



Feasibility of an Iowa Urban Service Bureau

tech transfer summary

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RESEARCH PROJECT TITLE

Feasibility of an Iowa Urban Service Bureau

SPONSOR

Iowa Highway Research Board
(IHRB Project TR-761)
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The mission of Iowa SUDAS is to develop and maintain urban design standards and standard specifications for the State of Iowa that will be recognized, adopted, and used by state and local government, contractors, and consulting engineers as the acceptable standards for construction of urban public environments.

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A feasibility study determined there is support for an Iowa Public Works Service Bureau to assist cities of all population sizes in Iowa and then recommended an organizational structure and financing option to bring the bureau into existence.

Goal

The goal of this project was to determine the support for a city-level service bureau, and once established, explored the feasibility of developing, financing, and operating such an organization.

Problem Statement

With more than 900 cities in the state, the level of communication regarding urban public works issues is lacking. Although Iowa counties have a service bureau, cities do not have a corresponding organization, which puts the cities at a disadvantage when information is needed to justify changes in financing or regulatory issues related to streets and other public works issues.

Background

Many states have league of cities organizations outside of the formal state government, but their primary activity is typically to provide advocacy for local governments regarding public policy at the state level. The Iowa League of Cities in particular also provides guidance and awareness to member cities through research, publications, and training. However, public works information provided by the organization is usually broad-based in nature due to the varied size and complexity of the public works activities in cities across the state. Most state departments of transportation also offer an urban element as a part of their programming.

Based on this research, however, no other state has a public works service bureau that operates with the purpose of opening communication among cities to discuss public works issues.

Project Description

A technical advisory committee (TAC) was formed to discuss the value of forming a city-level service bureau and then to determine questions to send to cities to gauge their interest in establishing a public works service bureau. The questions were sent to all cities with populations of 250 people and greater and received a high response rate with favorable interest.

The project team, comprised of Iowa Statewide Urban Design and Specifications (SUDAS) staff, then established goals, objectives, and operating guidelines for the potential public works service bureau.

To determine how to set up the service bureau, the project team developed four organizational structure alternatives, with estimated costs for each, as well as financing options. The project team recommended the best strategy for bringing the public works service bureau into existence and the potential governance of the agency if developed according to its recommendations.

Key Findings

- The questionnaire yielded a 24 percent response rate (182 responses out of 744 contacts) to three of the questions; the fourth had a smaller response rate as it was inadvertently left off of the initial email.
- When the “somewhat” and “highly” likely responses to each survey question are combined, it was apparent that a public works service bureau providing the services identified would be used and provide value across the state.
- The “somewhat” and “highly” likely responses to use the service bureau for various purposes showed support among cities of at least 76 percent.
- The questionnaire showed the most support (90 percent) for a system where cities could review a series of management tools, like organizational charts for cities of all sizes, sample ordinances, and job descriptions.
- The most economical alternative to organizing a service bureau involves adding web and computer applications staff to SUDAS.

Recommendations

With the interest in an Iowa Public Works Service Bureau evidenced by the responses from the questionnaire, it is recommended that such an organization be pursued. Based on the significant economic differences and the advantages of existing name recognition and contacts across the state, the recommended organizational alternative is to develop the Iowa Public Works Service Bureau within the existing organizational structure of the SUDAS program utilizing in-house staffing.

Implementation Readiness and Benefits

Since the development of a public works service bureau is feasible, the next step is to propose a second phase of the project to initiate startup funding.