

BENCHMARK RANKINGS OF TRANSIT SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Benchmarking is a well-established practice among public and private entities that are interested in improving their performance. Benchmarking allows agencies to measure their performance against the performance of other similar agencies, assuming that similar types of data are maintained to allow for meaningful comparisons. The practice of benchmarking also allows agencies to measure their progress over time.

Transit agencies maintain considerable data (i.e., in the National Transit Database, or NTD) required by the federal government in order to receive federal funds. These data could provide the foundation for meaningful benchmarks of performance to be established, which would help transit agencies realize where they stand in the industry. However, there currently is no effort to utilize these data nationally in a manner universally regarded as constructive by the transit industry. Part of the problem is that transit agencies operate in different economic and geographic environments with different policy goals, which renders broad comparisons of system performance misleading. What is needed is a method for measuring commonly maintained performance statistics in a manner that is broadly acceptable to the transit industry.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this project was to develop a method of measuring commonly maintained performance statistics in a manner that is broadly acceptable to the transit industry, and, thus, to provide information that can be useful to agencies to improve their performance over time. The benchmarking method was to be developed using NTD data for all fixed-route motorbus reporters in fiscal year 2001.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Researchers reviewed previous studies that ranked transit agencies or otherwise investigated transit performance measurements. The strengths and weaknesses of these studies were evaluated. An advisory committee composed of representatives of transit agencies and the transit industry throughout the United States provided additional guidance through this process.

With assistance from the study advisory committee, existing NTD information was compiled and analyzed to develop comparative measures. Appropriate variables were determined for the selection of peer groups and a variety of performance categories were established.

The final report includes a description of the selection of peer groups and performance measurement categories developed for this study, along with the results for all transit systems in the United States. The conclusions are presented along with suggestions for future refinements of the developed process. Brief discussions of results are included, but the analysis does not go beyond what is revealed by the NTD data used in the study.

The results of this initial benchmarking study do not conclusively define the overall performance of any transit agency; there are countless other factors, both exogenous and endogenous to a transit agency's operations, which influence performance. One of the most important factors is agency goals. Goals such as geographic coverage, service to specific areas or groups, and low fares often dictate a level of performance that can be acceptable to transit agencies and their governing boards, even when that performance appears to be "low" by the definitions used in a study such as this one. Benchmarking studies such as this never reveal the whole picture regarding transit performance, and they should always be used as only one of many tools to measure performance and target areas for improvements.

BENEFITS

The results of this study will allow transit agencies to measure their performance against relative peers using a simple index system. The method described in this study will hopefully provide a way of measuring overall transit performance that is more acceptable to the industry than previous efforts. Individual transit agencies, other agencies in Florida, and the Florida Department of Transportation can use the results and methodology from this study to compare transit system performance. The results of this study will also be useful to agencies outside Florida.

While this benchmarking process is intended to be comprehensive, and is certainly useful in its current form, there is no doubt that future benchmarking efforts will benefit from additional input from the industry. Another benefit of this study will be the additional thought and research into transit agency performance that is sparked by this effort.

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