ODOT employees rise to the top in commuter challenge

This summer, Governor Kulongoski challenged the 8,500 state employees who work in the Capitol Mall area in Salem to reduce carbon emissions by replacing drive alone commutes with carpooling, biking, walking, vanpooling or public transit. State employees rose to that challenge – with ODOT employees leading the way and placing first in the large agency category.

Employees reduced the state's carbon footprint by more than 593,000 pounds of carbon, exceeding the Governor's goal of 500,000 pounds. Employees also saved an estimated $125,118 in gas money.

"Changing daily routines isn't easy. But small changes can deliver big results, and we all should feel proud for what we as state government were able to accomplish," Governor Kulongoski said. "Now, the challenge going forward is to continue those smart commuting habits and use them for everyday errands."

Many of the more than 900 ODOT employees who work in the Capitol Mall area participated in the challenge, which ran from June until Labor Day. They either continued to use the alternative commuting options they were already using or agreed to try an alternative commute option at least one day a week. Of the large state agencies participating in the Challenge, ODOT did the best! More than 36 percent of ODOT Capitol Mall area employees replaced some drive-alone commutes this summer.

ODOT employees not only participated in the Challenge, but also helped to organize it on behalf of the Governor's office. Alison Wiley and Mike Krause with ODOT's Public Transit Division coordinated the Challenge, tracking progress towards the goals, developing campaign messages and working hand-in-hand with all the agency coordinators to encourage maximum participation.

The Challenge used a variety of methods to share information about commuting options and inspire participants including seminars on public transit and biking, carpool matching lunches and opportunities for participants to share their "commuting stories" with each other.

"Thank you to everyone who replaced some drive-alone trips with carpooling, biking, walking and taking the bus to work!" said Wiley. "You saved gas dollars as well as carbon emissions. That's even more true for the many state employees who were commuting that way long before the Challenge began."

The challenge was an inspiration not only for ODOT employees in the Capitol Mall area, but in several other areas of the state as well. Employees from several regions shared their inspiring commuting stories.

"It was great to see so many ODOT employees from around the state get involved," Krause said.

Pre and post surveys were one of the tools that Wiley and Krause used to measure the success of the Challenge. The surveys also provided valuable information that will be used to improve future programs.

"Response rates to the surveys were two and three times greater than average response rates to surveys, and respondents wrote more than 2,200 comments centered on low-cost, low-carbon commuting, including how they did it and the barriers they overcame doing it," said Wiley.

The Governor's Challenge did not create a new state transportation benefit or program, but rather encouraged employees to use the current options available to them.

The Challenge results show that through education and outreach, Oregonians will carpool or choose to walk, bike or take mass transit when they are provided information on the benefits of other transportation options and how to access them.

Numbers of interest

$125,118
Gas dollars saved by employees who changed their commuting habits

24%
Increase in walking commuting

35%
Increase in carpool commuting

100%
Increase in bicycle commuting

19%
Decrease in drive-alone commute trips

593,000 pounds
Carbon dioxide saved by Capitol Mall employees from June 1 to Aug. 29 (surpassing the Governor's goal of 500,000 pounds by 19 percent)

539,363
Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMTs) reduced over the course of the Challenge

5,160
People responding to the opening survey

3,396
People responding to the closing survey

20 pounds
Carbon dioxide saved with every gallon of gas not burned

Accounting standards...and why I should care!

Compare selling bonds as an agency to using your own personal credit. Your credit rating impacts your ability to obtain credit, right? It's the same at ODOT when we're trying to obtain credit through the sale of bonds. In the case of the Bridge Program, when the time comes to pay back OTIA bonds, the funding available for future projects will be reduced by the amount that must be paid back – again, just like your own budget would be impacted by the need to repay what you owe.

Good credit rating is critical

That's why maintaining a good credit rating as an agency is critical, and we all play a role in keeping that top credit rating. And so does the Government Accounting Standards Board. GASB is charged with establishing and improving financial accounting and reporting by state, county, city and other local governments through statements that become standards. This impacts not only how ODOT accounts for its publicly-owned assets, but how it annually reports on them. The impacts of this are not limited to accountants. Major investments in the states' highway infrastructure are funded by significant dollar amounts generated by the sale of bonds. ODOT's bond credit rating (or our credit worthiness) is based on the ability to sell and maximize the dollar amounts produced by bond sales — and that is directly impacted by the quality of our financial reporting.

Every year ODOT is required to produce financial reports that include asset values and depreciations as well as fund balances and other financial information. In order to ensure ongoing success and compliance with GASB statements, communication between technical staff and financial services staff must be coordinated to create the most thorough, accurate report possible.

Compliance on several levels

When ODOT's reports are assessed, concerns with compliance can be expressed on several levels, with the goal being a "clean" opinion. A clean opinion means that all requirements have been met. A "consistent" opinion means auditors should apply more scrutiny, including those from the federal government. Sufficient negative attention of this nature means an organization's bond rating is downgraded. This results in higher costs for bonding activities and reduced availability of options. Since funding is critical to ODOT and the sale of bonds has become an integral part of this, compliance is also critical. It is also federally mandated (Federal Circular A-133) and required by state statute (ORS 291.040).

GASB 34 was the most significant change in governmental accounting and became a standard in 1999. This brought about sweeping changes in financial reporting requirements for state and local governments. Most dramatic was the focus on an organization's long-term financial health that went beyond the traditional fund reporting. This included attention to all assets, liabilities, revenues, expenses, gains and losses and necessitated a comprehensive demonstration of stewardship. The challenges we faced regarding the quantity and condition of the assets, beyond bridges and pavement, created a monumental task. Gaps in data compounded the problems, but Financial Services staff worked diligently to keep ODOT in compliance.

ODOT has good rating

Thanks to the continuous hard work of ODOT's Financial Services staff, the department continues to have a good bond rating. Increasing scrutiny, attention to detail via new standards and more interest in the financial health of organizations, will continue to require that the department be vigilant in its tracking and reporting. The recent financial crisis will have its own impacts on future standards. Efforts such as Asset Management are critical to our future ability to produce accurate reports that comply with standards. That's why it's more important than ever before for all of ODOT to embrace the AM efforts going on throughout the agency. For more information about GASB, contact Jesse Moore at (503) 986-3516 or Laura Wipper at (503) 986-4092.