
CHAPTER 3

WYDOT's process for selecting projects relies on extensive data

WYDOT selects highway projects to receive state General Funds as part of its overall process for selecting projects. This involves assessing the condition of highways and then selecting projects for which funding is available. The process is generally strong and relies on highway data including data on pavement and bridge conditions, safety ratings, and traffic volumes.

State Transportation Improvement Program lists projects planned for the next six years

WYDOT's six-year plan schedules and designates funding for projects.

Federal law requires states to develop a State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP), a schedule of projects the state plans to undertake in the future. Projects can be included in the STIP only if the state can reasonably anticipate receiving full funding for them. Annually, WYDOT updates the STIP listing of the next six years of federally-funded and state-funded projects. The STIP schedules contract maintenance and construction projects, including General Fund projects. Each district also maintains a separate list of smaller upcoming maintenance jobs to be completed by WYDOT staff.

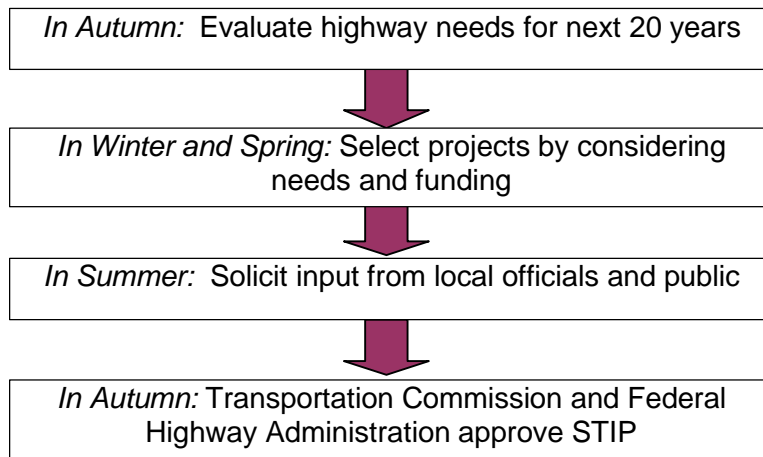
In the fall of 2007, WYDOT developed the 2008-2013 STIP and for the first time, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) allowed WYDOT to assume it would receive \$100 million in General Funds in each of those years. This decision was based on the Legislature's recent appropriations and the Governor's stated intent to continue requesting funds. It enabled WYDOT to incorporate planning for General Fund projects into the project selection process. WYDOT did not change its project selection process as a result of receiving General Funds.

Headquarters and district staff are involved in project selection

Engineers use bridge, safety, and pavement data.

WYDOT uses a process summarized in Figure 3.1 to update the STIP. Generally, districts select highway projects. Districts base these decisions on data and analysis provided by headquarters programs, such as data on bridges, safety, and pavement condition. Headquarters staff also match projects with funding sources and make sure district projects are within budget estimates. Finally, they compile district decisions into the STIP. Headquarters staff may question decisions, but they do not prioritize projects within districts.

Figure 3.1
Summary of WYDOT process for revising the STIP



Source: LSO analysis of WYDOT documents and interviews with WYDOT staff

WYDOT annually reviews the needs of every highway section.

Evaluate highway needs for next 20 years In autumn, headquarters and district staff update the Needs Analysis database containing information on every section of road in the state system. This covers a mix of state and U.S. highways as well as interstates. For each section of road, headquarters programs generate safety, bridge, and pavement condition scores for inclusion in the Needs Analysis.

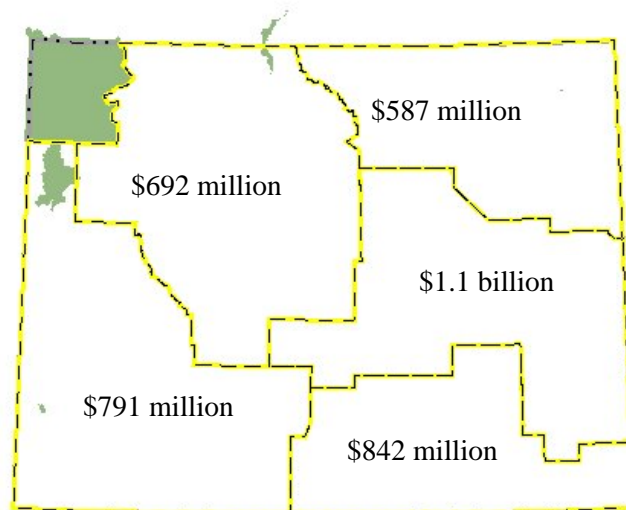
The Needs Analysis documents when each section of road will next need work. Needs that should be addressed immediately are categorized as “present needs,” while non-immediate needs are classified according to the time when they will become necessary: 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-20 years, and more than 20 years. The Needs Analysis also includes what kind of work is proposed and the estimated cost.

WYDOT reports having more needs than available funding.

WYDOT has identified more projects as having present needs than it can fund. As illustrated in Figure 3.2, the 2007 Needs Analysis shows present needs will cost \$4 billion. Since present needs are greater than available funding, the Needs Analysis also includes a priority rating for each present need on a scale of one to four.

Figure 3.2

**Estimated \$4 billion cost of fixing present needs
By WYDOT district**



Source: LSO analysis of WYDOT’s 2007 Needs Analysis data

As part of the annual update of the Needs Analysis, district engineers and staff drive the roads in their districts to visually assess road condition and identify needs. They have with them data on pavement and bridge condition, crash histories, and traffic volumes.

In November, headquarters staff visit each district to review and update the Needs Analysis, discussing changes in road conditions and whether they warrant changes in the scheduled work. At these meetings, headquarters staff may question district decisions, such as changes in need timeframes and priority rankings. In updating the Needs Analysis, the focus is not on what work districts will do, but what they think ought to be done, regardless of whether funding is available.

Federal funding program requirements affect project selection and timing.

Select projects by considering needs and funding After identifying road needs, staff take funding constraints into account as they select and schedule projects. Decisions are based on highway data, road tour observations, and engineering judgment. Another consideration is federal funding programs and their eligibility requirements, since these affect project selection and timing. For example, not all types of federal funding can go to low-volume state roads, a factor that limits the number of projects undertaken on these roads.

Each district submits its proposed projects to headquarters staff, who check whether estimated costs are within budget constraints and match projects to available funding. District staff then adjust their priorities and schedules, based on funding and project cost estimates. In the spring, they meet with headquarters staff to discuss when projects should begin.

District staff meet with local officials in each county.

Solicit input from local officials and the public In May or June, districts hold one meeting in each county to talk to local officials and legislators about the draft STIP and learn about local government plans. The format of these meetings is geared to WYDOT's discussion with local officials, with some districts allowing the public to attend, and others not making the annual STIP meetings public. Both scenarios appear to limit the general public's opportunity to comment on which projects WYDOT will do.

The public also has an opportunity to comment on the STIP at the end of the process in July, when WYDOT puts the revised draft on its website. However, in 2007 WYDOT did not issue press releases announcing that the STIP was available for comment, and we found it difficult to get to the STIP list of upcoming projects on the website. Since neither the home page nor the Information

The upcoming project list is not easy to find on WYDOT's website.

Central page has a link to it, people must navigate their way through the website to find the STIP. Searching for a project list is further complicated because WYDOT refers to it only as the State Transportation Improvement Program or by its acronym, STIP, which people outside the transportation industry may not know is the name for the project list. A more descriptive name, such as “highway projects,” could make it easier to find.

Transportation Commission and Federal Highway Administration approve STIP The process of developing one year's STIP ends a year after WYDOT began by assessing highway needs. In September, the Transportation Commission approves the plan, after which it goes to the Federal Highway Administration for approval. As WYDOT finalizes one STIP, it has already begun developing the next year's STIP.

Once a project is in the STIP, WYDOT can begin the design, a process that involves many steps beyond determining pavement depth and road width and slope. The design phase can also include soil research and survey work, coordinating with local governments and land owners, developing plans for right-of-way and utilities, and an environmental review. Depending on the complexity of the project, this preparation can take between three and ten years, although some maintenance projects such as pavement overlays take less time to plan.

Project timing can change

Changes in cost and revenue estimates can delay projects.

Projects can be moved forward or back for a variety of reasons, such as when cost estimates or revenue projections are different than expected. For example, WYDOT identified projects for the \$100 million in General Funds it anticipated receiving for each of the years in the STIP. However, when appropriating \$200 million in General Funds to WYDOT for the '09-'10 biennium, the Legislature reserved \$10 million for designated purposes. This five percent reduction in the funding WYDOT had planned for may force officials to delay some projects. It illustrates how plans are subject to change, and why a project may be on WYDOT's to-do list for years before finally being started.

