

Expediting Project Delivery (C19) Case Studies Series

Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG)

Expediting Project Delivery (C19) is a product developed under the Second Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP2) to help transportation agencies deliver projects with greater efficiency and speed by encouraging the use of innovative approaches and early coordination with resource agencies, stakeholders, and the public. The product identifies 16 common constraints to efficient project delivery and recommends 24 strategies, organized into six themes, to expedite project delivery.

This case study illustrates how the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments (AMBAG) applied two *Expediting Project Delivery* strategies to improve its project delivery process.

Summary

AMBAG used **\$50,000** in SHRP2 Implementation Assistance Program (IAP) User Incentive funding from FHWA in October 2013 to create the Transportation Finance Working Group (TransFi) and apply two [strategies under the SHRP2 C19 Product](#), *Expediting Project Delivery*. Through the interagency coordination under TransFi, AMBAG and its partner agencies were able to **share information** on potential grant opportunities, **saving time and staff resources**.

Implementation challenges included funding disparities between planning and construction and operations, staff limitations, and schedule conflicts. Benefits include \$32 million in funding for TransFi member agencies. AMBAG's next steps are to continue to hold TransFi meetings to ensure continued information sharing.

Background

In October 2013, AMBAG received SHRP2 IAP User Incentive funding to address constraints it and its peer agencies faced related to **finding and securing funding for transportation projects**. Due to a lack of construction funding, a backlog of planned projects throughout the region had developed. As a small Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), AMBAG is not responsible for overseeing and implementation transportation projects and relies on the local Regional Transportation Planning Agencies (RPTAs) for assistance. These partner agencies, however, face their own challenges. Unlike larger transportation agencies in urban areas with dedicated grants management staff, grant staff in small rural agencies typically have **multiple roles and responsibilities**. Smaller agencies don't have the manpower to deal with complex grant application requirements. This can force staff to focus on known, reliable grants rather than seek out and apply for new, competitive opportunities.

Product Implementation

AMBAG used the SHRP2 IAP funding to form the Transportation Finance Working Group (TransFi). TransFi's purpose is to **assist agencies identify funding for transportation projects to help alleviate the backlog of unfunded projects**. TransFi

Expediting Project Delivery

The *Expediting Project Delivery* Strategies are organized into the following six themes. The main themes covered in this case study are in bold.

1. Improve public involvement and support.
2. Improve resource agency involvement and collaboration.
- 3. Demonstrate real commitment to the project.**
4. Improve internal communication and coordination.
- 5. Streamline decision making.**
6. Integrate across all phases of project delivery.

This product saves time by reducing project delays while also providing innovative approaches to improve transportation planning and decision making. This product allows agencies to anticipate where delays are expected to occur and to apply tested strategies to avoid or reduce delays during all phases of project development and delivery.

provides agencies with information on new and upcoming grants, summarizes complicated grant program guidance documents and coordinates inter-agency information sharing on transportation finance.

TransFi uses an innovative approach to implement two of *Expediting Project Delivery's* [24 strategies](#): **Strategy 2: Consolidated Decision Council** and **Strategy 7: Early Commitment of Construction Funding**. AMBAG modeled TransFi after the San Francisco Bay Area's Transit Finance Working Group. Typically, financial coordination groups are found in urban areas. AMBAG has taken this concept and applied it to its rural, three-county region. This approach **increases member agencies' capacity to plan and implement transportation projects** in addition to improving inter-agency coordination on project finance and management.

Additional responsibilities, such as facilitating monthly meetings, providing technical assistance, and promoting inter-agency coordination also helps increase member agency capacity and enable timely, efficient decision making.

Over the course of AMBAG's *Expediting Project Delivery* Implementation from January 2014 to June 2015, AMBAG held **18 TransFi meetings** and reviewed over **40 different grants**. The partner agencies involved in TransFi include the Santa Cruz Regional Transportation Commission, the Santa Cruz Metropolitan Transportation District, the Transportation Agency for Monterey County, Monterey-Salinas Transit, and the San Benito County Council of Governments. Key products produced are grant program summaries distributed to the agency staff.

Figure 1. Primary Tasks of TransFi

General Tasks	Description
Transportation Finance Research	On a monthly basis: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies grant opportunities that may be applicable to transportation. • Provides a short executive summary of each program (approximately two to three pages) in length, which includes key decision-making criteria. • Identifies the level of competitiveness for each grant program based on the number of awards. • Provides analysis of legislation related to transportation funding.
TransFi Group Meetings	Prepares agendas and organizes monthly meetings for area transportation agencies.
Technical Assistance	Reviews and provides comments on partner agencies' grant applications by request.
Inter-Agency Coordination	Facilitates meetings between local agencies to develop inter-agency funding agreements to expedite project delivery.

AMBAG

- The Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz counties, located on California's Central Coast (see Map 1).
- Established in 1968
- Coordinates with:
 - Three RPTAS
 - Three transit operators/agencies
 - The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans)
 - The local governments of 18 cities and three counties
- Works to plan and implement multimodal transportation projects throughout the region.
- The tri-county region AMBAG serves has a total population of approximately 763,000 people.

Challenges to Implementation

Through the creation of TransFi, AMBAG and its area partner agencies have created a framework to share information on grant opportunities more efficiently, saving staff time that would have been spent searching for relevant grants. However, the challenges that led AMBAG to apply for SHRP2 IAP funding still exist and threaten to delay project delivery.



Map 1. Map of the AMBAG Region along the Central California Coast.

Source: AMBAG

- **Funding Disparity.** AMBAG and its regional partners have noticed the disparity between funding for project planning and funding for construction and operations. Even with TransFi's resources, AMBAG found that planning funding accounted for the majority of awarded grants in the region. While planning is a critical step in implementing projects, the region still has a substantial backlog of planned projects with no construction funding available. Grants for construction are highly competitive and unpredictable. Rather than relying on grants for construction funding sources, some agencies throughout the region have pursued sales tax ballot measures to fund the construction and implementation of projects. While AMBAG is not directly involved in these efforts, they do provide research and information to local governments on this topic.

- **Staff Limitations.** Despite TransFi's work, staffing limitations still exist for AMBAG and partner agencies. Staff turnover is consistently a problem. For example, AMBAG recently lost its dedicated grants staff person, which caused TransFi to lose priority as other deadlines approached. Additionally, grant applications tend to be due around the same time, which places a heavy burden on limited staff during certain times of the year.

- **Schedule Conflicts.** TransFi has encountered scheduling conflicts amongst its member agencies. The large geographic scale of the AMBAG region forces some agency staff to travel more than one hour each way to attend the monthly meetings. This lengthy travel time prevents some people from attending meetings regularly, as being away from the office for a large portion of the day is difficult.

To overcome both staffing and scheduling limitations, TransFi relies on e-mail and teleconference updates when necessary rather than in-person meetings to allow flexibility in participation.

Benefits

In its first year, TransFi reviewed over **40 grants**, facilitated **more than 20 grant applications**, and helped transportation agencies throughout the region secure **over \$32 million in funding**. Other benefits include:

- **Strategic grant selection and applications.** The distillation and dissemination of grant information by TransFi has allowed member agencies to become more knowledgeable about the grant application process and therefore more deliberate in their applications.
- **Efficient decision-making.** The services provided by TransFi give the member agencies the necessary tools to quickly determine whether or not they want to explore a grant opportunity, further facilitating timely and efficient decision making.

- **Additional funding sources.** Furthermore, agencies are now exposed to new types of funding sources, such as housing grants, technology grants, and other non-traditional grants that take advantage of the co-benefits of transportation projects.

Centralizing grant research not only eliminates redundant work, it also frees up partner agency staff to focus on other tasks, such as writing successful applications. TransFi’s work has also fostered an environment of partnership throughout the region. Prior to the formation of TransFi, partner agencies and local governments did not share information related to funding opportunities. Now, there is much more dialogue among and between agencies to share information and collaborate, not only on grant opportunities, but on regional priorities, as well. The dialogue amongst TransFi members has allowed for discussion of which city or agency may be the best fit for a specific grant opportunity, rather than members competing against each other for the same opportunity. This strategic approach in submitting grant applications makes the AMBAG region more competitive overall.

This collaboration and partnership amongst TransFi members has expanded beyond the core agencies of TransFi. When reviewed grants do not seem like a good match for the member agencies, they are referred to other agencies in the region such as other cities and counties, the Highway Patrol, National and State Parks, National Monuments, the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, and local non-profit organizations. The project has allowed AMBAG to connect various agencies for partnerships on grant applications, improving grant application competitiveness by demonstrating cooperation on projects throughout the region.

Lessons Learned

Several key factors were essential for the success of TransFi.

- **Executive support and commitment from all partner agencies.** The commitment from upper-management helped to promote the functional inter-agency relationships that were vital to the success of TransFi. The purpose and intent of the group was explained and AMBAG was assured active participation and collaboration from agency staff.
- **Staff capability and time.** TransFi’s efforts would not have been successful without proficient staff at the partner agency level that are able to write successful grant applications. Staff capacity at AMBAG for someone to become a subject matter expert in transportation finance and lead the working group was also a requirement for the success of the project.

Without this buy-in from agency leadership and staff, TransFi would not be successful and have brought additional funding to the AMBAG region.

Expediting Project Delivery Success Story

“One of our larger partner agencies was particularly aggressive about going after grant funding, even when the odds of being awarded a particular grant were low. Their effort resulted in the award of over \$19 million in grants during the 18 month project period, including one of the highest value grants (\$6.3 million) in the state for Round 1 of the California Transportation Commission’s Active Transportation Program, and one of only 14 grants awarded (\$10 million) statewide for the first round of the California State Transportation Authority’s Transit and Intercity Rail Program. This illustrated that, with a support of the SHRP2 funded Transportation Finance Working Group, a smaller nonurban agency can successfully compete against larger urban areas for highly competitive project funding.”

-AMBAG Final Report

Next Steps

TransFi will continue to provide support to partner agencies through grant opportunity research and information sharing. In the future, AMBAG hopes to expand the scope of the group to include more local jurisdictions, as well as more grant types, such as parks and recreation and emergency services. Given limitations, AMBAG will rely on teleconference and web based meetings to better engage partner agencies. As the need for planning and construction funding persists, TransFi will continue to provide member agencies with information to ensure the best possible outcome for grant applications.

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