the content and method of communication the Department uses to communicate with each key customer group.

IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE

- By March 1, 2007, SDDOT should issue press releases to the media and informational notices to leaders of key customer groups to report the findings of the 2006 Customer Satisfaction Assessment and announce the Department's plans to respond to the findings.

- By April 1, 2007, SDDOT should ensure that the results of the survey are communicated to all employees in the Department.
- By May 1, 2007, the Executive Team should require subordinate managers from the Area Engineer level and above to identify specific ways that they will use the results of the 2006 Customer Satisfaction Assessment to improve organizational performance over the next two years.
- By November 1, 2007, SDDOT managers from the Area Engineer level and above should provide an update to their immediate supervisor regarding how they have used the results of the 2006 Customer Satisfaction Assessment to improve their work unit's performance as part of their performance review process.
- In the spring of 2008, SDDOT should begin the process of reassessing its performance again.

SUMMARY

Although the short-term benefits of customer surveys and strategic planning initiatives are difficult to measure, the long-term impact of such processes can have a dramatic and lasting impact on an organization. The results of the 2006 Customer Satisfaction Assessment clearly demonstrate that SDDOT's commitment to its Strategic Plan and the Department's on-going 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 will need to respond to the priorities that were identified during this assessment and be prepared to respond to new issues that will emerge in the years ahead.