



The PTATS Story

If you have anything to do with funding and allocations for transportation-related projects in the National Park Service, you're most likely familiar with PTATS, the Park Roads and Parkways Transportation Allocation and Tracking System.

“What you might not know is that PTATS was developed by a small group of committed staff, including the direct involvement of personnel at the NPS regional level, and with strong support and encouragement from Washington Office (WASO). This is what made the PTATS system a reality and success. This small group of “worker bees” saw a better way to handle a complex budget management issue, and stayed after it until it was a reality.

The NPS Project Management Information System (PMIS) is a critical piece of the program development and scheduling process in getting NPS transportation projects planned and built. But the PMIS deals only with project need identification and budget formulation. It doesn't address the other side of the coin: funding.

Instead, funding is handled by PTATS, (pronounced PEE-Tats). The Park Roads and Parkways Program (PRPP) staff developed PTATS in 2003 to replace an unwieldy collection of electronic spreadsheets — called the Master Budget Sheet (MBS) — that was dispersed, copied, modified, and re-circulated in a never-ending stream of versions.

Well, actually some may have considered the MBS more than just unwieldy. “Before PTATS, we were using abacus-level analysis tools and a stone tablet database design,” quips Mark Anderson, the budget and policy manager with the WASO transportation program. “With the development

of PTATS, we had a set of intuitive, automated analysis tools and a flexible, adaptable electronic digital database. PTATS really moved the management of the PRP program from 1970s era technology and software into the 2000s era technology and software.”

The Park Roads and Parkways Program (PRPP) staff developed PTATS in 2003 to replace an unwieldy collection of electronic spreadsheets called the Master Budget Plan...

What's PTATS All About?

PTATS was developed as an automated budget implementation tool, providing a method for FHWA and NPS staff to request funding allocations, and Regional and Washington Office (WASO) managers can approve those funding allocations through a single, unified system. Funds are then allocated to NPS Regions and Offices, and FHWA Divisions through electronic Fund Advices.

The roots of PTATS go back to an après-ski conversation between David Keough and Dawn Foy (see the related front-page interview this month). “On that ski trip we discussed the MBS, an Excel-based precursor to PTATS,” says Keough, former IMR Transportation Program Manager. “This was a very cumbersome first attempt at comprehensive project cost tracking within the PRPP—it worked, but it was way harder than it needed to be.”

While enjoying good bleu cheese washed down with old port, Keough and Foy discussed the possibility of a web-based platform to replace the MBS. “Our friends thought we were ridiculously boring, but [that conversation] was indeed the genesis for PTATS, and it got Dawn involved,” Keough reported.

The roots of PTATS go back to an apres-ski conversation between David Keough and Dawn Foy...

The FLHP/SMAC committee—with membership including each Region’s transportation manager, WASO NPS

staff, Denver Service Center staff, and representatives from FHWA headquarters and divisions—oversaw the development of PTATS. As each enhancement to PTATS was recommended by a member of FLHP/SMAC, it was discussed, documented to determine business requirements, and approved by the FLHP/SMAC committee, making PTATS a system owned and supported by the entire user community based on documented business requirements.

PTATS has evolved over the years; the versions developed within the first year provided the capacity to request and approve allocations with a documented audit trail, replacing the former MBS spreadsheet. Over the next several years, the FLHP/SMAC committee expanded the functionality to meet additional business requirements to include electronic Fund Allocations for NPS and FHWA, managing multiple fund sources, Loan/Borrow tracking and documentation, and multiyear planning.

The FLHP/SMAC committee...oversaw the development of PTATS, making it a system owned and supported by the entire user community.

Where NPS Transportation Project Funding Comes From

Funding for NPS transportation projects comes from the United States Highway Trust Fund, commonly referred to as simply the “Trust Fund.” The Trust Fund receives monies from sales taxes on gasoline, diesel fuel, gasohol, and various taxes related to long-haul trucks. The Fund is divided into three accounts: the Highway Account, the Mass Transit Account, and a smaller “Leaking Underground Storage Tank” account.

The Highway Account supports transportation improvement programs that serve federally owned lands. Collectively these are called the Federal Lands Highway Program (FLHP), which is jointly administered by the Department of the Interior (DOI) and the Department of Transportation (DOT). The Park Roads and Parkways Program is one of the FLHP programs, and is thus authorized under the US Department of Transportation (USDOT), rather than the National Park Service statutes.

Obligations and Budget Authorities

Congress empowers agencies to incur obligations to spend, generally in the form of an authorization, followed (in most cases) by a separate appropriation. Contract authority, which permits an agency to incur obligations before monies have been appropriated, is advanced through multiyear congressional authorizations.

Because the Federal Lands Highway Program is not allowed to retain any unused contract authority to carry over to the following fiscal year, close monitoring of funds obligated, and the tracking of funds expended, becomes crucial.

The obligation authority is the total annual spending authority, and enables cash payments and reimbursements for projects. Once the monies are authorized, Congress likes to see them expended on the projects for which they were requested. It's a use-it-or-lose-it proposition. And here's where the PTATS program starts to shine.

Because the Federal Lands Highway Program is not allowed to retain any unused contract authority to carry over to the following fiscal year, close monitoring of funds obligated, and the tracking of funds expended, becomes crucial.

“PTATS allows me to manage all of our funding allocations, to park accounts,

DSC, and FHWA,” says Justin De Santis, Transportation Program Manager for the Pacific West Region. “And there are lots of accounts, because it's not just project construction accounts, it's also all the support activities like environmental compliance, re-vegetation, design, construction engineering, and more.”

PTATS Workflow

When Congress sets an obligation authority, the Federal Lands Highway office advises the NPS WASO of the amount of funds available. WASO then establishes ceilings for program administration and the four PRP program categories. Amounts are allocated by formula to each of the seven NPS

regions, and then posted on PTATS.

Next, park units, regional offices, FLH divisions, and the Denver Service Center (DSC) enter their initial funding requests into PTATS. These amounts will cover administration, preliminary engineering, construction engineering, planning, and the actual construction costs of transportation projects.

“The controls built into PTATS give both NPS and FHWA managers assurance that the processes related to budgeting and project development are being followed,” said Jeffrey Mann, former FLHP coordinator for the NPS. “It’s also a valuable communication tool, as well as a library for important, project-related documents.”

This is an important point, because the PTATS platform allows Federal Lands Highway personnel access to project information, which is not permitted by the PMIS due to NPS firewall protection.

Periodically, the FLH staff and the WASO staff meet to determine a funding allocation; the FLH office then transfers to WASO the funds to cover the NPS transportation needs. WASO personnel download the lists of approved projects and funding levels, and account numbers from the PTATS system. Only projects that were formulated and approved through the PMIS are entered into PTATS. If the project was not formulated in the PMIS, it will not appear in the PTATS database, and cannot receive funding.

The PTATS platform allows Federal Lands Highway personnel access to project information, which is not permitted by the PMIS due to NPS firewall protection.

“I can track allocations by project, by park, by year, by activity type. . . just about any way you can think of,” says De Santis. “And it generates reports out of AFS, which I can use to see how much has been spent on any allocation. It does all this, and has numerous automated business practices that minimize clerical errors and keep the Program running in accordance with NPS policy and Title 23 requirements. I’m very grateful to have it.”

PTATS is a “real-time” system, which means that requests and approvals made through the system are instantaneous. This allows adjustments and changes to the project budgets to be made throughout the fiscal year. As project modifications are identified, funds are reallocated in PTATS as necessary between the NPS regions and the Federal Lands Highways division.

The balance between regional allocations and the fiscal year’s budgeted activities can be seen on the PTATS home page, showing the funds available at any given time for a region. Funds may then be augmented or turned back, depending on project activities.

Typically in July, near the end of each fiscal year, each NPS region evaluates the amount remaining in the region’s allocation. Excess funds can be reallocated within the region to “move-up” projects or “swing” projects that can be completed before the end of the fiscal year (September 30th). Funds may also be used for eligible emergency projects, or they can be “loaned to or borrowed from” another region or WASO through a loan/borrow arrangement. Funds need to be obligated, but contracts are often completed the following fiscal year with the associated costs expended. Any funds not obligated must be “returned” under the August redistribution.

The ability to quickly identify and re-program available funds through PTATS allows the Park Roads and Parkways Program to consistently hit as high as a 99% obligation rate on PRPP funds available for NPS transportation projects.

PTATS and Multiyear Planning

Multiyear planning is another area where NPS and FHWA work together to deliver the NPS Transportation program; allowing open communication with the posting of plans within PTATS greatly assists that effort. Projects are developed in the PMIS to determine future funding needs, and are then pulled into PTATS to create a multiyear plan. Regional Transportation Managers use PTATS to work “what if” scenarios for their multiyear plan of projects. They can look at various funding levels and manipulate projects to meet corresponding ceilings. The region can then release the projected multiyear plan to be reviewed by both the NPS WASO and FHWA staffs.

The Future of PTATS

PRPP and FLHP staffs consider PTATS to be an organic, changing platform that can expand to handle additional details of tracking funding for transportation projects. And other federal agencies are paying close attention to what PTATS provides to the NPS.

“As near as I can tell, PTATS is the only system of it’s kind. And it’s difficult to overemphasize the importance of this system.” — A. Mark Anderson

“The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has wanted a similar platform for its Refuge Roads Program,” says Jeffrey Mann, FLHP. “Recently, we took the first baby steps by instituting a spreadsheet-based request and approval process housed on OMB’s MAX Website. We’re getting close to transitioning to a platform built using OMB’s MAX Collect tool, which is a feature of the MAX website. It will have some of the functionality of PTATS, and maybe after a lot of tweaking could stand as a counterpart to PTATS.”

But for now, PTATS is a singular program. “As near as I can tell, PTATS is the only system of it’s kind,” says Mark Anderson. “And it’s difficult to overemphasize the importance of this system. It began with our \$50 million dollar program of projects, managed on large spreadsheets, and now supports a \$240 million dollar program of projects managed with state-of-the-art budget execution software. It really made it possible for the PRP program to grow to its current size.”

Anderson adds, “PTATS took several budget processes that used to take months, and turned them into the push of a button.”