

# **KDOT Partnership Project Internal Focus Groups**

## **Summary**

---

Conducted for  
**The Kansas Department of Transportation**



by  
**ETC Institute**  
TransTech Management  
HNTB

July 30, 2003

## ***Executive Summary***

### ***Overview of the Partnership Project***

The Partnership Project is a top to bottom review of KDOT that was initiated by the Secretary of Transportation as part of the Governor's BEST Process to evaluate how Kansas government functions. The Partnership Project will be used to identify ways that KDOT can continually improve the way it serves Kansas.

The Partnership Project is being led by an Internal and External Advisory Group, which is composed of KDOT employees and community leaders from across the State of Kansas. The Internal and External Advisory Group will provide the Secretary of Transportation with its findings and recommendations at the end of this year. These findings will be based on the following data collection activities:

- ! One-on-one interviews with senior KDOT managers.
- ! One-on-one interviews with persons outside KDOT who influence transportation decisions in the State of Kansas.
- ! Internal focus groups with KDOT employees.
- ! External focus groups with transportation stakeholders in each of KDOT's six districts.
- ! Statistically valid surveys of Kansas residents.
- ! Survey of KDOT's external partnership groups including contractors, consultants, city/county officials, state legislators, other state agencies, and other organizations with whom KDOT works.

### ***Internal Focus Groups***

During July 2003, ETC Institute facilitated a total of nine focus groups with KDOT employees. One focus group was conducted in each of the six KDOT districts and three were conducted with Headquarters employees in Topeka. A total of 88 persons attended the meetings. Those who attended were recruited at random from among KDOT supervisors and senior technicians in the locations where the focus groups were conducted. The types of positions that were represented in the focus groups were based on the job titles provide by participants included the following:

- Data managers
- Accounting managers

- Accounting specialists
- Administrative specialists
- Area engineers
- Area maintenance superintendents
- Attorneys
- Bridge inspectors
- Construction engineers
- District maintenance superintendents
- District office coordinators
- Engineering technicians
- Engineering associates
- Environmental scientists
- Equipment operators
- Equipment shop superintendents
- Estimating engineers
- Financial managers
- GIS managers
- Highway maintenance supervisors
- Highway maintenance superintendents
- MPO Administration engineers
- Operations engineers
- Professional civil engineers
- Print shop managers
- Regional geologists
- Research analysts
- Review appraisers
- Road design squad leaders
- Shopkeeper specialists
- State auditors
- Sub area supervisors
- Traffic engineers
- Traffic managers

The purpose of the internal focus groups was to better understand the issues that were identified during one-on-one interviews that were conducted with senior KDOT managers and transportation stakeholders in June 2003.

Four major issues were discussed during each focus group. First, participants were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of how well KDOT works with external partners. Second, they were asked to discuss internal partnering issues that involve the way KDOT work units work with other KDOT organizations. Third, they were asked to discuss issues related to efficiency and cost savings, and finally, they were asked to brainstorm suggestions for improving the way KDOT does business. At the end of each focus group, all participants were given an opportunity to make closing comments on any topic.

The following pages summarize the comments that were made by focus group participants. This information will be used to develop surveys that will be administered to Kansas residents and transportation stakeholders during August 2003. Detailed comments are available in a separate report.

### ***External Partnering Issues***

Although most employees generally understood the concept of partnering, several indicated that the term “partnering” had negative connotations. Some of the reasons focus group participants did not think KDOT is partnering effectively with external organizations are listed below.

- I don't care what the policies are, I just wish top KDOT officials would enforce the policies. They make exceptions all the time and it makes us look like idiots for trying to enforce the policy.
- Cities need to look through regulations and understand which are KDOT obligations and which ones are city obligations. Many cities don't understand what their responsibilities are.
- Our agency in general is not cordial to potential contractors and we need to do a better. Potential contractors need to be given specific directions; we should not give them a moving target to try and hit.

### ***Internal Partnering Issues***

Most of the focus group participants thought internal partnering between KDOT work units had improved in recent years, particularly between Construction and Maintenance. One of the most significant barriers to internal partnering that was mentioned involved the lack of familiarity that many KDOT employees in the field have with their counterparts at Headquarters. Several participants thought that some of the barriers between work units were caused by high turnover in the Agency. Many employees indicated that they just don't know who to contact in other work units when they need help with an issue.

### ***Efficiency and Cost Savings***

KDOT employees who attended the focus groups suggested more than two dozen ideas for KDOT to increase its overall efficiency or reduce costs. Some of the specific suggestions are listed below:

- We waste a ton of money buying supplies through contracts. It would be much cheaper to buy from local suppliers, plus it would help the local economy. Buying through contracts may have been a good policy at one time, but it's definitely not cost effective now.

- New equipment comes from Topeka every week and they expect us to just figure out how to use it while still doing our jobs. It would be much more efficient if they just ordered the equipment that we ask for.
- We contract out new signs and replace them every ten years. It seems like it would be more efficient to do it internally.
- Give consultants more access to our plans on computers. This would be more efficient and would help to shorten project time.

### *Suggestions for Improvement*

During the last 30 minutes of each focus group, participants were asked to write down two or three things KDOT should do to improve the Agency. Once the participants had recorded their ideas, each person shared their idea with other members of the group. The moderator wrote the suggestions on large pieces of paper for everyone in the room to see. Once everyone's suggestions had been presented, the moderator gave each member of the group a worksheet for evaluating the ideas. The participants then rated each suggestion on a scale of 1 to 5, where "5" meant the participant thought the idea was one of the most important actions for KDOT to take and "1" meant the respondent did not think the idea was important at all. The suggestions with the highest overall rating are listed below. A more complete list of suggestions is provided separate from this summary.

1. Pay stubs should be printed or at least e-mailed to employees.
2. Address the "use it or lose it" policy by rewarding work units that save money.
3. Look at the cost of contracting jobs vs. doing jobs internally, especially some maintenance functions, such as weed spraying, mowing, & signage.
4. Review the contract inspection process - a lot of money is spent on the QC/QA process; are we getting a good value for the number of contractors being used; could we replace consultants with full-time KDOT positions?
5. Hold contractors/consultants more accountable for the quality of their work.
6. Create provisions to hold cities/counties more accountable for utility relocations.
7. Allow more "off-contract" local purchase options for small purchases.
8. Give incentives to attract/retain good employees.
9. Get rid of state-wide signage contracts; we can do it internally for less money.
10. Local KDOT managers should have more input/control on local issues involving cities/counties.