

# Peer Reviews

## Good Advice at a Reasonable Price

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CAMERON BEACH

**P**eer reviews conducted by groups of transit professionals brought together as a panel examine new starts or major changes to rail transit systems. This process represents a cost-effective method of

gaining high-level "hands on" expertise at a minimal cost to the property requesting the review. The process is analogous to "networking," a common term for today's computer-minded population.

LIKE MANY OTHER NEW rail transit operations, the Sacramento Regional Transit District availed itself of the peer review process. Peer reviews are conducted by groups made up of public transportation executives from transit systems throughout North America. They are invited periodically to review a system's plans and procedures prior to opening for revenue service.

Typically, transit properties are asked to send managerial-level personnel with a high degree of technical expertise to the project being reviewed. All travel and lodging expenses are paid by the host system, while salaries of the individuals involved are the responsibility of their respective employers.

A typical peer review lasts 3 days, excluding travel time. Generally, the first day of a review is spent on introductions, orientation, and a tour of the system itself. On the second day, the peer review panel examines construction drawings, operating procedures, rule books, operating plans, and system details. This is usually accompanied by presentations from the staff of the project being reviewed. Additional field inspections may be scheduled as required.

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On the third day, the peer review panel meets privately and drafts a report to the senior management of the host property explaining their findings, conclusions, and recommendations. Given the short time limit, this review is usually oral but may be followed with a more detailed written report, depending on the needs of the system. The written report is generally a series of recommendations in a line item format. In Sacramento, this report was circulated to staff and a written response to each recommendation was prepared. This document, in turn, was forwarded to the board of directors for review. Each review panel member also received a copy of the reviewed property's comment.

Prior to its opening in March 1987, the Sacramento Regional Transit District conducted five such peer reviews during design and construction. Specific areas that were examined were operations, start-up, construction management, safety, and system security. Panel members came from systems in Portland, San Jose, San Diego, San Francisco, Edmonton, Calgary, Boston, and Philadelphia. In each case, the panel made several recommendations in specific areas that it felt needed attention. Most of these recommendations were taken to heart by the staff in Sacramento as well as the board of directors.

The peer review process alleviates dependency on high-priced consultants. Each of Sacramento's peer reviews was conducted for less than \$5,000. This was money considered well spent, because the same level of outside professional consulting would have cost easily 10 times that amount.

Peer reviews are beneficial not only to the system being reviewed, but also to the panel members themselves. These individuals are heavily involved in day-to-day operations at their own systems and find the peer review process an excellent forum for exchanging information. An additional benefit of this process is the ability to call on your peers should an operating problem develop once the system is in operation. The relationships built during this process become an excellent base for "networking" solutions to complicated technical or operational problems.

In recent years, expertise in the electric railway industry has become a scarce commodity. The system in Edmonton, Alberta, was on the cutting edge of the rebirth of light rail in North America when it opened in 1978. The stagnation the industry had undergone from the late 1930s through the late 1970s left virtually no one in North America familiar with street railway operation. Quite often, systems have had to look to their European counterparts, where rail transit flourished after World War II in contrast to the abandonments that occurred in North America. George Krambles, former general manager of the Chicago Transit Authority, is one of the few holders of a degree in electric railway engineering. In fact, this degree was last offered by the University of Illinois in 1940.

Without the networking ability available through the peer review process, most systems would have a difficult time finding the expertise necessary to design, construct, and operate a light rail transit system. Most of today's rail transit operating managers acquired their expertise by working on one of the new systems being constructed. The peer review process has proved invaluable in assisting these individuals to gain the expertise needed to manage and operate the multimillion-dollar light rail systems now in service in North America.