

Tips for Submitting Problem Statements to the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP) - February 19, 2009

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Introduction

This article is directed towards individuals and organizations interested in submitting problem statements to the Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP.) It contains some tips on ways to write a problem statement that may improve the chances that it will be selected.

Background

The TCRP presents a unique opportunity for anyone to submit a public transportation problem statement and potentially have that problem statement funded, researched and reported on by a team of experts. More information on TCRP can be found at: www.tcrponline.org or <http://www.trb.org/CRP/TCRP/TCRP.asp>.

TCRP problem statements and research teams are selected through competitive processes. Problem statements are subjected to levels of review, first by a screening workshop of industry peers, and then by the TCRP Oversight and Selection (TOPS) committee which has the ultimate decision-making responsibility. Each year, about a hundred problem statements are typically reviewed by the screening workshop and about a third are recommended for submittal to TOPS. TOPS reviews the problem statements and selects a smaller number depending on available funding. In 2008, six projects were advanced from a pool of 95 statements. The funding levels ranged from \$300,000 to \$400,000. A problem statement may also be recommended for advancement as a “research synthesis” which can be funded at a lesser amount.

Tips for Preparers

These tips should not be the only reference used in preparing a problem statement. Go to the TCRP and TRB websites shown above for guidance.

Explain your problem as clearly and simply as possible, and avoid technical jargon.

– The reviewers come from many different backgrounds and not all may have experience in your specific problem area.

Do some background research. – Your problem may have been the subject of prior research that already has been published. In some instances, a completed research project may sound similar to what you propose, but may not contain the answer you seek. It is helpful to reviewers if you can briefly document why existing research has not filled your need.

Explain why solving your problem would be beneficial to transit operators in general. - Although a problem may be particularly vexing to one transit agency, it is unlikely to receive funding unless the solution has benefit to a larger share of the transit industry. Final project selection is conducted primarily by transit general manager types. In addressing the benefits of research in an area, consider the audience and what would interest its members.

Scale your problem statement to the potential resources available. – Some problem statements may require millions of dollars to research thoroughly. Resources available to TCRP are limited and awards usually support a small research team for a year or two. It may be helpful to divide a problem statement needing a larger amount of funding into smaller pieces that can be phased sequentially over more than one budget period.

Be brief. – Reviewers have a short time and many problem statements to review. State your main points up front and include only enough detail to explain the main points clearly.

Recognize that a problem statement is not the same as a proposal. – If a problem statement is selected for funding, a competitive procurement will follow to select a contractor to perform the research.

If your problem statement is not selected, feel free to resubmit it next year. – Many good problem statements are not selected due to funding limits, but might fare better in a subsequent pool of problem statements, or at a time when priorities shift.