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From Pilot to Permanent: Evaluating and Scaling Transportation Projects

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Author

Dine, Jo

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Jo Dine, MURP

Issue

Increasingly, public agencies are employing transportation-related pilot projects to test innovative ideas before fully committing to their implementation. Pilots have the potential to encourage transformative action in government settings at both the local and regional levels. In recent years, pilots have allowed agencies to integrate new technologies and services like micromobility, microtransit, and automated vehicles. Pilots have also been used to test policies such as fare-free transit and smart pricing for parking meters, as well as infrastructure changes like traffic-calming measures and bus-only lanes.

Despite the promise of many pilot projects, agencies are facing recurring challenges associated with transitioning successful pilots into permanent programs. Typically, pilots are funded through external grants, meaning that agencies have to quickly secure long-term funding sources if they decide to scale a pilot. Project oversight and ongoing maintenance may also need to be transitioned from one department to another. As a result, pilots often end abruptly after their trial period — even when they have clear value and public support.

This study investigates the various factors, motivations, and decisions related to pilot projects, in support of larger efforts by the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) to fund and manage transportation pilots alongside their member agencies. Specifically, this research is intended to address the following questions:

1. What motivates the use of pilot projects by public agencies?

2. How do agencies evaluate their pilots and decide whether to discontinue or scale them?

3. What challenges are agencies facing during the pilot process and how can they overcome them?

Study Approach

After examining the existing literature on pilot projects, the researcher conducted 15 interviews with practitioners in the field and completed a case study analysis of seven different pilots. The majority of the interviewees (13) were representatives of public agencies across nine different states, including one metropolitan planning organization, four regional transit agencies, and eight city governments. The remaining interviewees were from a nonprofit organization and a private technology company, both of which work closely with public agencies to help run pilot projects.

The case study narratives were mostly informed by insights from interviewees, with additional data coming from government reports, blog posts, press releases, news stories, academic journal articles, and public meeting materials. Two of the cases were pilots that are currently ongoing, while three have been made permanent and the remaining two were discontinued (Figure 1). The cases vary significantly in terms of jurisdiction size, land use, resources, transportation needs, political leanings, and demographics.

Project	Type of Pilot	Agency	City	Status
Youth Opportunity Pass	Fare Program	San Diego Association of Governments	San Diego, CA	Ongoing
Mobility Hubs	Mobility Hubs	City of Minneapolis	Minneapolis, MN	Ongoing
Ride TFT	Microtransit	City of Twin Falls	Twin Falls, ID	Permanent
Cool Pavement	Streets, Infrastructure	City of Phoenix	Phoenix, AZ	Permanent
HOV/HOT Weekend Hours	Highways, Pricing	Houston METRO	Houston, TX	Permanent
Traffic Calming	Streets, Infrastructure	City of Arvada	Arvada, CO	Ended
Move PGH	Mobility Hubs	City of Pittsburgh	Pittsburgh, PA	Ended

Figure 1. Matrix of pilot projects used for the case study analysis, classified according to their current status

Key Findings

- Pilot projects have different motivations, ranging from a desire to test the waters with a controversial idea to a need to improve internal processes. These motivations influence each pilot's design and strategy.

- Most pilots are funded through grants from the state, regional, or federal government. Along with the challenges involved with securing long-term funding, agencies often underestimate the staff time needed to manage and transition a pilot.

- It is common for agencies to partner with community organizations, nonprofits, universities, and private companies for pilots. Academic and community partnerships, specifically, can encourage greater public trust in the project.

- External partners can assist with communication strategies or pilot evaluation. Often, this involves both quantitative and qualitative data collection (e.g., a scientific study, transportation mode and usage metrics, surveys, etc.) and a published report.

- Based on the experience and evaluation of the pilot, agencies decide whether to extend, adjust, discontinue, or scale the project. While attempting to scale or extend them, agencies often face external barriers, whether legal, legislative, financial, or otherwise. Pilot-operating staff must remain flexible, adaptable, and willing to end a project when necessary.

- Prioritizing pilots can create a more innovative culture within an agency that rewards risk-taking and openness. Even when efforts fail, there will almost always be valuable lessons to learn from the experience.

Recommendations

Experiences and outcomes from pilots vary according to the unique circumstances of each project. However, some recurring themes and patterns emerged throughout this research, informing the following recommendations for SCAG and its member agencies:

- Combine quantitative data collection with surveys, focus groups, and public meetings to identify unexpected outcomes and gain a more nuanced understanding of experiences throughout the pilot.

- Prioritize partnerships with community-based organizations, nonprofits, and universities to incorporate a greater diversity of resources and relevant outside perspectives.

- Communicate openly with affected communities, formulate a strategy for making the pilot highly understandable and visible, and share observed results widely.

- Organize coalitions for support and advocacy if a pilot is facing external obstacles to being scaled. Even if it does not initially succeed, there could be another chance to revive the pilot later and apply lessons learned.

- Make adjustments if a pilot has not achieved its stated goals or performance indicators, and determine the root causes of such "failure." Then, use these findings to inform a new and improved approach to the issue.

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