

Plan for Increasing the Public Availability of Information About FTA Operations

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Executive Summary

This plan responds to a March 20, 2015 memorandum from the Department of Transportation General Counsel and Chief Information Officer that requires each Operating Administration to develop a specific action plan for making “in demand” information publicly available on an ongoing basis.

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) provides financial and technical assistance for public transit systems to develop new transit systems and improve, maintain, and operate existing systems. FTA maintains a number of systems and data elements supporting its primary functions, including funding allocation, award, and oversight activities. The congressionally-mandated National Transit Database (NTD) is the primary system for many of these data elements which support FTA’s mission.

The FTA collects data from transit providers in the United States and its territories in order to administer various programs as specified by Congress. Data are collected in the NTD to support formula apportionments, research activities, performance benchmarking, and public transportation planning. Data are also collected for grants management purposes, including grant awards, grant disbursements, and data for evaluation of applications for discretionary grants. Finally, data on safety incidents are collected to support enforcement of FTA safety regulations.

With a few exceptions, all FTA data are posted on the FTA website or on the NTD website. Individual NTD major safety incident reports are not currently posted due to concerns that they may contain personally identifiable information (PII) or allow speculation as to causality and blame for which they were not intended. NTD data that are collected monthly are usually posted on the website within 40 days.

Annual NTD data are published on the NTD website, typically in October of each year. Monthly NTD data, including monthly ridership and summary safety data, are published monthly. Grant apportionment data are posted shortly after each apportionment and annual data summary documents for a number of programs are posted in the FTA library once they are final.

The FTA Office of Communications and Congressional Affairs (TCA) recently determined the strategic goals it will pursue to assist FTA in meeting its mission and performance plan objectives. One TCA strategic goal is to improve access to FTA information as a means to support our internal and external communications initiatives. This effort is just now beginning and TCA envisions it will include completing current actions such as the FTA website migration and its related reorganization, and integrating the NTD into the FTA website; reviewing news media and congressional inquiries to identify frequently requested information; being proactive in identifying and posting new documents that are likely to be in high demand; ensuring the timely posting of all congressionally-mandated reports; and expanding the use of social media, among other measures.

Additionally, the FTA Office of Transit Safety and Oversight (TSO) is currently engaged in planning its collection and release of data related to transit safety. TSO is currently drawing most

of its data from NTD, but is expected to augment this data with other sources, and release data specific to its mandate, over the next few years.

The FTA is committed to the continued assessment and availability of its data.

1.0 Understanding Data in Demand

1.1 Review of Existing Practices

The following is a brief overview of current FTA data releases that demonstrate FTA's commitment to more efficient and responsive proactive data release:

National Transit Database Data

The National Transit Database (NTD) was established by Congress to be the Nation's primary source for information and statistics on the transit systems of the United States. Recipients and beneficiaries of grants from the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) under the Urbanized Area Formula Program (§5307) or Rural Formula Program (§5311) are required by statute to submit data to the NTD. The Federal Transit Administration uses these data to populate the formulas that drive the yearly apportionment of grants to the transit industry and to create a biennial report to Congress on the state of the nation's transit industry and infrastructure.

Each year, the NTD program makes this data available on a public website on a series of Excel spreadsheets. This information is currently used by a variety of transit stakeholders. State and local governments, as well as individual transit agencies, use this information to conduct performance benchmarking among peer transit systems. NTD data are also frequently used by academic researchers seeking to study public transportation systems. NTD data are key components of the American Public Transportation Association's Annual Factbook and data on capital assets. Time series of NTD data are frequently used by suppliers of transit equipment and services to evaluate market trends and by government at all levels to guide transit investment decisions.

The following highlights the NTD releases and provides the location these data are located.

- FTA publishes a new set of roughly 600 transit agency profiles that report urbanized area data on the NTD website annually (<http://www.ntdprogram.gov/ntdprogram/data.htm>). These profiles are updated each winter and provide a one-page summary of key statistics on each reporting transit agency's finances and operations. These profiles are used by FTA executives as background when they meet with transit agencies. A search tool on the web page makes it easy to find the profile for any agency.
- NTD data summary tables are posted on the NTD website data page (<http://www.ntdprogram.gov/ntdprogram/pubs/dt/2013/excel/DataTables.htm>). This

data is widely used by the public and other government agencies to evaluate transit finances and service levels. An updated set of these files is posted every year and FTA has recently initiated a contract to review these tables and revise the format to make the tables easier to understand and use.

Apportionment Data

FTA publishes data used to calculate formula grant apportionments after each apportionment is published in the Federal Register. This data accounts for approximately \$10 billion in grants annually. There have been as many as four apportionments in a year, one occurring after each continuing resolution that funds another four or more months of FTA formula grants. Links to data for each program are posted on the FTA website (http://www.fta.dot.gov/12853_13935.html). This listing also includes information on how to use and interpret the data. Please see the apportionment section for additional details.

Grant Data

FTA publishes data from awarded grants to state and local grantees on a monthly basis. This data includes information on grantees, funding allocation and amounts, and expected schedules for spending. FTA pulls the data from the Transportation Electronic Award Management (TEAM) system, FTA's grant-making system of record, and publishes it to www.usaspending.gov. The upcoming deployment of the Transit Award Management System (TrAMS), FTA's new grant-making system, will use the same mechanism to release data to the public.

Safety Data

The FTA Office of Transit Safety and Oversight (TSO) administers a national transit safety program and program compliance oversight process to advance the provision of safe, reliable, and equitable transit service through adherence with legislative, policy, and regulatory requirements as established by FTA. TSO publishes several different data sets on their public website:

- In response to concerns regarding the safety performance of Rail Transit Agencies (RTAs), the FTA may conduct an organization-wide Safety Management Inspection (SMI) of the rail and/or bus systems to assess the RTA's safety programs and compliance with its own procedures and rules, existing federal regulations, and FTA Safety Advisories. To address the SMI safety findings, FTA may issue a Safety Directive to the RTA with a number of required actions. FTA may also perform a Safety Management System Gap Analysis to evaluate a RTA's safety management practices. These documents are available at http://www.fta.dot.gov/tso_16476.html.
- During an incident/accident investigation FTA may develop safety advisories to highlight a finding or safety deficiency that requires timely and immediate action, or may be an area of concern to the transit industry. These safety advisories are available at http://www.fta.dot.gov/tso_15922.html.
- TSO publishes Rail Safety Statistics Reports (RSSPs). These Reports use information collected by FTA from NTD and the SSO program. As applicable, these reports also use data supplied by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), the National Transportation Safety Board

(NTSB), and the National Safety Council (NSC). These reports are available at <http://www.fta.dot.gov/TSO/RailSafety.html>.

1.2 Improving Current Practices

FTA currently assesses and publishes data based upon mandatory posting requirements and through coordination with the respective data owners. To further enhance access to FTA data to internal and external stakeholders, FTA will:

1. Continue to evaluate nominated datasets for release, in whole or in part, to the public.
2. Analyze and nominate additional datasets for potential release to the public where possible.
3. Create an FTA master data schema that documents all critical FTA datasets.
4. Create a data dictionary repository to house all critical FTA dataset metadata.
5. Identify which datasets are authoritative.
6. Document the processes and formulas for any derivative data outputs that FTA publishes.

FTA plans to accomplish these goals through collaborative cooperation between all data owners and the FTA technical staff. FTA believes that having a holistic data view will better enable it to identify additional data sharing opportunities.

Additionally, FTA is actively looking for opportunities to improve access to FTA data and information as a means to support its internal and external communications initiatives. Currently, the Office of Communication and Congressional Affairs (TCA) analyzes the communications needs for projects and issues as they arise, and from public, news media, and Congressional inquiries. TCA intends to develop a more coordinated approach for proactive information disclosure through management of the forthcoming FTA Public Information Program.

Over the next 12 months, the National Transit Database (NTD) has two projects planned that will improve the quality and usability of the NTD data. Data products are currently made available on the website as Excel spreadsheets. FTA awarded a contract in September 2015 to reformat and refresh the current data tables to improve their usability by the public. NTD is also in the process of moving the website to a Drupal-based platform. This redesign will allow for more timely content updates and gives the FTA a chance to revisit and retool the user experience. The new website will improve the access to historic NTD information as well as allow FTA to quickly add supplemental resources to the website such as presentations or training documents.

Finally, as legislatively mandated by MAP-21, FTA plans to roll out an expanded asset inventory and document new performance reporting requirements over the next two years. The new inventory will be a more comprehensive look at the assets owned and maintained by

transit providers and will allow for a richer analysis of investments in public transportation and performance benchmarking.

2.0 Meeting Mandatory Posting Requirements

2.1 Congressional Reports

Currently, congressional reports are tracked by the Federal Transit Administration's Office of Budget and Policy. While some congressional reports are posted on the FTA website, the posting has not been consistent and is not currently up to date.

The FTA, coordinated through Office of Communications and Congressional Affairs (TCA), intends to undertake and implement a more centralized Congressional reports management system in order to ensure the timely posting of all Congressionally-mandated reports. FTA will determine whether posting is more appropriate on the program office website, or on a centralized congressional reporting page. FTA intends to implement this system in the first quarter of fiscal year 2016, and will retroactively post any congressional reports that have already been transmitted.

2.2 Congressional Testimony

The FTA Office of Communications and Congressional Affairs publishes all cleared congressional testimony for all hearing appearances on the FTA public website (<http://www.fta.dot.gov/newsroom/12293.html>). Additionally, searching for "testimony" on the FTA website returns several pages of citations that link to transcripts of the full testimony.

2.3 Freedom of Information Act Request Logs

FTA posts information on its Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests as they occur. The FOIA logs are posted in the FTA FOIA Electronic Reading Room under Category 4 – Frequently Requested Records (http://www.fta.dot.gov/legislation_law/12316_8574.html).

FTA's control log of FOIA requests received in FY 2014 was posted on the FTA website on September 29, 2015. FTA plans to post the control log for 2015 by October 30th, 2015.

2.4 Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room

FTA's Office of Congressional and Public Affairs ensures that statutorily-mandated FOIA Electronic Reading Room records are current as outlined in 5 U.S.C. § 552 by posting relevant documents promptly to FTA's Electronic Reading Room (http://www.fta.dot.gov/legislation_law/12316_8574.html). Currently, these records are published if the agency has received at least three requests for the record, or if the Office of

Congressional and Public Affairs has reason to believe that a request will generate this level of interest.

3.0 Considering Additional Items for Posting

3.1 Funding and/or Apportionment Tables

FTA publishes a large amount of apportionment data as standard operating procedure:

- Annual Apportionment Tables and Related Data Sets: Each time that FTA publishes a continuing resolution or full year apportionment notice, FTA also publishes tables that allocate over \$10 billion in formula and discretionary funds to state, urbanized areas, and transit agencies. These tables are available at <http://www.fta.dot.gov/apportionments>. In addition, FTA publishes the National Transit Database (NTD) and Census data that is used in the various formulas as well as tables that break certain formulas into component tiers and flow charts that describe how the formulas work. We publish this information at least once a year and sometimes two to three times per year depending on the number of partial apportionments FTA makes available. Prior-year apportionments are also available.
- Annual Statistical Summaries: On an annual basis, FTA publishes a set of statistical summary tables that detail the amount of funds awarded in FTA grants the preceding fiscal year. The statistical summary tables provide detailed information on FTA awards including funds awarded by funding program, recipient, state, urbanized area, and by the types of goods and services to be purchased. FTA has statistical summary information going back to 1998. This information can be found at <http://www.fta.dot.gov/data>.
- Grant Making Overview Reports: Since 2011, FTA has published on <http://www.fta.dot.gov/data> some relatively simple reports and visuals documenting the number and amount of grants awarded in the preceding fiscal year by FTA funding programs, along with charts and visuals on FTA funding trends beginning in 2006.
- Special Publications: In 2011, FTA published a detailed data dashboard on grants awarded under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This dashboard provides detailed information about Recovery Act grants including information on third-party contractors receiving funds from FTA grantees. In 2014, FTA published a similar dashboard on grants awarded under the Disaster Relief and Appropriations Act. See <http://www.fta.dot.gov/data>.

3.2 Correspondence Logs

FTA has explored the possibility of posting correspondence logs. Although correspondence logs are not routinely posted, the responsive requests will be posted in FTA's Electronic Reading Room whenever a FOIA request is received for Congressional correspondence.

4.0 Protecting Sensitive Information from Release

FTA ensures that private, privileged, or other sensitive data (such as information protected by the Privacy Act or Trade Secrets Act) is not posted on its websites through a process of management review and approval. The FTA Office of Congressional and Public Affairs works closely with FTA program and regional offices to understand information that might become public, and relies on the Office of Chief Counsel (TCC) to provide appropriate legal guidance regarding whether these items contain sensitive information. All items posted are approved at the office director level or above.

5.0 New Initiatives

The following is a description of a new information and/or data release that will make FTA more efficient, results in a new disclosure or significantly improves current disclosure, and is responsive to a demonstrated need for the information.

TCA is planning to work with the Office of Budget and Policy to identify common requests from news media for information contained in NTD. The intended outcome would be for a series of data charts to be pre-produced and available on the NTD site for public consumption.

Additionally, the format of the current set of NTD Excel data tables that FTA makes available on its web site has not changed in many years. The layout of many tables is still based on design standards needed to print the tables in bound volumes. Rural data is not well represented and there are no rural time series tables. FTA will revise these tables to make it easier to find the table with the data a user needs. FTA will also add or modify tables so that they support the most commonly performed analysis. The improved interface will allow for a “key word” search where a user enters a description of the data they need and a list of tables that contain that data is returned.

The full range of NTD data exists in a set of database tables that are posted on the current data page. Although we provide Excel spreadsheets formatted for less-sophisticated users, there is a growing demand for easier access to the full database. FTA will encourage this by producing a comprehensive data dictionary that cross-references database headings with corresponding terms in the NTD glossary, or in the reporting manual.

Finally, TSO in the midst of developing a Strategic Data Requirements Collection Plan which will inform future publications/releases of safety data statistics. We expect this plan to be ready in fiscal year 2016.

6.0 Conclusion

FTA provides a full set of current data on its programs and grants, as well as on the transit industry. FTA is improving its data interface and is finding and filling gaps in its data on an ongoing basis. Offices responsible for the data are also responsible, through management review, for the appropriateness of our data postings. As a small agency, FTA finds that this level of management has been effective in the past and should meet our needs in the future. However, given FTA’s ongoing commitment to assess its data assets, the organization will leverage existing or create new assessment forums when it adds benefit to that assessment process.