



Kansas RTAP Fact Sheet

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Subcommittees: The Worker Bees of a Transit Board

By Anne Lowder

Transit boards exist to govern transit operations and provide high-level oversight for operations. These are significant responsibilities, and are difficult to address in depth at regular board meetings. Having subcommittees on key issues can give a board the opportunity to have in-depth discussion with experts in those areas, and with stakeholders in the community. The subcommittee's job is to develop well-considered recommendations for the full board to consider for adoption.

This article will describe some of the typical subcommittees for transit boards, how they function, and the pros and cons of forming subcommittees, by summarizing major points on subcommittees from the National Rural Transit Assistance Program Guidebook titled *Boards that Perform*.

The Basics of a subcommittee

Subcommittees are groups of persons appointed or selected to perform a function on behalf of a larger group. The duties of subcommittees are to gather information, discuss options and make recommendations to the full board. The subcommittee reports during a board meeting and helps to instill structure to keep your meeting tightly focused. The full governing board may accept, reject, or modify these recommendations using established, formal procedures.

Subcommittees address specific issues that are essential to guiding the decisions of a transit board. Members of



Examples of Transit Subcommittees

Finance – Addresses issues related to grants, purchasing, budgeting, cash flow, and fare structure policies.

Personnel – Addresses labor issues, wages and benefits, pension trust, and employee incentive programs.

Marketing and Planning – Addresses dissemination of public information and service development planning.

Operations – Addresses operational concerns such as service area, accessibility, fare collection systems, and service performance by route as well as service sector.

Maintenance – Addresses facility maintenance and improvement, fleet selection, fleet maintenance and storage, parts, inventory management, and other material supply concerns.

Safety/ Security – Addresses accident performance, changing hazard and threat conditions, emergency preparedness activities, and interagency coordination.

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the subcommittees can be drawn from members in your community, experts on that committee's area of interest, staff, and board members.

The National Rural Transit Assistance Program guidebook, *Boards that Perform*, recommends that subcommittees should generally have at least three members and not more than seven. The smaller group structure allows for more open discussion on important and complicated issues. Examples of transit subcommittees are shown in the sidebar.

It is important to know that all subcommittees formed by the board and reporting to the board, regardless of who is on them and whether a quorum of board members is in attendance, must follow all public meetings requirements for meeting postings, accessibility and the recording minutes.

In Finney County, Kansas, the seven members of the Finney County Committee on Aging (FCCA) board are appointed by the Finney County Commissioners. The board then appoints subcommittees such as Meals on Wheels and Transit to work on the specific issues. Bonnie Burgardt, Director of Finney County Transit said, "Subcommittees work great to eliminate long discussions on each issue during board meetings. It is in the subcommittees where issues are discussed and recommendations are made so at the board meeting they are able to vote yes or no on a subcommittee's recommendation."

The bottom line: Subcommittees bring depth and efficiency to a board.

Pros and cons of subcommittees

The pros of using subcommittees include the opportunity for more thorough research and consideration of information. Subcommittees take the varied responsibilities of the transit board, separate them and narrow them into specific issues. The subcommittee members study their assigned issues using

experts in the field, discussing options and best practices with business partners and citizens, and report on their findings and make recommendations back to the board. The transit board can then use the in-depth information and recommendations provided by the subcommittees to make informed decisions.

The cons using of subcommittees include increased staff time involved in preparing for the additional meetings and supporting the subcommittees. Important discussion of high-impact decisions may be held away from the full board.

Some topics, such as setting the policy for the agency and monitoring the agency's operations are better served if they are discussed by the full board at a regular board meeting.

Another con: the potential for micro-management. Board members who serve on subcommittees may stray into wanting to take responsibility for things not within board authority. If the subcommittee is examining something more operational than governing/oversight in nature, any board member on that subcommittee needs to be careful to step back into the general oversight role once the board acts on the subcommittee's decision and management takes it from there.

Are subcommittees needed indefinitely?

Some subcommittees are "standing," with duties with no fixed endpoint. They exist to provide ongoing input, such as a safety and security subcommittee or a finance subcommittee. Other subcommittees may be ad hoc, appointed with well-defined charges and deadlines, after which they will cease to exist.

Frequently boards will use ad hoc committees to research and report on recommendations for building additions/expansions, technology upgrades, or major changes in operations. It is

important that the scope of the work of any subcommittee be narrowly and clearly defined by a set of detailed guidelines voted on by the board.

What about a small agency? Do they need subcommittees?

Small boards, in small communities, may not have access to enough people to create viable subcommittees. Instead, the board as a whole could function as a subcommittee. A special board meeting would be held as a work session to discuss a single topic in detail, to make a recommendation to be taken up for a vote at a future regular board meeting.

Conclusion

Warren Buffett said; "Risk comes from not knowing what you're doing." A transit board without subcommittees poses a risk for the transit agency and its operations. No one person or transit board can be an expert in all things transit and the needs of the community. Appointing subcommittees on specific issues, allowing the subcommittees to research and discuss the specific issues, and prepare reports and provide recommendations on those specific issues to the transit board helps the board make informed decisions. For more information, read the National RTAP resource at the link below. ●

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Source

- The National Rural Transit Assistance Program (NRTAP) resource: Boards that Perform Roles and Responsibilities of Transit Board Members. January 2008. http://web1.ctaa.org/webmodules/webarticles/articlefiles/BoardsThatPerform_v5_WEB.pdf