National Operations Center of Excellence

NOCoE Best Practices: Procurement

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Introduction

OVERVIEW

Traditional Department of Transportation (DOT) contracting and procurement systems are primarily designed around a predictable framework of design, construction, and maintenance services for roadway infrastructure. This legacy framework creates challenges when applied to Transportation Systems Management and Operations (TSMO) programs. Unlike typical highway infrastructure projects that can be easily purchased on a standardized, per-unit or per project basis, TSMO is a complex, multifaceted program of services.

TSMO encompasses an interconnected portfolio of multiple individual projects, on-going operational programs and services, rapidly evolving physical and digital infrastructure, specialized software assets, and human resources. While the strategic value of TSMO has become well understood within the program delivery offices of transportation agencies, there remains in many places knowledge gaps within the procurement role. The procurement function is frequently isolated in a separate department or division without dedicated personnel experienced in acquisition of TSMO supporting technology applications.

This institutional misalignment stems from the fact that standard DOT contract language can be structurally inadequate for modern technology and service applications. TSMO activities are highly service-oriented, focusing on tasks like traffic incident management, continuous traffic monitoring, and complex system integration. Because the underlying technology changes so rapidly, the procurement system can be strained with technical specifications, standard security requirements, and the long-term operational implications of purchasing restrictive, proprietary systems. An example of this limitation is found in data-sharing agreements: traditional contracting mechanisms are fundamentally unequipped to evaluate or negotiate the transactional worth of DOT-provided data in exchange for valuable third-party traffic feeds.

Compounding these structural challenges are systemic obstacles related to decentralized administration, strict budgeting, federal and state requirements, and institutional inertia. When procurement is managed across multiple separate districts or regions, it leads to fragmented workflows and a lack of programmatic familiarity within local contracting offices. replacing outdated legacy systems is an expensive endeavor that strains tight budgets, especially when agencies must navigate the shifting financial demands of cloud-based Software as a Service (SaaS) or sole-source technology models. This complexity requires thoughtful coordination with central information technology departments to address vital cybersecurity standards, artificial intelligence applications, and data-sharing rights. However, because funding structures heavily favor tangible, traditional "asphalt-and-concrete" infrastructure projects, securing stable capital for digital TSMO innovations remains exceptionally difficult. Furthermore, the more recent

requirements of the Build America Buy America Act affect acquisition of ITS technology to support TSMO by mandating that final assembly occurs domestically and that >55 percent of components by cost are U.S.-made.

To successfully integrate and mainstream TSMO across all public sector business areas, transportation departments are working toward comprehensively modernizing their administrative policies and processes. New procurement frameworks need to be established to directly govern complex issues like data ownership, risk allocation for third-party operational services, and the commercial utilization of public right-of-way assets. Mandating that TSMO strategies be explicitly considered in all standard contracts will help normalize these advanced operational tactics. Agencies can also optimize their resources by establishing dedicated funding mechanisms and forming strategic alliances with universities to acquire low-cost technical expertise. Ultimately, fostering regional multi-agency collaborations and leveraging standardized procurement repositories from professional associations and the NOCoE will allow agencies to achieve the economies of scale necessary to deploy resilient, modern transportation environments.

Procurement of TSMO-related resources and assets covering various aspects of program development and delivery can be found in the *Transportation Operations Manual* (TOM) Chapter 16: Procurement which discusses work types, selection methods, contract mechanisms, and award structures and touches on some innovative options for agencies to consider.

Considerations

PRE-SOLICITATION

The pre-solicitation phase of the procurement process involves developing requirements, forecasting budgets, conducting market research, structuring the contract type and selection criteria, and formal notification of opportunity. This groundwork influences the success of the acquisition lifecycle. Requirements development defines the exact scope of the project, program, or service (e.g., TSMO system software, variable message signs, safety service patrol, etc.) and identifying the business needs, technical standards, and deliverables. Market research provides analysis of the industry space to determine if the required resources are commercially available, identifying potential vendors, consultants, and contractors, and assessing emerging trends or risks. Two useful tools to elicit this knowledge are a Request for Information and a Request for Qualifications.

Request for Information

Using a Request for Information (RFI) is a strategy that supports the pre-solicitation phase of TSMO procurements by serving as a preliminary market research tool to help agencies gauge industry capabilities, refine scopes of work, and establish realistic budgets and timelines before releasing a formal, binding Request for Proposal (RFP). Although often times RFIs are used more for ITS technology procurement to support TSMO programs, they can be useful to collect knowledge about TSMO maintenance and operations program delivery resources as well. They provide significant value when issued with sufficient time to allow information from responders to provide input in advance of project development.

RFIs allows vendors to showcase innovative systems, such as advanced traffic management software, data-sharing integrations, or connected vehicle frameworks which helps the agency identify what currently exists or is coming into the market. They help refine requirements to prevent overly restrictive or vague language in an agency's final Request for Proposals by gathering industry feedback on the draft project concept of operations, requirements, and technical specifications. RFIs can be structured to request from offerors rough order of magnitude estimates for budget and timeline, which can assist the agency in securing the refining funding and project schedules. They help agencies determine the best contract and delivery methods, such as deciding whether to package multiple services into a single enterprise-wide contract or procure them in phases.

New York State DOT uses RFIs to support the development of enterprise TSMO systems that support operations. Using this approach satisfies objectives for various operational and planning purposes to have economies of scale across the agency in terms of TSMO system

development and greater consistency in collecting, managing, and sharing of TSMO-related data. By taking into account changing markets and customer expectations the agency enables the ability to rapidly adapt systems and technologies. An RFI is one of the exchanges with industry prior to proposals that is identified in Federal Acquisition Regulations (48 CFR § 15.201). For official guidance on integrating RFIs into the systems engineering and procurement process, refer to the FHWA *Systems Engineering for ITS Procurement Guide*.

Request for Qualifications

A Request for Qualifications (RFQ) is a formal procurement method used to evaluate whether potential bidders possess the necessary skills, resources, experience, and credentials to execute an upcoming project. Instead of focusing solely on finalized project designs, an RFQ can target earlier stages of the Systems Engineering process, such as formulating a Concept of Operations or establishing project requirements. Depending on the agency's goals, an RFQ can lead straight to a contract—often through a Qualifications Based Selection process that pairs the most qualified bidder with a contract negotiation, or it can serve as a foundational mechanism for securing future, undefined support. For instance, many transportation agencies utilize RFQs to establish Indefinite Delivery/Indefinite Quantities (IDIQ) contracts, creating a flexible framework to negotiate specific task orders as work arises.

Beyond immediate contracting, RFQs frequently function as a strategic prequalification tool to streamline the bidding process for major infrastructure projects. By assessing vendor capabilities upfront, agencies can narrow down the field of applicants to a select, high-quality shortlist of proposers. This prequalification strategy serves a dual purpose: it significantly reduces the administrative burden on the project owner, who no longer needs to evaluate dozens of exhaustive proposals, and it incentivizes the shortlisted firms to invest more time, effort, and resources into crafting superior, highly competitive bids.

SOFTWARE AS A SERVICE

More vendors are using Software as a Service (SaaS) models to offer ITS software to support TSMO service delivery. Rather than installing and managing software at agency locations, transportation-related functions are provided through cloud-based platforms. SaaS subscriptions need to be carefully managed with regard to the initial agreement and subsequent modifications that may occur with renewals and recurring bills. Traditional procurement and competitive bidding requirements in this respect need to be thoroughly reviewed to avoid complications.

For transportation and transit-specific agencies, the procurement framework introduces additional operational and federal mandates. Solutions must natively support industry-standard formats for data feeds. When funding is backed by federal entities like the FHWA, procurement criteria must explicitly incorporate Build America Buy America provisions, Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) participation goals, and cost-predictability analyses over the contract's entire lifecycle. To avoid the administrative burden of drafting complex RFPs from scratch, both state and transit agencies frequently streamline the acquisition process by

leveraging cooperative purchasing vehicles or state-level contract catalogs, allowing them to rapidly deploy vetted cloud solutions under pre-negotiated, compliant terms.

Beyond security, a solution must demonstrate tight technical alignment and robust contractual viability. Because SaaS relies on standard, multi-tenant architectures, procurement officers heavily scrutinize how well out-of-the-box functionalities match existing business processes and requirements, as custom coding is generally restricted. The software must seamlessly integrate with legacy systems and identity providers via standard APIs and must meet web content accessibility guidelines. Contractually, agencies enforce Service Level Agreements SLAs that mandate high performance and system uptime backed by clear financial penalties for breaches. In addition, these contracts should explicitly state that the public agency retains absolute data ownership and outline protocols for data portability, extraction, and secure destruction upon contract termination.

When state and transportation agencies procure SaaS solutions, they employ strict, multi-step evaluation criteria to safeguard public data, guarantee system reliability, and maximize taxpayer value. At the core of this process is focus on data security and regulatory compliance. Agencies typically mandate that all citizen, financial, and infrastructure data reside on US-based servers to ensure data sovereignty. Furthermore, vendors must hold rigorous security certifications, such as Federal Risk and Authorization Management Program (FedRAMP) or StateRAMP authorization, which validate compliance with NIST 800-53 security controls. Depending on the nature of the data, platforms may also need to align with specialized frameworks for personally identifiable information in medical information, crash reports records, or strict encryption and disaster recovery protocols to protect critical public infrastructure.

PERFORMANCE BASED CONTRACTS

Performance-based contracting (PBC) modernizes public procurement by shifting emphasis from rigid procedural instructions to the ultimate objectives of a project. PBCs shift the focus from traditional low-bid, deliverable-based procurement to specifying desired outcomes (e.g., maintaining target operational speeds or minimum data uptime). Instead of dictating the exact methodology a supplier must use, this outcome-driven strategy explicitly details what needs to be achieved, granting vendors the operational flexibility to implement innovative techniques and specialized approaches. By clearly defining overarching goals rather than micromanaging daily tasks, agencies can elicit top-tier supplier performance at a reasonable cost, effectively leveraging private-sector expertise to optimize project delivery.

To ensure accountability and long-term success, a performance-based contract replaces traditional, highly prescriptive statements of work with objective performance standards and quantifiable

Key Attributes:

- Outcome Focus
- Clearly Defined Objectives
- Identified Timeline(s)
- Performance Metrics and Incentives
- Monitoring of Performance

metrics. These agreements are anchored by comprehensive quality assurance surveillance systems and structured control plans designed to continuously monitor compliance. Furthermore, by tying a vendor's financial compensation to clear, measurable outcomes through integrated performance incentives, the contract directly aligns the supplier's profit motives with the agency's operational standards, eliminating the ambiguity common in conventional procurement agreements.

QUALIFIED PRODUCT LISTS

Many state DOTs use approved products lists to ensure consistency and interoperability across different regional deployments, streamlining the purchasing process for frequently used ITS field equipment. The ITS Qualified Product list (ITS/QPL) maintained by the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) documents hardware that has demonstrated satisfactory field performance. This live, continuously updated index serves as a critical reference for construction, maintenance, and information technology personnel to identify and verify approved devices for deployment across the state's ITS SmartWay infrastructure. To maintain regional network uniformity, the QPL evaluates and standardizes equipment across several core technical classifications, ensuring seamless integration with regional Traffic Management Centers (TMCs). These primary categories include full-color Dynamic Message Signs (DMS) in various configurations—such as walk-in, front-access, and over-lane arrays—high-resolution CCTV camera systems with precise pan-tilt-zoom functionalities, and advanced vehicle detection sensors and radar hardware used for real-time incident management and traffic data collection.

While the QPL streamlines procurement by establishing an approved baseline of hardware, inclusion on the list does not waive any standard testing, integration, or acceptance protocols required by the agency. Every listed device must still undergo rigorous verification, validation, and testing using either state or authorized external resources, and all equipment must be deployed in strict accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. The index is explicitly non-inclusive of every potential product that could be used on the SmartWay network; rather, it dictates approval solely for the specific device types and models that have successfully cleared TDOT's strict evaluation procedures. Vendors and practitioners looking to verify current device qualification criteria, latency requirements, and network protocols can access the most up-to-date hardware files and parameter documents directly through official state specification

resources.

COOPERATIVE PURCHASING

Cooperative purchasing agreements for TSMO program elements and supporting ITS technologies allow public agencies to pool their buying power and utilize pre-existing, competitively bid contracts. This procurement method lets state agencies, municipalities and transit authorities bypass lengthy, redundant bidding processes to purchase technology and equipment at pre-negotiated volume discounts. Instead of each agency drafting individual RFPs for traffic signals or traffic management data, a "lead agency" or cooperative purchasing organization (like a state DOT or a national purchasing cooperative) runs a single comprehensive bid. Once the master contract is awarded, other eligible agencies can piggyback on the contract by signing a participating addendum, securing identical pricing and vendor terms.

TSMO program elements involve complex, rapidly evolving technology and services such as adaptive traffic signals, automated vehicle tracking, application software, smart tolling and supporting consulting services. Cooperative purchasing benefits TSMO cutting procurement timelines from months to weeks by eliminating the need to write and advertise new bid solicitations thus reducing timelines. Because the master agreement is established through an open and competitive public procurement process, it complies with state and federal purchasing regulations. Transportation and supporting agencies within a region (or nationally) can standardize their technology (e.g., specific traffic cameras or signal controllers) by utilizing the same vendor pool.

The National Association of Purchasing Officers (NASPO) offers the ValuePoint service for public sector entities to facilitate cooperative public procurements that serve states, cities, and local governments across the U.S. Agencies looking to take advantage of these contracts should first review their local procurement regulations, check existing memberships in cooperative networks, and visit those websites to browse pre-vetted vendor catalogs. Through these alliances, agencies aggregate their purchasing power and adopt vetted master agreements that already include pre-negotiated terms and conditions suitable for SaaS, transportation data, and other bid items and services.

Another approach is cooperative purchasing through the regional metropolitan planning organization (MPO). The Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) and the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) created a collaborative effort to purchase large datasets and associated analytics. The work involves up front identification and specification along with on-going management. The program committee consists of representatives selected by a range of administrators from both agencies including members of the GDOT Offices of Planning, Program Delivery, Transportation Data, and Traffic Operations as well as the ARC's groups responsible for modeling performance analysis and monitoring, and regional planning.

As a specific example the agencies have jointly purchased statewide Origin-Destination (O-D) data and an associated analytics suite. Public and private sector transportation partners have

free access to statewide speed, travel time, reliability, and origin-destination data. Agencies no longer need to create separate budgets for these expenses; and as a result, projects and programs, have uniform data analysis capabilities regardless of size.

COORDINATION OF TSMO AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY PROCUREMENT

TSMO relies both on Information Technology (IT) and Operational Technology (OT) aligning processes and early coordination across both organizations ensures that procurement pipelines account for vital network requirements, cybersecurity, data-sharing, and administrative rights. Traditional IT procurement within state agencies typically relies on established state contracts, standard RFP processes, pre-qualification stages, or justified sole-source and emergency contracts. However, when acquiring ITS technologies, the process is heavily influenced by OT. Because OT involves what are termed industrial control systems in the IT world and physical infrastructure, procurement must accommodate specialized demands such as agency qualified product lists, road and bridge specifications, civil construction coordination, and high-voltage power considerations. The physical nature of these assets also introduces strict operational requirements, requiring parallel validation testing before production and ensuring field contractors are thoroughly trained in work area safety and traffic management guidelines.

To successfully bridge IT and OT, leading agencies are shifting toward a long-term, lifecycle-oriented approach to procurement and financing. Instead of viewing acquisitions as one-time transactions, these organizations evaluate their existing inventory against shifting market capabilities and secure long-term vendor partnerships. Financing models incorporate annualized payments, volume pricing leverage, and dedicated funding for obsolescence and sustainability. Furthermore, because different funding streams carry specific compliance requirements such systems engineering analysis, matching a project's scope to its funding constraints is essential to sustaining these critical, permanent roadside technologies.

Innovation in acquisition management spans pre-procurement, active solicitation, and post-procurement phases to ensure optimal product viability. Before a contract is even issued, agencies can leverage vendor days, RFIs, and loaner equipment for live testing in the operational environment. During the active procurement phase, strategies like incorporating an agile delivery approach for software development ensure the best immediate value. Once the contract is finalized, long-term success is sustained through rigorous operations and maintenance support, spare parts management, and active collaboration to influence future vendor product roadmaps.

Vendor accountability should last until a product is fully decommissioned, meaning contract exit strategies should be defined at the outset. Key operational elements such as maintaining an updated qualified products list, enforcing foundational cybersecurity specifications rather than treating it as an afterthought, and incorporating field safety realities are critical. To be effective, agencies must employ qualified project managers and provide continuous, specialized training for both ITS subject matter experts and procurement professionals.

An organizational model that New Hampshire DOT, Maricopa County DOT, and the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission have implemented is to have information technology (IT) department staff embedded into the transportation agency and more specifically into the TSMO function.

For NHDOT the harmonization of standards and requirements among the three states involved in their tri-state ATMS is achieved through RFP development and regular meetings with IT support from each state. Systems engineering analysis, a requirement for most federal funding, serves as a baseline for procurement, integration, and operation of devices across all agencies. Reconciling operational differences between multiple agencies during the requirements writing process was complex, requiring compromises to ensure the software accommodated agencies different operations approaches.

New York is moving towards a collaborative RFP model between the DOT and Office of Information Technology Services (OITS). This is a shift from the past process where the DOT primarily drove requirements. The DOT is now involving OITS from the beginning to embed all IT, security, and standardization requirements upfront, rather than trying to fit them in afterwards. Previously independent In the past DOT regional traffic management centers would contract work independently of each other and are now beginning to align their contracts.

Oregon DOT views their approach as a system integrator model that leverage resources at Oregon State University. With this approach systems are built and/or maintained by in-house staff or custom developed by long-term partners. Other software are commercial off the shelf products used as is or with added customization or user facing integration.

REQUIREMENTS

Systems Engineering

To secure federal funding for TSMO projects that include ITS technologies, the FHWA requires a systems engineering analysis (SEA) for federal-aid projects scaled appropriately to the project's complexity and ensure stakeholder agreement, technological suitability, and traceability across the entire life cycle from needs to final verification as well as subsequent asset management of the technology. The SEA defines technical requirements and ensure complex ITS components function properly across multi-agency jurisdictions to support service delivery through TSMO. SEA maps system requirements to the concept of operations and regional ITS architecture(s), making the technology easier to test and evaluate.

Core components of this analysis include explicitly identifying which portions of the regional or statewide ITS architecture the project aligns with to guarantee multi-agency interoperability. Furthermore, the analysis must clearly define the institutional roles and responsibilities for implementation, daily operations, and long-term maintenance. Project teams must also draft comprehensive functional and performance requirements, conduct an objective analysis of alternative technology systems and operational concepts before finalizing a design, and explicitly demonstrate that all procured components comply with national ITS communication standards and protocols.

When these technical criteria are satisfied, agencies can pull from several core federal-aid funding programs to support both capital deployments and day-to-day operations. Beyond the standalone technical analysis, federally funded TSMO initiatives must be seamlessly integrated into broader regional planning and financial accountability frameworks. Projects cannot move forward in isolation; they must be formally programmed into the respective State and Metropolitan Transportation Improvement Programs (S/TIP). As part of this planning integration, agencies must demonstrate how the proposed technology will directly contribute to regional performance targets, including traffic safety, corridor mobility, and maintaining a state of good repair. Finally, grantees must maintain strict financial compliance, adhering to the detailed reporting, tracking, and auditing guidelines outlined under 2 CFR 200 Subpart D and F. Practitioners looking to align their deployment pipelines with these federal objectives can reference comprehensive procedural breakdowns directly through the FHWA TSMO Resources database.

Cybersecurity Clauses

With the ever increasing risk of cybersecurity intrusions into critical infrastructure systems like traffic control, it has become increasingly important to take these considerations into account. For example, agencies are now involving IT staff in TSMO project development (e.g., the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission) early and throughout the systems engineering process to reduce program risk and speed the process. This approach adds value early in project planning and project development process by leveraging expertise in identifying and addressing potential security issues.

Another approach is for the IT function to provide a supplemental technical requirements appendix to the procurement documents outlining compliance requirements for technical security, privacy, AI, and risk. Vendors then present their approach to how they would achieve compliance and address gaps as well as the approach to accessibility and hosting option in their response. The IT role continues through the proposal evaluation process and into project delivery (e.g., New York State DOT and Office of Information Technology Services).

An important consideration is to be mindful of TSMO technology vendors' full understanding of IT and security requirements in procurements. There has been recent experience where vendors have not fully read or understand the practical implications of compliance with statewide standards. This is more effectively addressed up front in the pre-proposal meetings held as part of a solicitation process rather than after the fact the design process; and another reason to incorporate cybersecurity into the SEA. A summary FAQ document outlining the overarching ITS environment security strategy and essential security expectations with what is or is not sufficient will support responsive RFP submissions.

LOOKING FORWARD

The NOCoE has an open unfunded synthesis problem statement on the topic of *Challenges and Current Practices in Transportation Technology Procurement* in their research proposal database. This proposal is aligned with this best practice report and is intended to provide the next level of depth at the discrete agency specific level.

The role of information technology (IT) is becoming increasingly central to TSMO, driven by highly complex and interrelated systems like active traffic management, integrated corridor management, and vehicle-to-infrastructure connectivity. The historic division between state DOT procurement rules and those for traditional IT procurement has created severe modern challenges for state DOTs, especially as both IT and TSMO rapidly transition toward cloud-based solutions to lower costs and increase flexibility. Existing procurement methods have simply failed to keep pace with these technological advancements, leaving agencies to struggle with the specialized demands of buying and managing modern software-as-a-service (SaaS) platforms, custom applications, and open-source software.

To address these vulnerabilities, this research synthesis would conduct a comprehensive literature review, along with transportation agency and department of information technology interviews, to document current procurement practices and establish areas where systemic risks have been successfully mitigated. The study would focus heavily on investigating how agencies handle data procurement, data governance, and data security validation for both internal on-premises systems and external cloud solutions.

The study would seek to explicitly delineate the responsibilities between distinct IT and TSMO divisions, answering where administrative lines are drawn, and analyze whether procurement roadblocks change depending on whether an agency operates under a dedicated transportation agency Chief Information Officer (CIO) versus a broader State-level CIO. Ultimately, the gathered case examples will help practitioners accelerate their technology pipelines and uncover gaps for future research.

Resources

***AASHTO Transportation Operations Manual* (TOM)**

- Chapter 16: Procurement

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Statewide Contracts FAQ

Virginia Information Technology Agency

Procurement Policies

Chapter 21 - Performance Based Contracts and Service Level Agreements

Other Sources

What is Procurement Technology? The Definitions, Trends, and Tools You Should Know, Philip Ideson: Updated on April 30, 2026 (www.artofprocurement.com website)

Future of Mobility: Top 10 Technologies Driving Digital Transformation in 2025 by Susi Wallner, Last updated: April 22, 2025, at StartUs Insights