

Legislative Audit Division

State of Montana



Report to the Legislature

December 2002

Performance Audit

Rest Area Program

Montana Department of Transportation

This report provides findings and recommendations related to a performance audit of the Rest Area Program administered by the Montana Department of Transportation. Overall, the program is operating effectively. The report contains recommendations to help improve operations including:

- ▶ Strengthening program planning by establishing a greater level of statewide coordination.
- ▶ Updating the Rest Area Plan to reflect the temporary status of the City Park Rest Area program.
- ▶ Ensuring traveler information at rest areas is complete, consistent, and up-to-date.
- ▶ Developing policy to increase consistency of rest area pet areas.
- ▶ Increasing consistency of caretaker oversight.
- ▶ Establishing an ongoing process for analyzing rest area cost data.

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December 2002

The Legislative Audit Committee
of the Montana State Legislature:

This is our performance audit report of Montana's Rest Area Program. A rest area is a roadside area with parking spaces separated from the roadway, provided for travelers to stop and rest for short periods. Rest areas also include amenities such as restrooms, picnic tables, traveler information and telephones. There are several divisions within the Montana Department of Transportation responsible for administering the rest area program.

This report provides information to the legislature regarding planning, design, and maintenance of Montana's rest area facilities. Overall, the program is operating effectively. In the report we make recommendations for strengthening program operations by establishing greater statewide coordination, increasing consistency of rest area amenities and caretaker oversight, and analyzing maintenance costs to determine effectiveness. A response from the department is included at the end of the report.

We wish to express our appreciation to all department personnel, as well as the city/county and private individuals we worked with, for their cooperation and assistance during the audit.

Respectfully submitted,

(Signature on File)

Scott A. Seacat
Legislative Auditor

Legislative Audit Division

Performance Audit

Rest Area Program

Montana Department of Transportation

Members of the audit staff involved in this audit were Angie Grove, Angus K. Maciver, and Kent Rice.

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Meredith Reiter, Billings
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Introduction

Approximately five years ago, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) was receiving numerous complaints regarding rest area conditions. In response to these complaints, the department instituted a new program to improve the condition of the state's rest areas. During this same period, MDT requested a performance audit of the rest area program. The Legislative Audit Committee approved and prioritized a performance audit in 2001. This report presents the findings of our performance audit of MDT's rest area program.

What is a Rest Area?

As defined by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation officials (AASHTO), a rest area is a roadside area with parking spaces separated from the roadway, provided for travelers to stop and rest for short periods. In Montana, rest area facilities may include restrooms with sinks, picnic tables, water fountains, pay phones, trash containers, information displays, and pet areas.

There are currently 52 rest areas in Montana including:

- ▶ 17 Interstate facilities
- ▶ 14 primary and non-interstate facilities
- ▶ 13 City Park Rest Area facilities
- ▶ 3 visitor information centers
- ▶ 5 other facilities

Statutory Guidance is Limited

There are very few Montana statutes related to rest areas:

- ▶ 75-15-103(12), MCA – defines a “safety rest area.”
- ▶ 60-5-110, MCA – prohibits commercial activity.
- ▶ 60-4-103, MCA – land acquired for highway purposes can be used for rest areas.
- ▶ 90-14-105, MCA – community and volunteer projects in conservation and natural resource settings to support or enhance rest areas.

These statutes are the only legislative policy regarding rest areas. There are no administrative rules related to rest areas. The only

Report Summary

detailed state policy on rest areas is the department's Rest Area Plan (RAP), which has no statutory reference.

Positive Progress in Program Development

The RAP is a comprehensive planning document addressing all relevant issues identified by both road users and transportation officials. RAP policies adopted by the department are based on AASHTO guidelines and are generally accepted as best practice among state highway officials. Overall, MDT is making positive progress in development of Montana's rest area program.

RAP Implementation for New Construction

Analysis of the Bozeman and Sweetgrass facilities and MDT's planned construction program for other new facilities led us to conclude that RAP policies are being implemented for new and planned construction. The new construction MDT is planning will entail the replacement or abandonment of nearly all the older generation facilities that do not meet the standards outlined in the RAP.

RAP Review

The RAP includes the following guidance:

- ▶ Policy Review: MDT should review funding requirements biennially and explore new funding sources. Regular user surveys and consultation with other agencies should be conducted. The plan should be reviewed and the need for new construction should be re-evaluated annually.

We evaluated the department's progress on implementation of policy regarding ongoing planning for the rest area program. While MDT's progress on planning, as compared to other states, is more advanced, we believe the department can further improve program development. To establish a greater level of strategic control over program planning, MDT should develop formal procedures for regular and comprehensive reviews of RAP policy, including:

- ▶ Review district rest area activities and comparing these with RAP policy.
- ▶ Assessment of all aspects of RAP policy.

- ▶ Evaluation of progress on the key aspects of rest area development identified by AASHTO and the traveling public.

We recommend the Planning Division develop formal procedures to ensure all aspects of the RAP are reviewed on a regular basis and reported to the Transportation Commission. In addition, the department's management team should coordinate statewide plan priority setting in conjunction with the Transportation Commission.

City Park Rest Area Program

MDT and the legislature established the City Park Rest Area (CPRA) program in 1991. According to MDT, the main purpose of the CPRA program was to address a problem with rest area provision on Montana's primary highway system. MDT provided funding up to \$100,000 for each community to either upgrade existing restroom and parking facilities, or to build new facilities. The communities agreed to keep the facilities open 24 hours a day during the peak travel season (April 15th – November 15th) and to maintain them in good condition for a minimum term of ten years.

The CPRA program does not fit the direction of MDT's rest area program. The program is not a viable part of rest area planning; yet the program is still referred to in the RAP and reflected on the planning map. The CPRA program was designed as a temporary solution to the problem of rest area provision on non-interstate and primary routes. The RAP guides MDT to secure continued funding for the program. However, requests for additional funding have not been successful and MDT management has decided to concentrate resources on state-owned rest areas. The minimum standards enforced at MDT facilities do not apply to CPRA facilities. Providing rest area coverage in remote areas of the state was one of the primary reasons for establishing the program. MDT needs rest area facilities at some of the CPRA locations, even if these facilities are not required to meet standards. However, from a policy and planning perspective, the unresolved status of the CPRA program is not conducive to orderly or comprehensive planning.

We recommend the department conduct a review of the continuing viability of the CPRA program. The review process should address

Report Summary

the temporary status of the program, availability of funding, service levels at CPRA facilities and long-range planning impacts. The RAP should be updated to reflect the review and changes should be put before the Transportation Commission for approval. The department should also establish a process for the ongoing review and updating of the RAP.

Progress on Other Policy Elements

An assessment of progress toward RAP objectives relating to all department rest area facilities (existing and new) shows progress is less advanced on certain policy elements:

- ▶ Spacing:
 - ✓ *Policy – One hour of travel time between major resting locations should be established. MDT translates this into a distance ranging from 60 to 100 miles between rest areas.*
 - ✓ *Progress – Deficiencies still exist on certain highway routes. Depending on the method of analysis, rest area distribution in other states is better than in Montana.*

In order to determine if MDT is meeting RAP spacing criteria, we completed an assessment of actual distances between rest areas using Geographic Information System (GIS) software. This analysis included a 20-year projection for MDT-owned facilities based on planned construction of new rest areas. Currently, MDT is not meeting RAP spacing criteria. Based on MDT proposals for new rest area construction, a 20-year projection shows an improvement in rest area distribution as more facilities are built. However, it should be noted that the department has no definite construction schedule for the rest area program. If MDT completes construction as currently planned, the state should approach the levels of rest area distribution in neighboring states.

- ▶ Visitor Information:
 - ✓ *Policy – MDT should pursue partnerships with state and federal agencies and other interested parties to develop visitor information centers. Local business and tourism promotion groups should be allowed to display information. Computerized information systems should be considered for*

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new and upgraded facilities and non-electronic information boards should be updated in all rest areas.

- ✓ Progress – No new visitor information centers have been constructed and information boards have not been updated in all areas. Neighboring states provide more travel/tourism information at their rest areas, as well as through the Internet.

Visitor information centers (VICs) are common at gateway facilities in neighboring states. Currently, Montana has three combined rest areas/VICs located at Broadus, West Yellowstone, and Wibaux. The facility at Lost Trail Pass includes an area for a VIC but it has yet to be constructed. All four neighboring states we contacted have brochures and information leaflets available to travelers at rest areas. Montana does not provide this service at its rest areas.

During our visits to Montana rest areas, we observed variations in the types of information provided at rest areas and how the information is presented to the traveling public. We noted variations in the amount and type of information posted, limited information, and faded or hard to read information. The traveling public has access to any rest area in Montana. Providing complete and consistent information at all rest areas will help ensure the traveling public is informed of important information.

MDT needs to ensure rest area information is complete, consistent, and up-to-date. To accomplish this, we recommend the department design standardized information, assign responsibility for posting and maintaining information, and establish a system for regularly updating and replacing information. Complete and consistent information should help the overall appearance of rest areas and improve visitor experiences throughout the state.

▶ Seasonal Closures:

- ✓ *Policy – All areas should be open 24 hours a day. New facilities should be designed for year-round use and existing facilities should be upgraded for year-round operations.*
- ✓ Progress – MDT is waiting to replace older, non-winterized facilities rather than refurbishing. Montana closes more rest

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areas during winter than any of the four neighboring states we contacted.

Another aspect affecting rest area spacing is seasonal closures. The main factor in relation to winter closure of Montana's rest areas is the age of facilities. Older facilities were not designed or built to operate in winter weather conditions. Upgrading facilities for year-round operations is expensive. MDT managers decided to forego upgrading facilities and many are scheduled for replacement over the next 10 to 15 years.

If MDT proceeds with construction as currently planned, rest area spacing during winter will improve. New winterized facilities will result in all of MDT's rest areas being open year-round with the exception of two facilities that will be closed due to snow load: Lookout Pass and Lost Trail Pass.

Rest Area Maintenance

One of our objectives was to evaluate rest area conditions and review Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) procedures to determine the level of maintenance at Montana's rest areas. The department has a defined process for contracting for maintenance, a defined process for evaluating maintenance contractors, and the condition of rest areas, in general, is satisfactory. Our findings indicate the rest area maintenance program is operating effectively.

We examined the condition of rest areas through observation and completion of an evaluation form. In conjunction with other audit work, Legislative Audit Division personnel visited 36 separate rest area facilities and completed 86 evaluations. Our evaluation form was set up to allow the user to rate ten categories of facility conditions as acceptable or unacceptable. Overall, about half the evaluators (40 of 86) documented conditions as all acceptable, while about half the evaluators (46 of 86) indicated at least one category was unacceptable.

How Caretakers are Evaluated

Our review of rest area maintenance included an analysis of how MDT evaluates caretakers. The department has an informal policy on completing evaluations of rest area caretakers on a monthly basis.

Report Summary

For the three districts we reviewed, this is not occurring consistently. Some evaluations are completed weekly, some monthly, and some only sporadically.

If evaluations are not completed monthly, caretakers may not satisfactorily provide all services within the contract. This may lead to complaints about rest areas, or depending on the service, could lead to injury. In addition, there could be a lack of follow-up or resolution of issues noted on evaluations. For an evaluation process to be effective, the process should contain follow-up/resolution to issues. If a deficiency is noted, it should be corrected. This is critical for caretaker evaluations because the purpose of the evaluation is to review performance.

We recommend MDT management increase consistency of caretaker oversight by modifying the evaluation form and enforcing monthly evaluations of rest area caretakers. As part of caretaker oversight, MDT should implement some form of formal complaint tracking system.

Pet Areas

According to section 75-15-103(12), MCA, rest areas are provided for the convenience of the traveling public. Many people travel with their pets and when they stop at a rest area they usually walk their pets. A designated pet area would be considered a convenience for the traveling public.

There is no standardized MDT design for pet areas. The RAP does not provide guidance on pet area design, location, and maintenance. As a result, we noted inconsistencies in pet areas around the state. It appears MDT considers pet areas important because the majority of Montana rest areas include them. However, to improve this convenience, we believe MDT needs to ensure each rest area has a designated pet area clearly marked and easily accessible. In addition, the area should receive proper attention to ensure it is useable and safe for pets and people.

Is Contracting for Maintenance Cost Effective?

There are currently 31 maintenance contracts with costs ranging from \$750 per month to \$5,997 per month. This range generally

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exists because there are different amenities and services provided at rest areas. Our analysis of these monthly costs indicated noticeable differences. The department did not have information to explain maintenance cost differences, but suggested high use and prevailing wage rates as probable reasons. Based on our analysis of existing data, it appears some form of cost benefit analysis is warranted.

The RAP says the department should use private contractors or in-house personnel for maintenance, whichever provides the necessary service level at the lowest cost. The department has begun this process through the use of in-house maintenance staff at Sweetgrass. We believe the department should continue with these efforts to establish a benchmark to use in a cost benefit analysis. In addition, a formal process for analyzing overall rest area maintenance costs should be developed and should include:

- ▶ Establishing a standard maintenance cost to measure bids against.
- ▶ Developing formal policy for rejecting bids that exceed the standard cost.
- ▶ Compiling rest area traffic data on a regular basis.
- ▶ Comparing maintenance costs statewide.
- ▶ Comparing contracted costs to in-house costs.
- ▶ Reviewing costs on a regular basis to determine whether in-house or contracted maintenance is more cost effective.

Analysis of cost-related data will provide the department assurance that rest area costs are reasonable. Comparing contracted costs to in-house costs, as well as comparing costs between rest areas, will enable managers to establish a standard to measure against. An ongoing analysis will ensure the department continues to achieve desired results.

Chapter I - Introduction

Introduction

Approximately five years ago, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) was receiving numerous complaints regarding rest area conditions. In response to these complaints, the department instituted a new program to improve the condition of the state's rest areas. During this same period, MDT requested a performance audit of the rest area program. The Legislative Audit Committee approved and prioritized a performance audit in 2001. This report presents the findings of our performance audit of MDT's rest area program.

Audit Objectives

Preliminary planning work was conducted to gain an understanding of the rest area program administered by MDT. We examined laws, rules, and policies, interviewed staff, reviewed files and other rest area related documentation, observed daily activities such as public meetings and rest area field reviews, and visited a sample of rest areas. We developed the following objectives to help guide our review:

1. Determine if policy in the 1999 Rest Area Plan is being implemented.
2. Determine if the City Park Rest Area Program should be continued.
3. Determine what legislative policy exists to guide Montana's rest area program.
4. Determine how Montana's rest area development and maintenance compares with neighboring states.
5. Determine the level of maintenance at Montana's rest areas.
6. Determine if contracting for rest area maintenance is cost effective.

Audit Scope and Methodology

To set the scope of our review, we established sub-objectives and methodologies for each main objective. We obtained and reviewed the Guide for Development of Rest Areas on Major Arterials and Freeways and the report on Commercialization of Interstate Highway Rest Areas published by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO). We examined MDT

Chapter I - Introduction

documentation including the Montana Rest Area Plan (RAP), maintenance survey results, and website information.

We analyzed the RAP to determine its validity and the implementation status for selected policies. We reviewed the planning map, the 1998 Montana Rest Area User Survey Report, and minutes from past Transportation Commission meetings. We talked with MDT personnel, observed operations, and evaluated rest area facilities. We also reviewed statutes and past legislative session bills to determine if legislative policy is needed to help guide the rest area program.

We reviewed MDT's rest area design process to determine what standards exist, how the department determines when and where to build new rest areas, procedures followed for construction, and project oversight. We talked with MDT personnel and reviewed available documentation including the Montana Road Design Manual.

We visited three of the five MDT district offices in the state. We talked with MDT personnel regarding rest area operations including spacing, design, contracting, maintenance, evaluations, and complaints. We reviewed rest area contract contents. We reviewed caretaker evaluation files for the past two years to determine frequency of completion, concerns noted, and follow-up actions.

We developed a form to evaluate rest area facilities. We completed 86 evaluations of 36 rest area facilities in all five districts. We also obtained input from rest area caretakers and MDT section personnel. We analyzed findings to formulate an opinion about the condition of Montana's rest areas.

We obtained cost information for all 33 rest area contracts, as well as MDT incurred costs for major maintenance, repairs, and supplies. We also obtained maintenance cost information and talked with MDT personnel responsible for maintenance of a newly constructed

rest area. We analyzed cost information and made comparisons between facilities to determine the effectiveness of contracting for maintenance.

We obtained input from the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR), University of Montana, and Travel Montana, Department of Commerce, regarding MDT rest area operations. We also reviewed recent Montana traveler surveys conducted by ITRR at rest areas.

We compiled information related to the City Park Rest Area (CPRA) Program. We talked with MDT personnel and city/county officials responsible for CPRA operations. We reviewed CPRA agreements and observed several CPRA facilities around the state. We completed evaluations of CPRA facilities the same as for MDT facilities.

Detailed information was gathered from four neighboring states to obtain comparative information on rest area operations. Information and examples from neighboring states were used as an objective scale to measure progress and determine if development of Montana's program is more or less advanced than programs in other states.

Compliance

While there are few laws and rules related to Montana rest areas, we remained aware of potential violations of laws and regulations throughout the audit. No compliance concerns were identified. However, we believe statutory clarification would help guide the rest area program. Details on this issue are discussed in Chapter III.

Management Memoranda

During the course of our review, we identified issues related to rest area operations which we believe warrant management attention but are not the subject of recommendations in this report. We presented the following suggestions to department management for possible operating improvements.

Chapter I - Introduction

Obtaining Input from Field Personnel

Numerous personnel are involved in rest area operations including MDT district and section personnel and maintenance caretakers. Currently, there is no formal process for obtaining input from these personnel regarding suggestions for rest area improvement. MDT's construction process has several stages where input is obtained on facility design, but this does not include input from caretakers or information on current rest area operations. Some of the ideas mentioned to us by these personnel seemed to be good ideas for improving rest area maintenance and operations. Thus, it could prove useful to MDT to try and incorporate these ideas into the rest area program. A way to do this would be to solicit input on a regular basis from both caretakers and MDT personnel.

Standardizing Regulations for Nonprofit Organizations

In several districts we visited, rest areas are used by nonprofit organizations as a location for soliciting donations. These districts have developed rules for control over use of rest areas for nonprofit organizations. Because each district developed its own rules, there are some differences in procedures. We recommend the department review current district rules and develop a standardized statewide policy for use of rest areas by nonprofit organizations.

Surveying Nonresident Visitors

ITRR conducts research on travel, recreation, and tourism. One method of research used by ITRR is surveys of nonresident visitors at rest areas throughout Montana. As part of these surveys, ITRR asks general questions regarding the provision of rest areas in Montana. A September 2002 nonresident visitor report is the latest report providing survey results regarding rest areas. While MDT conducts a biennial survey on highway maintenance, which includes rest areas, the department's survey is limited to in-state residents. We suggest department management review the potential of working with ITRR to expand its survey of nonresident visitors regarding rest area operations.

Report Organization

The remainder of this report is divided into four chapters. Chapter II provides general background information on MDT's rest area program. Findings and recommendations related to rest area policy

Chapter I - Introduction

and planning are contained in Chapter III. In Chapter IV, we discuss our findings and recommendations regarding MDT's progress on implementing other key policy elements. Finally, Chapter V provides information regarding rest area maintenance.

Chapter II - Background

Introduction

According to the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the primary benefit of rest areas is improved highway safety. Improvements in safety are attributed to reductions in driver fatigue and fewer cars stopping on the shoulder of roads. AASHTO suggests that a 10-minute stop every hour would significantly reduce fatigue-related accidents, and that properly spaced rest areas would significantly reduce the number of shoulder stops.

The inception of rest areas came from a provision of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1938. Rest area growth began with the passage of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956, and then gained momentum with the passage of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 and establishment of the Highway Trust Fund.

In Montana, rest area development paralleled highway development. Some rest area facilities still in operation today were built in the early 70's. Early rest area spacing was inconsistent varying from 20 miles to over 80 miles on Interstates. The primary highway system generally offered fewer and farther spaced rest areas. In the mid to late 80's, internal studies revealed the number of rest areas available in Montana was inadequate. Attempts were made to improve Montana's rest area planning by providing long-term guidance for future construction, maintenance, and abandonment decisions.

What is a Rest Area?

As defined by AASHTO, a rest area is a roadside area with parking spaces separated from the roadway, provided for travelers to stop and rest for short periods. In Montana, rest area facilities may include restrooms with sinks, picnic tables, water fountains, pay phones, trash containers, information displays, and pet areas. The following figure provides representative photos of two Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) rest areas.

Figure 1
Montana Rest Areas
(representative examples)



Source: Legislative Audit Division photographs.

MDT's Organizational Structure Related to Rest Area Operations

Section 60-2-110, MCA, authorizes the Transportation Commission to set priorities and select projects for construction and reconstruction on Montana's highway system. The department is responsible for establishing requirements and procedures and making recommendations to the commission. There are several MDT divisions involved with rest area operations including:

- ▶ Administration
- ▶ Director's Office
- ▶ Engineering
- ▶ Maintenance
- ▶ Rail, Transit, and Planning

Personnel within these divisions are responsible for establishing policy, design and construction, and overall maintenance of rest area facilities. In addition to Helena personnel, the department has field personnel involved with rest area operations. Field personnel are located in five districts, sub-divided into ten areas, including:

- ▶ Billings District includes Billings and Lewistown areas.
- ▶ Butte District includes Butte and Bozeman areas.
- ▶ Great Falls District includes Great Falls and Havre areas.
- ▶ Glendive District includes Miles City and Wolf Point areas.
- ▶ Missoula District includes Missoula and Kalispell areas.

A district administrator, reporting directly to the department deputy director, supervises each district. Centralized services, construction, and maintenance personnel within each field area are responsible for day-to-day rest area operations.

Montana's Current Rest Area Program

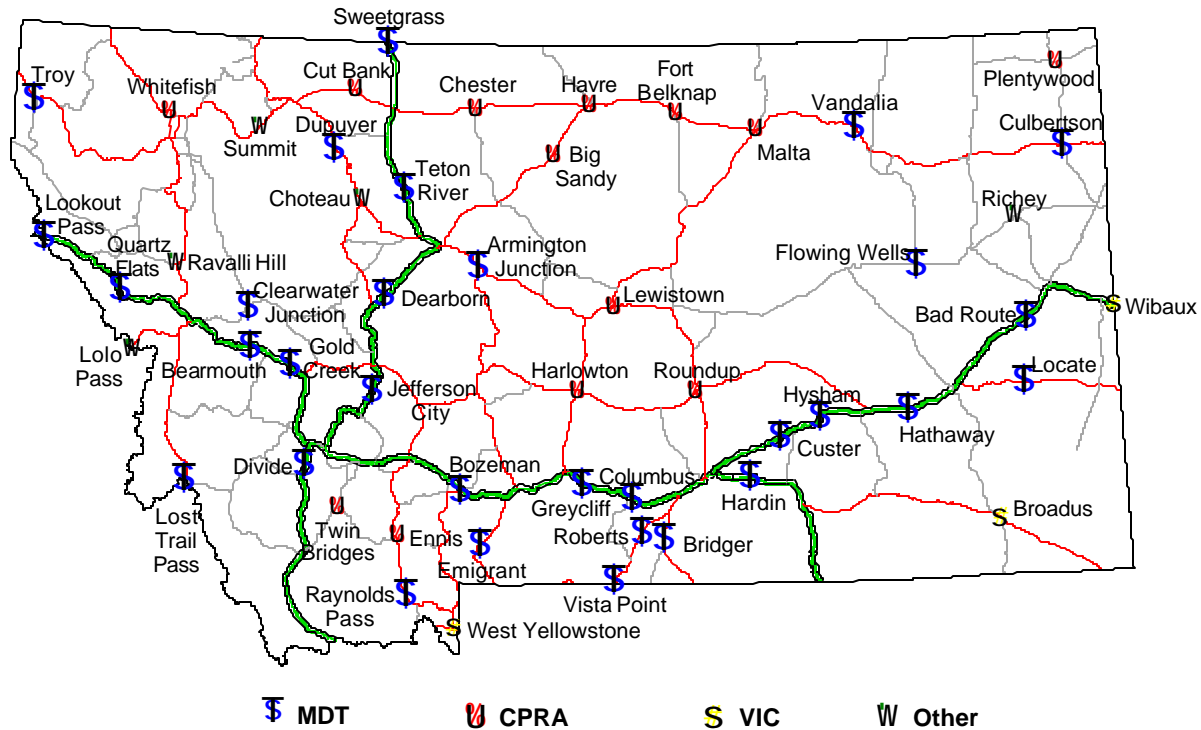
There are currently 52 rest areas in Montana including:

- ▶ 17 Interstate facilities – owned and operated by MDT.
- ▶ 14 primary and non-interstate facilities – owned and operated by MDT.
- ▶ 13 City Park Rest Area (CPRA) facilities – owned and operated by local government. These are discussed in detail in Chapter III.
- ▶ 3 visitor information centers (VIC) – combined rest area and visitor center with operations split between MDT and the city/county.
- ▶ 5 other facilities – these facilities are owned and operated by someone other than MDT, including the United States Forest Service, the state of Idaho, or the local city.

The following map shows the locations of Montana's rest area facilities.

Chapter II - Background

Figure 2
Montana Rest Area Locations
(2002)



Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division from MDT records.

Development of New Rest Areas

The formal process for developing a new rest area starts with a nomination from one of the five MDT district administrators. The Transportation Commission must approve a nomination for the process to continue. The next step in the process is a location feasibility study, which includes public meetings. The department solicits public input on the concept for a new rest area. If the public does not want a rest area in a proposed location, the department looks elsewhere. The department generally does not use condemnation to obtain land for rest areas. As of October 2002, there were plans to upgrade/replace or construct new facilities at 23 locations. These locations are provided in the following list, including identification of new construction:

- ▶ Anaconda/Opportunity
- ▶ Baker
- ▶ Bearmouth
- ▶ Big Timber
- ▶ Boulder
- ▶ Dearborn
- ▶ Elmo (new)
- ▶ Eureka (new)
- ▶ Flowing Wells
- ▶ Glasgow
- ▶ Happy's Inn (new)
- ▶ Harlowton (new)
- ▶ Hysham
- ▶ Junction I-90/212 (new)
- ▶ Lima
- ▶ Lolo Pass
- ▶ Lookout Pass (Dena Mora)
- ▶ Malta
- ▶ Miles City
- ▶ Mosby (new)
- ▶ Paradise (new)
- ▶ Rogers Pass (new)
- ▶ White Sulphur Springs (new)

If the public accepts the concept of a rest area in the proposed location, the department hires a consultant to design the facility. At the same time, if necessary, the department takes an option out to purchase the property for the location. Once a design is drafted, more public input is obtained. If the public then decides they do not want the facility, the department will again look elsewhere. If accepted, the department determines the impacts to the environment. The property is purchased, plans are finalized, and the facility is constructed. The entire process from concept to final construction can take up to five years to complete.

Construction Costs

Using the two recently constructed rest areas as examples, the cost to construct a new facility ranges from \$1.2 million (Bozeman) to \$2.3 million (Sweetgrass). Using current dollars, the 15 planned rest area facilities mentioned in the previous section will probably cost somewhere in the range of \$1 to \$2 million each. Variables in cost may include land costs, connection to water and sewer systems, topographical issues, and design considerations. Construction is

Chapter II - Background

funded with a federal/state special revenue split similar to highway construction funding. The standard split is generally 87 percent federal funds and 13 percent state special revenue funds.

Facility Maintenance

Once a facility is built, operations are turned over to the department's Maintenance Division. Numerous MDT personnel are involved with rest area maintenance; however, the maintenance chief in each of the ten field areas has ultimate responsibility for their respective rest areas.

Rest Area Caretakers

Currently, the department contracts with private caretakers for rest area maintenance in all but one rest area, Sweetgrass. To obtain comparative cost information, district management chose to use MDT personnel to maintain the rest area at Sweetgrass. The department uses a request for proposal (RFP) process to contract for caretaker services. The purchasing agent for each district is responsible for overseeing the contracting process. An RFP is issued soliciting proposals for maintenance of a rest area. A three-member selection committee scores submitted proposals based on RFP criteria. A public meeting is held to discuss proposals and review scores. Scores are then finalized, a scoring summary sheet is prepared, and the file is sent to Helena for final review and approval. Upon approval, the district awards the contract to the highest scoring proposal. Contracts are normally issued for one year with an option to renew up to two more years. By law, the department could issue contracts for up to six years.

Each field area is responsible for contract administration. The work of the contractor is to be evaluated monthly. The department uses an inspection report to rate contractor work as either good, acceptable, or poor.

There are currently 31 maintenance contracts costing approximately \$79,000 per month and \$767,000 per year. Rest area maintenance is primarily funded with highway state special revenue (gas tax).

In addition to caretaker costs, MDT incurs costs at rest areas for major maintenance, repairs, supplies, etc. Over the past five years, these other costs averaged \$563,469 annually. Thus, in total, rest area maintenance costs average about \$1.35 million annually.

Abandoned Rest Areas

Since 1979, MDT has abandoned 17 rest area facilities. The reasons for closing rest areas vary but are usually due to public health concerns, such as failure of the septic system. If a replacement system cannot be located or is cost prohibitive, the department closes the rest area. However, for safety, the department maintains most abandoned rest area locations as truck parking areas. Truck parking areas are not considered rest areas, but for convenience and sanitary reasons, the department is equipping truck parking areas with vault-type toilets.

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

Introduction

Departmental policy is the most important reference point when evaluating rest area operations and the overall effectiveness of the program. In this chapter, two aspects of Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) rest area policy are examined: the 1999 Rest Area Plan (RAP) and the City Park Rest Area (CPRA) program. Evaluating implementation of RAP policy allows us to make conclusions regarding the strategic direction of MDT's rest area program. Conclusions in relation to the CPRA program are considered separately from this overall view as it is a stand-alone program and involves facilities that are not state-owned or operated.

Statutory Guidance is Limited

There are very few Montana statutes related to rest areas:

- ▶ 75-15-103(12), MCA – defines a “safety rest area.”
- ▶ 60-5-110, MCA – prohibits commercial activity.
- ▶ 60-4-103, MCA – land acquired for highway purposes can be used for rest areas.
- ▶ 90-14-105, MCA – community and volunteer projects in conservation and natural resource settings to support or enhance rest areas.

These statutes are the only legislative policy regarding rest areas. There are no administrative rules related to rest areas. The only detailed state policy on rest areas is the department's RAP, which has no statutory reference. In addition, while the department used a collaborative approach in developing the RAP, this approach did not include legislative input. However, section 60-2-110, MCA, delegates authority to the Transportation Commission for setting priorities and approving projects. Any rest area construction or reconstruction projects must be approved by the commission.

Conclusion: Statutory guidance in relation to rest areas in Montana is limited.

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

Positive Progress in Program Development

The RAP is a comprehensive planning document addressing all relevant issues identified by both road users and transportation officials. RAP policies adopted by the Transportation Commission are based on American Association of State Highway and Transportation officials (AASHTO) guidelines and are generally accepted as best practice among state highway officials.

Conclusion: Overall, MDT is making positive progress in development in Montana's rest area program.

Implementation of the 1999 Rest Area Plan

The RAP was produced following a detailed review process that addressed all aspects of MDT's rest area program. The contents of the plan form a blueprint for future development of Montana's rest area network through policy proposals covering a wide range of issues. Our audit objective was to determine if MDT is implementing the plan. We reached the following conclusions:

- ▶ The department is implementing RAP policy for new and planned facilities.
- ▶ MDT is not completing regular reviews and updates of the RAP.

Background

Prior to development of the RAP, the department's rest area planning process consisted of a map showing MDT's existing facilities, those scheduled for closure, and planned locations for new rest areas. The map did not have any policy component to serve as a strategic guide for the program. To improve long-term planning, MDT's Planning Division contracted with the Western Transportation Institute (WTI) at Montana State University to produce the RAP. This process took place in three stages:

1. MDT personnel completed a facility inventory to identify poor conditions and maintenance needs at existing rest areas.
2. Researchers from WTI conducted a survey to determine the views of the traveling public in relation to Montana's rest areas.

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

3. WTI produced the RAP using information gathered in the first two stages, input from a Rest Area Advisory Committee and a steering committee of MDT personnel, and AASHTO guidelines for developing new rest area facilities.

MDT personnel from different divisions as well as district staff were members of the steering committee. The advisory committee had members representing motorists and road users, charitable organizations, local tourism/economic development groups, and state entities including Travel Montana and the Montana Historical Society. Finally, public input was obtained to enable citizens to comment on the proposals. This collaborative approach allowed input from all parties to be incorporated into the plan.

The RAP also incorporates the Montana Rest Area Planning Map. The map reflects on-the-ground planning in terms of facility locations and closure/construction proposals. The RAP was presented to the Transportation Commission in December 1999 for review and approval. The Transportation Commission voted to approve the plan without amendments. This action conferred official policy status on the proposals contained in the document.

Plan Implementation for New Construction

The RAP is a policy document, intended primarily to function as a guide for the development of new rest areas. Some of the more important elements of RAP policy for new construction include:

- ▶ Location Factors: Facility location decisions should consider availability of utilities, site acreage, environmental impacts, right-of-way opportunities and community acceptance. New sites should be single building designs located at intersections.
- ▶ Design Features: AASHTO design equations should be used to determine facility size and layout. Building design should be standardized and incorporate common entrance areas, more natural light and better quality fittings and fixtures.

At the time of our audit, there were only two new facilities to use as examples of policy implementation: Bozeman and Sweetgrass.

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

Bozeman and Sweetgrass Rest Areas

The new facilities at Bozeman and Sweetgrass illustrate where RAP policy is being implemented. The Bozeman facility opened in September 2000 and Sweetgrass opened in June 2002.

Figure 3

New Rest Areas in Montana

Bozeman



Sweetgrass



Source: Legislative Audit Division Photographs.

Bozeman is a high-volume/urban design with interchange access from both directions. The Bozeman facility provides an example of the importance of spacing in location decisions. Prior to construction, a 220-mile section of I-90 between Gold Creek and Greycliff had no rest area provision. This situation was created when the rest area on Homestake Pass had to be closed due to failure of the septic and water systems. Sweetgrass is a high-volume/rural

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

facility that replaced an existing structure. Again, the facility consists of a single-site building with interchange access to both north and southbound traffic.

In addition to being single-site designs with interchange access, both facilities use municipal water/sewer systems. The buildings incorporate all the design features from the RAP: common entrance areas, increased natural lighting, porcelain fittings and glass mirrors. They also include some innovative characteristics. Restroom partitions at Bozeman allow closure of half the restroom to allow public access during cleaning. Sweetgrass has a heat exchange system built into its landscaping. Both facilities include electronic information systems and updated travel information boards. The Bozeman facility has Lewis & Clark interpretive information produced in collaboration with local historical groups.

Both facilities were designed for 24-hour, year-round usage. This will be the case for all new construction, except in two cases where snow load does not allow for winter operations: Lost Trail Pass and Lookout Pass. To date, the department's plans for new construction will result in the replacement of most of the older, non-winterized facilities currently in operation.

In terms of maintenance, a private contractor will maintain the Bozeman rest area when the temporary contract is replaced. MDT currently employs 1.5 FTE to maintain the Sweetgrass rest area. Using department employees will provide cost information to compare against private contractor maintenance arrangements. This issue is discussed further in Chapter V.

Summary and Conclusion

Analysis of the Bozeman and Sweetgrass facilities and MDT's planned construction program for other new facilities led us to conclude that RAP policies are being implemented. The new construction MDT is planning will entail the replacement or abandonment of nearly all the older generation facilities that do not meet the standards outlined in the RAP.

Conclusion: MDT is implementing Rest Area Plan policy for new and planned construction.

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

RAP Policy Implementation

The RAP is used to guide other aspects of MDT's rest area planning. The RAP includes the following guidance:

- ▶ Policy Review: MDT should review funding requirements biennially and explore new funding sources. Regular user surveys and consultation with other agencies should be conducted. The plan should be reviewed and the need for new construction should be re-evaluated annually.

We evaluated the department's progress on implementation of policy regarding ongoing planning for the rest area program.

Program Development is Ahead of Neighboring States

As part of our analysis, we compared Montana's operations to programs in neighboring states. Discussions with transportation officials from Washington, Idaho, Wyoming and South Dakota led us to an overall conclusion that Montana's rest area program planning/development is more advanced in some respects, but less advanced in others. The areas where Montana is ahead of these neighboring states can be summarized as follows:

- ▶ Planning: Montana's RAP is a more comprehensive and up-to-date planning document compared to those identified in neighboring states.
- ▶ AASHTO Guidelines: Montana has adopted AASHTO guidelines on rest area development as official policy. None of the other states contacted have done so.
- ▶ User Surveys: Montana includes rest area queries in regular customer satisfaction surveys, an approach not used by neighboring states.

While MDT's progress on planning, as compared to other states, is more advanced, we believe the department can further improve program development. The following sections discuss our recommendations for improvements.

Plan Review

RAP policy states the plan should be reviewed annually and updated as necessary in order to ensure the document evolves over time. Reviews should address perceived deficiencies in the program and should include analysis of how successfully these deficiencies were

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

addressed. AASHTO best practice guidelines also underline the importance of a periodic review process.

The current review consists mainly of a status report compiled by MDT's Planning Division. This status report provides plans for reconstruction or abandonment of facilities, and seasonal closures. Thus, the only aspects of the RAP assessed in this report are site-specific location factors, spacing criteria, and year-round operations. We do not consider the report to be a comprehensive review process, as it does not cover other policy elements.

Relying solely on the status report as the reviewing mechanism effectively limits strategic control over the program. Without regular monitoring of progress on all aspects of rest area development, the department is unable to prioritize projects or measure performance. An example of this can be seen in current construction planning. Although high-volume Interstate projects generally receive priority over lower-volume primary or secondary routes, there is no further prioritization of projects. The new Sweetgrass facility has already been built, while reconstruction of Lookout Pass, with over twice the average traffic volume, is yet to begin. There is no indication of how the 23 proposed new locations will be prioritized, and control over construction schedules is at the discretion of each district. Any district administrator who does not place a high priority on rest areas can, in effect, impact implementation of the RAP. However, according to department management, the process was designed this way to ensure local needs are met. Rest area projects compete with all other highway construction projects on a district basis. The Transportation Commission has ultimate authority for setting priorities.

Conclusion

From the perspective of RAP development, the localized approach worked well and ensured the process was broad-based and inclusive. Following Transportation Commission approval of RAP policy, a department management team has been responsible for putting the plan into action. However, new construction, location proposals, commitment of resources, and construction scheduling have all

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

remained primarily district responsibilities. Responsibility for implementing RAP policy is dispersed among district administrators and the various division staff who make up the management team. Management team members each bring a unique perspective to rest area construction decisions, but no one is specifically assigned the task of RAP review.

To strengthen program planning, MDT should develop formal procedures for regular and comprehensive reviews of RAP policy, including:

- Reviewing district rest area activities and comparing these with RAP policy.
- Assessing all aspects of RAP policy.
- Evaluating progress on the key aspects of rest area development identified by AASHTO and the traveling public.

MDT should identify a departmental division responsible for developing review procedures and ensuring reviews are completed regularly. The Planning Division appears to be the most appropriate entity due to its role in the plan development process and its continued involvement with the status report. While the RAP recommends an annual review, we recommend a regular review, although not necessarily every year.

Recommendation #1

We recommend:

- A. The Planning Division develop formal procedures to ensure all aspects of the RAP are reviewed on a regular basis and reported to the Transportation Commission.**
- B. The department management team coordinate statewide plan priority setting in conjunction with the Transportation Commission.**

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

City Park Rest Area Program

MDT and the legislature established the City Park Rest Area (CPRA) program in 1991. Our audit objective was to determine if the CPRA program should be continued. In response to this objective, we reached the following conclusions:

- ▶ The program was originally conceived as a temporary measure.
- ▶ Additional funding for the program is unlikely to continue.
- ▶ CPRA facilities are not required to meet minimum standards in the RAP.
- ▶ CPRA facilities have a negative impact on MDT's long-range planning.
- ▶ MDT should update the RAP to reflect the current status of the CPRA program.

Program Background (1991-1995)

According to MDT, the main purpose of the CPRA program was to address a problem with rest area provision on Montana's primary highway system. CPRA areas could be constructed and maintained at reduced cost to the state. At the same time, the program boosted local economic development efforts by providing local communities an opportunity to attract through-traffic that might otherwise not stop.

MDT provided funding up to \$100,000 for each community to either upgrade existing restroom and parking facilities, or to build new facilities. The communities agreed to keep the facilities open 24 hours a day during the peak travel season (April 15–November 15) and to maintain them in good condition for a minimum term of ten years. The department provided highway directional signs for each facility.

In 1991 the legislature approved funding and construction occurred in six communities. Additional funding was approved in 1995 and seven more communities participated in the program. CPRA facility locations are noted in the map on page 10. The funding source for the CPRA program was state special revenue (gas tax).

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Temporary Measure

Some MDT staff describes the program as a stop-gap measure designed as a temporary fix. The program was an interim solution to the problem of providing rest area coverage in some of the more remote areas of the state where none existed before. It also provided cities with facilities many regard as a valuable resource and an important part of their community. The ten-year terms for the first six facilities have passed and the remaining minimum terms will end within the next five years. MDT has no plans for renewing or extending the CPRA agreements.

Additional Funding

According to MDT personnel, the department requested additional funding from the legislature in 1999 and 2001, but these requests were not approved. During the most recent Executive Planning Process, MDT management decided not to pursue further funding for the CPRA program. This decision was driven by the fact that there are growing demands on limited state special revenue. This meant rest area development was competing for funds with an increasing number of high-priority highway projects. As a result, MDT management decided to concentrate available funds on the construction of new state-owned and maintained rest areas.

This chronology of events indicates a change in the state's rest area development philosophy. State dollars are used to draw down matching federal funds to maximize total program budgets and make more efficient use of available revenue. If MDT were to continue the CPRA program, each community would receive up to \$100,000 of state special revenue with no federal match, whereas construction of a state-owned facility would attract federal matching dollars. Based on the same funding split applied to the new Bozeman facility, total project funds would increase to about \$1 million. There are 12 proposed new rest areas not on the Interstate system. If MDT were to pursue local partnerships to build CPRA facilities, the state would expend up to \$1.2 million in return for use of rest areas they do not own or control. If MDT builds new state-owned facilities, the \$1.2 million of state funding will produce approximately \$8 million of federal matching funds, based on the normal 87 percent federal/

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13 percent state-funding split. In addition, the state will own nine new high specification rest areas it controls and maintains.

Minimum Standards

Based on interviews with city/county officials and on-site observations, facility design, available amenities, and maintenance standards vary widely between CPRA facilities. For example, some CPRA areas incorporate shower facilities (Havre), or children's play parks (Cut Bank and Ennis), and others do not. Restroom facilities vary in quality between locations, different cities have different maintenance arrangements (employee versus volunteer), and none are subject to the same evaluation procedures used to enforce maintenance standards at MDT rest areas.

MDT policy on rest area design, amenities, and maintenance standards is contained in the RAP. The RAP establishes standards for amenities and service levels at Montana's rest areas. Examples include availability of basic amenities (hot water and soap, water fountains, telephones and travel information), establishing preventive maintenance programs for facilities, and upgrading rest areas to allow them to remain open year-round.

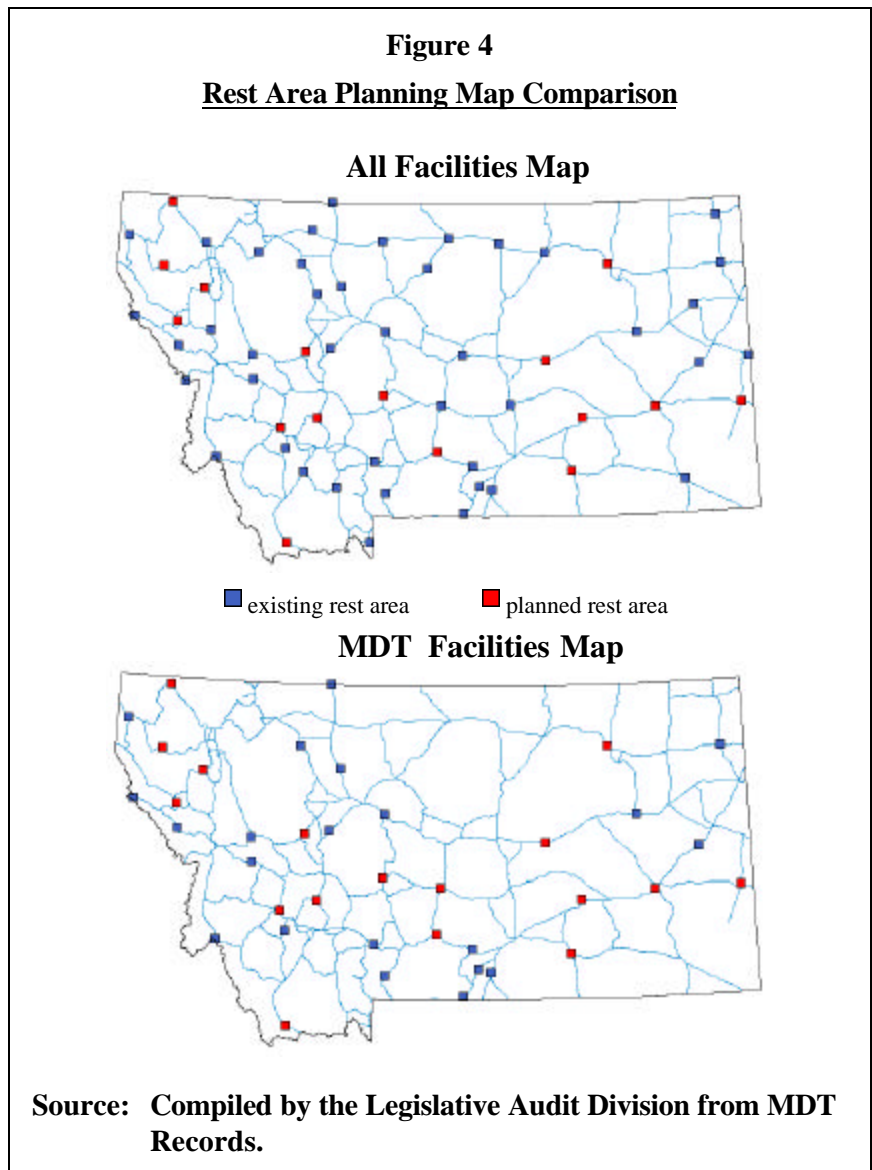
The focus of MDT's current rest area strategy is ensuring these standards are enforced at all MDT rest areas. While this is possible at sites owned, operated and evaluated by the state, it is not possible at CPRA rest areas. Although conditions at the CPRA facilities we visited were generally good, the department has no control over CPRA facility operations. If local communities are unable to continue to fund maintenance and upgrades of CPRA facilities, and MDT is unable or unwilling to assist with these costs, then facility conditions will worsen rather than improve over the coming years.

The RAP was developed in response to concerns identified by the traveling public. Rest area users want higher standards at facilities and year-round operations. MDT cannot meet these needs with CPRA facilities. If the traveling public encounters poor conditions at a CPRA rest area, they are unlikely to make a distinction between ownership.

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Long-Range Planning

The inclusion of CPRA facilities on the planning map presents a distorted picture of rest area distribution from a planning perspective. MDT should make planning decisions on the basis of clearly defined policy goals, but CPRA facilities hinder this. The following maps illustrate the differences between a planning process based on inclusion of CPRA and other non-MDT facilities (all facilities map), and excluding facilities that are not under MDT control (planning map).



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Decisions about new rest area locations are currently made on the basis of the all facilities map. This map appears to show that planned new construction will solve most spacing problems. However, the first map does not reflect the fact that MDT does not control CPRA facilities. For example, there is an existing CPRA facility at Malta constructed in 1992. The agreement for this facility has reached the end of its minimum ten-year term. According to the MDT rest area status report, there is a proposal to build a new state-owned facility at Malta if the CPRA agreement is not renewed. The city of Malta could, at any time, decide to close the rest area leaving a large section of US 2 without coverage. The agreement has not been renewed because MDT has no plans to renew any CPRA agreements. This information is not reflected in the all facilities map.

The planning map serves as a more accurate guide for where new rest areas are needed. The exclusion of non-MDT facilities is necessary to reduce the uncertainty and confusion the Malta example illustrates. The second map indicates a need for future rest area provision on sections of highway in the northern and central regions of the state.

Summary and Conclusion

The CPRA program does not fit the direction of MDT's rest area program. The program is not a viable part of rest area planning; yet the program is still referred to in the RAP and reflected on the planning map. The CPRA program was designed as a temporary solution to the problem of rest area provision on non-interstate and primary routes. The RAP guides MDT to secure continued funding for the program. However, requests for additional funding have not been successful and MDT management has decided to concentrate resources on state-owned rest areas. The minimum standards enforced at MDT facilities do not apply to CPRA facilities. Providing rest area coverage in remote areas of the state was one of the primary reasons for establishing the program. MDT needs rest area facilities at some of the CPRA locations, even if these facilities are not required to meet standards. However, from a policy and

Chapter III - Rest Area Policy and Planning

planning perspective, the unresolved status of the CPRA program is not conducive to orderly or comprehensive planning.

Recommendation #2

We recommend the department:

- A. Update the RAP to reflect the temporary status, availability of funding, service levels, and long-range planning impacts of the CPRA program.**
- B. Establish a process for ongoing review and update of the RAP to inform the Transportation Commission of changes in the status of CPRA facilities.**

Chapter IV - Other Rest Area Plan Elements

Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, policy guidance for the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) rest area program is contained in the Rest Area Plan (RAP). MDT's policy regarding planning is discussed in Chapter III. This chapter provides information on other RAP policy elements. Audit work focused on those issues rest area planners and users identified as being important.

Progress on Certain Policy Elements

An assessment of progress toward RAP objectives relating to all department rest area facilities (existing and new) shows progress is less advanced on certain policy elements:

- ▶ Spacing:
 - ✓ *Policy – One hour of travel time between major resting locations should be established. MDT translates this into a distance ranging from 60 to 100 miles between rest areas.*
 - ✓ *Progress – Deficiencies still exist on certain highway routes. Depending on the method of analysis, rest area distribution in other states is better than in Montana.*
- ▶ Visitor Information:
 - ✓ *Policy – MDT should pursue partnerships with state and federal agencies and other interested parties to develop visitor information centers. Local business and tourism promotion groups should be allowed to display information. Computerized information systems should be considered for new and upgraded facilities and non-electronic information boards should be updated in all rest areas.*
 - ✓ *Progress – No new visitor information centers have been constructed and information boards have not been updated in all areas. Neighboring states provide more travel/tourism information at their rest areas, as well as through the Internet.*
- ▶ Seasonal Closures:
 - ✓ *Policy – All areas should be open 24 hours a day. New facilities should be designed for year-round*

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use and existing facilities should be upgraded for year-round operations.

- ✓ Progress – MDT is waiting to replace older, non-winterized facilities rather than refurbishing. Montana closes more rest areas during winter than any of the four neighboring states we contacted.

These issues are discussed in more detail below.

Spacing

In order to determine if MDT is meeting RAP spacing criteria, we completed an assessment of actual distances between rest areas using Geographic Information System (GIS) software. This analysis included a 20-year projection for MDT-owned facilities based on planned construction of new rest areas. The table below shows actual maximum and minimum distances between rest areas on selected highway routes, including future projections. Our selection of highway routes includes a representative sample of Interstate, U.S., and State highway routes.

Table 1
Current and Projected Rest Area Spacing
(selected highway routes)

Route	Max ¹	Min ¹	Ave ¹	Diff ¹
I-90 (current)	138	24	68	114
I-90 (future) ²	102	38	68	64
US-89 (current)	119	24	68	96
US-89 (future) ²	112	24	80	88
MT-200 (current)	166	59	112	107
MT-200 (future) ²	158	58	100	100

¹ distance measured to nearest mile

² 20-year projection

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division.

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What this table shows is MDT is not meeting its spacing criteria for all rest areas. For example, on Interstate-90 the maximum distance between the Gold Creek and Bozeman rest areas is 138 miles. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the closure of the Homestake Pass rest area created this spacing situation. However, the data also indicates spacing will improve over the next 20 years if MDT continues with its currently planned construction. Using our Interstate-90 example, the maximum distance between rest areas will decrease to 102 miles and will be between the current Columbus rest area and a new rest area constructed at the junction of Interstate-90 and US-212. It should be noted that current spacing mileages include all Montana rest areas, not just MDT-owned and maintained facilities. Our 20-year projections include only MDT-owned and maintained rest areas.

An important element of this spacing analysis is average mileage. The average mileage is calculated using the distances between all rest areas on the selected route, not just the maximum and minimum distances. As a result, the figure for average mileage is a generalized measure and only illustrates one aspect of a spacing analysis. The difference between the maximum and minimum distance, can also be used in a spacing analysis to provide a measure of consistency of facility spacing. The mileages for US-89 provide a good example of how to interpret the table. Comparing current and future projections shows the average mileage on this route actually increases. Comparing the differences between the minimum and maximum mileages shows an improvement in consistency because these distances are converging.

As previously noted, average mileages are only a generalized measure of rest area spacing. However, this measure can be used for comparative purposes. The following section provides a comparison of rest area spacing between Montana and other states.

Comparison with Other States

In comparison with other states, Montana's rest area spacing compares favorably when all 52 rest area facilities are counted. This includes MDT and CPRA rest areas, as well as facilities owned and operated by other entities. The following table illustrates a spacing

Chapter IV - Other Rest Area Plan Elements

comparison between Montana and seven other western states based on the number of rest areas in relation to Interstate and National Highway System (NHS) mileages.

The “Miles per Rest Area” figures in the table are average mileages and do not represent actual distances between rest areas. For example, our GIS analysis shows a maximum spacing distance on I-90 of 138 miles. In the following table, the figure for Interstate miles per rest area, 70 miles, is an average for the entire Interstate system in Montana. These average mileages are only used as a comparison with other states.

Table 2
Rest Area Spacing for Montana and Seven Western States
(average mileages for 2002)

State	NHS Miles	Interstate Miles	Total Rest Areas	Interstate Rest Areas	Miles per Rest Area (NHS)	Miles per Rest Area (Interstate)
Colorado	3390	952	41	26	82.7	36.6
Idaho	2380	611	22	14	108.2	43.6
Montana	3892	1194	52	17	74.9	70.2
North Dakota	2750	572	22	11	125	52
Oregon	3755	729	33	18	113.8	40.5
South Dakota	2943	679	12	12	245.2	56.9
Washington	3384	762	31	17	109.2	44.8
Wyoming	2907	915	32	15	90.8	61

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division with data from MDT, Federal Highway Administration, and other state transportation department websites.

Chapter IV - Other Rest Area Plan Elements

Using average mileages, rest area spacing in Montana is ahead of all other states on the National Highway System with one rest area for every 75 miles of highway. In terms of Interstate distribution, Montana is in last place behind the other seven states.

Figures for rest area distribution in Montana change when considering only MDT facilities. Montana's NHS distribution increases to one rest area for every 108 NHS miles. While this compares well to some other states, Colorado and Wyoming are better. The following table illustrates this point.

Table 3
MDT Rest Area Distribution
(average mileages)

	NHS Miles	Interstate Miles	Total Rest Areas	Interstate Rest Areas	Miles per Rest Area (NHS)	Miles per Rest Area (Interstate)
MDT Rest Areas	3892	1194	36	17	108.1	70.2
20-year Projection ¹	3892	1194	43	17	90.5	70.2

¹ Includes only MDT facilities identified within the 2001 Planning Division status report.

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division from MDT and Federal Highway Administration records.

Our analysis shows overall spacing will improve as MDT proceeds with planned construction of new areas. This is especially true on Interstate and other high-volume routes in southern and western Montana. Results from our GIS analysis show that although the overall distribution of rest areas will be more consistent, there will still be some routes with significant distances between facilities. Spacing will continue to be a problem on routes currently served by non-MDT facilities.

Conclusion

Currently, MDT is not meeting RAP spacing criteria. Based on MDT proposals for new rest area construction, a 20-year projection

Chapter IV - Other Rest Area Plan Elements

shows an improvement in rest area distribution as more facilities are built. However, it should be noted that the department has no definite construction schedule for the rest area program. If MDT completes construction as currently planned, the state should approach the levels of rest area distribution in neighboring states.

Visitor Information

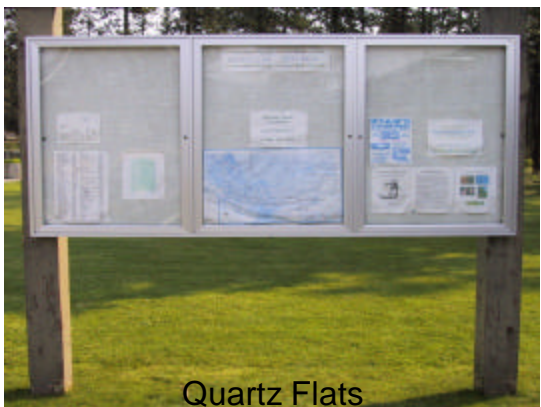
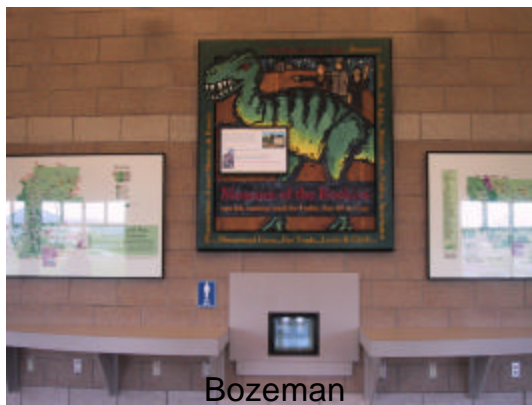
Visitor information centers (VICs) are common at gateway facilities in neighboring states. Currently, Montana has three combined rest areas/VICs located at Broadus, West Yellowstone, and Wibaux. The facility at Lost Trail Pass includes an area for a VIC but it has yet to be constructed. All four neighboring states we contacted have brochures and information leaflets available to travelers at rest areas. Montana does not provide this service at its rest areas.

During our visits to rest areas, we observed variations in the types of information provided at rest areas and how the information is presented to the traveling public. We noted the following variations:

- ▶ Variation in information – the most common variation noted at facilities was differences in the amount and type of information posted. For example, some facilities have large, professional-looking local advertising, while other facilities have no local information.
- ▶ Limited information – several facilities we visited had limited information posted. For example, one facility did not even post a highway map.
- ▶ Faded or hard to read information – we observed information posted at several facilities which could not be read. The information appeared to be faded from the sun, smeared from getting wet, or had been vandalized.

The photographs in the following figure provide some examples of variations in information at Montana rest areas.

Figure 5
Rest Area Information
(information and structure examples)



Source: Legislative Audit Division photographs.

Chapter IV - Other Rest Area Plan Elements

Lost Trail Pass Information

A specific example of an information-related inconsistency exists at Lost Trail Pass. This facility, which opened in 2001, was a cooperative project between MDT, the United States Forest Service, and the State of Idaho. As can be seen in the following pictures, Montana's information board is inferior to Idaho's sign. Because the signs are side-by-side, the difference is very noticeable.

Figure 6
Lost Trail Pass Information



Montana



front



back

Source: Legislative Audit Division photographs.

Importance of Information

The traveling public has access to any rest area in Montana. Providing complete and consistent information at all rest areas will help ensure the traveling public is informed of important information. The most critical lack of information we noted during our review was emergency contact information. Without contact numbers posted at rest areas, patrons do not know whom to call with problems. If a problem is not corrected, facility damage and/or patron harm may occur. For example, a broken water line or overflowing sink or toilet could result in facility damage and/or rest area users could slip and fall. In addition, faded, limited, and inferior information boards do not promote local communities and can give a

Chapter IV - Other Rest Area Plan Elements

poor impression of Montana, which could impact tourism. The Summer 2001 Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) survey report discusses the need for information for tourists. According to this ITRR survey, travelers plan trips using the Internet. Once in Montana, visitors use brochures, information center personnel, and signs as a source of information.

Who is Responsible?

Neither the rest area request for proposal (RFP) nor the contract assigns responsibility for maintenance of information boards. According to Planning Division personnel, department staff recently developed new information for rest areas, but they are having trouble with fading as well as getting the information posted at all facilities. MDT has worked with Travel Montana in the past but an ongoing agreement has not been established. Comments from Travel Montana personnel indicate they would like to help coordinate this service, which follows Rest Area Plan guidance.

Conclusion

MDT needs to ensure rest area information is complete, consistent, and up-to-date. To accomplish this, the department should design standardized information, assign responsibility for posting and maintaining information, and establish a system for regularly updating and replacing information. Complete and consistent information should help the overall appearance of rest areas and improve visitor experiences throughout the state.

Recommendation #3

We recommend the department:

- A. Design standardized information content and presentation for rest areas.**
- B. Assign information posting and maintenance responsibilities.**
- C. Establish a process for regularly updating rest area information.**

Chapter IV - Other Rest Area Plan Elements

Seasonal Closures

Another aspect affecting rest area spacing is seasonal closures. When analyzing only facilities that are open year-round, Montana's numbers increase to one rest area for every 205 NHS miles and 92 Interstate miles. Neighboring states close fewer of their facilities during winter compared to Montana.

The main factor in relation to winter closure of Montana's rest areas is the age of facilities. Older facilities were not designed or built to operate in winter weather conditions. Upgrading facilities for year-round operations is expensive. MDT managers decided to forego upgrading facilities and many are scheduled for replacement over the next 10 to 15 years.

Conclusion

If MDT proceeds with construction as currently planned, rest area spacing during winter will improve. New winterized facilities will result in all of MDT's rest areas being open year-round with the exception of two facilities that will be closed due to snow load: Lookout Pass and Lost Trail Pass.

Chapter V - Rest Area Maintenance

Introduction

One of our objectives was to evaluate rest area conditions and review Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) procedures to determine the level of maintenance at Montana's rest areas. The department has a defined process for contracting for maintenance, a defined process for evaluating maintenance contractors, and the condition of rest areas, in general, is satisfactory. Our findings indicate the rest area maintenance program is operating effectively.

Conclusion: MDT rest area maintenance program is operating effectively.

This chapter provides information on rest area maintenance and our review. While we believe program operations are effective, we also believe MDT can strengthen program effectiveness in the areas of pet areas, caretaker oversight, and cost analysis.

Survey Results

We examined the condition of rest areas through observation and completion of an evaluation form. In conjunction with other audit work, Legislative Audit Division personnel visited 36 separate rest area facilities and completed 86 evaluations. Our evaluation form was set up to allow the user to rate ten categories of facility conditions as acceptable or unacceptable. Overall, about half the evaluators (40 of 86) documented conditions as all acceptable, while about half the evaluators (46 of 86) indicated at least one category was unacceptable. The following table provides a summary of the results of our evaluations.

Chapter V – Rest Area Maintenance

Table 4
Rest Area Facility Conditions
(audit evaluations)

Category	Acceptable	Unacceptable
Information	62	24
Building Interior/Cleanliness	70	16
Pet Area	71	15
Grounds/Landscaping	77	9
Other	79	7
Parking	82	4
Signs	83	3
Picnic Area	83	3
Building Exterior	85	1
Safety/Security	85	1

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division

The top three categories receiving unacceptable ratings include traveler information, which we addressed in Chapter IV, building interior/cleanliness, and pet areas. Some evaluators made similar comments on rest area conditions, however, they did not rate the area as unacceptable. As a result, it appears our evaluation of facilities provided a good cross-section of opinions, probably similar to the traveling public.

Building Interior/Cleanliness

Our observations noted inconsistencies between facilities. The most obvious of these is the age of the facility. The original facilities like Jefferson City, Gold Creek, Bearmouth, and Dearborn were built in the early 70's. These facilities have probably reached, and possibly passed, their useful lives. The newer facilities like Clearwater and Armington Junction were built in the mid-90s and have a higher quality appearance than the older facilities. The brand new facilities, Bozeman and Sweetgrass, are top quality, which was expected since they only recently opened and cost \$1 million to \$2 million to construct.

One area on our evaluation form was building interior, which included cleanliness and appearance, as well as any other condition or feature the evaluator considered important. The cleanliness of the interior, odor, and lighting are some examples of unacceptable ratings of building interior. Cleanliness is what the caretaker is responsible for and this is what people see. However, cleanliness can be impacted by poor performance, time of day, facility use, variances in personal opinion, vandalism, or a combination of these, or other factors. MDT's only control over cleanliness is caretaker oversight. The RAP recommends evaluations be increased to improve cleanliness.

How are Caretakers Evaluated?

Our review of rest area maintenance included an analysis of how MDT evaluates caretakers. The department uses Maintenance Division personnel to complete standard forms for evaluating caretaker performance. The department's form was used to develop our facility evaluation form, so the categories noted previously are similar to the evaluation categories on MDT's evaluation form. MDT personnel are to complete an evaluation of caretakers each month. Completed caretaker evaluation forms are to be reviewed by supervisory personnel.

We reviewed MDT evaluation files for 13 rest areas in three districts and noted the following inconsistencies:

- ▶ Completing evaluations on a regular basis.
- ▶ Completing evaluations accurately.
- ▶ Documenting follow-up/resolution of issues.
- ▶ Using the newest evaluation forms.
- ▶ Reviewing evaluations (supervisory personnel).

Caretaker Oversight

The department has an informal policy requiring monthly evaluations of rest area caretakers. For the three districts we reviewed, this is not occurring consistently. Some evaluations are completed weekly, some monthly, and some only sporadically. Additionally, the evaluation form does not include an area for documenting follow-up and resolution of identified issues.

Chapter V – Rest Area Maintenance

The request for proposal (RFP) contains language requiring a monthly performance review, which is to be used to approve caretaker payment. Language in the contract between MDT and the caretaker says payment will be made upon satisfactory completion of all work ordered by the department.

If evaluations are not completed monthly, caretakers may not satisfactorily provide all services within the contract. This may lead to complaints about rest areas, or depending on the service, could lead to injury. In addition, there could be a lack of follow-up or resolution of issues noted on evaluations. For example, the men's room diaper-changing table at one rest area had a broken strap. The problem was noted and carried through evaluations for one year, but it was never documented whether or not it was fixed, or why it took so long to address the problem. In addition, the evaluations did not clarify who had responsibility for repairing the strap.

For an evaluation process to be effective, the process should include follow-up/resolution to issues. If a deficiency is noted, it should be corrected. This is critical for caretaker evaluations because the purpose of the evaluation is to review performance. If caretakers are not complying with contract requirements, but the department does not document noncompliance via an evaluation, disciplinary action or dismissal may be problematic.

Why are there Inconsistencies?

It appears as though some MDT personnel simply do not complete evaluations. One section supervisor thought the form did not lend itself to the way the process works. When this person completes a rest area inspection, he immediately gives directions to the caretaker to address issues. The evaluation form does not include an area to document follow-up/resolution. Another reason is supervisors do not review all evaluations. In addition, while some evaluations are reviewed, as indicated by a signature or initials, enforcement of the monthly evaluation policy appears to be individual-based. Finally, it appears there are no consequences for failure to complete evaluations. Caretakers are paid whether or not evaluations are completed.

Complaints

Another possible method of evaluating caretaker performance is monitoring traveler complaints. According to the user survey conducted during the development of the Rest Area Plan (RAP), 75 percent of the rest areas surveyed received criticisms regarding restroom cleanliness. In addition, the 2001 Nonresident Summer Visitor Profile report by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) received 50 unsolicited written comments complaining about Montana's rest areas. MDT personnel indicate complaints about rest areas are decreasing. However, we found there is no formal depository or history of complaints. The RFP requires the contractor to maintain a phone and post a phone number at the rest area for people to call with complaints. It does not require the contractor to notify MDT of complaints, nor does it require documentation of complaints. We found some facilities do not post a contact number, so people may not know who to call to complain. Thus, the current complaint process is a "self-monitoring" system with no oversight of contractors.

Conclusion

MDT management should increase consistency of caretaker oversight by modifying the evaluation form to include follow-up and resolution and enforcing monthly evaluations of rest area caretakers. Enforcement of policy is a supervisory responsibility. Supervisors must ensure caretaker evaluations are completed monthly. If the evaluation form is modified and supervisors ensure evaluations are completed monthly, facility consistency and cleanliness should improve.

As part of caretaker oversight, MDT should implement some form of formal complaint tracking system. The Dearborn rest area has collection posts for obtaining written comments, but they are not used. Department managers may want to consider using collection posts at all rest areas to obtain written comments. An option for collecting verbal complaints is to post only MDT phone numbers at rest areas. The department dispatcher could log complaints and relay messages to a caretaker for emergency situations. This will help strengthen caretaker oversight by tracking rest area complaints, as well as increasing the department's management information.

Chapter V – Rest Area Maintenance

Recommendation #4

We recommend the department:

- A. Modify the evaluation form to include documentation of follow-up/resolution.**
- B. Enforce policy on completing monthly evaluations through increased supervision.**
- C. Implement a formal rest area complaint tracking system, including changing its current method of contractor involvement.**

Pet Areas

Another category we evaluated was pet areas. We noted several conditions including:

- ▶ Tall grass (deterrent to use).
- ▶ Areas across parking lots or next to Interstate (dangerous).
- ▶ No designated area or it could not be found (confusing).

The following figure provides photos of pet areas around the state.

Figure 7

Pet Areas



Source: Legislative Audit Division photographs.

According to section 75-15-103(12), MCA, rest areas are provided for the convenience of the traveling public. Many people travel with their pets and when they stop at a rest area they usually walk their pets. A designated pet area would be considered a convenience for the traveling public. The RAP development process included a public survey of rest area facilities. According to this survey, 17 percent to 40 percent consider pet areas important. AASHTO suggests pet areas not be located near main highways, and when possible, should be accessible without crossing traffic lanes.

There is no standardized MDT design for pet areas. The RAP does not provide guidance on pet area design, location, and maintenance. As a result, we noted inconsistencies in pet areas around the state. For example, one rest area has its pet area on the end of the

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landscaped lawn, while another located its pet area across the parking lot, next to the Interstate, in a non-landscaped area. In addition, we observed several rest areas where it was unclear where the pet area was located.

Conclusion

It appears MDT considers pet areas important because the majority of Montana rest areas include them. However, to improve this convenience, we believe MDT needs to ensure each rest area has a designated pet area clearly marked and easily accessible. In addition, the area should receive proper attention to ensure it is useable and safe for pets and people.

Recommendation #5

We recommend the department develop design, location, and maintenance standards for pet areas to ensure all areas are clearly designated, safe, and in useable condition.

Is Contracting for Maintenance Cost Effective?

.Our final audit objective was to determine if contracting for rest area maintenance is cost effective The RAP says the department should use private contractors or in-house personnel for maintenance, whichever provides the necessary service level at the lowest cost. In order to accomplish this, the department should complete a cost analysis including:

- ▶ Analyzing current rest area costs.
- ▶ Developing a standard or threshold for maintenance costs.
- ▶ Establishing a formal contracting procedure for high cost proposals.
- ▶ Collecting and analyzing data on in-house costs for maintenance.
- ▶ Regularly compiling traffic count data at all rest areas.
- ▶ Analyzing cost-related data on a regular basis.

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MDT has not conducted any cost comparisons or cost benefit analysis of the rest area maintenance program. Thus, it is not possible to conclude whether or not contracting for maintenance is cost effective. However, based on our analysis of existing data, it appears some form of cost benefit analysis is warranted. The following sections provide details on rest area maintenance costs.

Monthly Contract Costs Vary

There are currently 31 maintenance contracts (excluding one scenic turnout and one visitor information center) with costs ranging from \$750 per month (Flowing Wells) to \$5,997 per month (Greycliff). This range generally exists because there are different amenities and services provided at rest areas. The monthly costs for these 31 contracts, ranked in order from highest to lowest, are provided in Table 5.

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Table 5
Rest Area Monthly Costs
(highest to lowest)

Rest Area	Monthly Cost	Yearly Cost	% of Highest
* Greycliff	\$5,996.83	\$71,961.96	100%
* Columbus	\$4,996.83	\$59,961.96	83%
* Bozeman	\$4,750.00	\$57,000.00	79%
Dena Mora	\$3,739.00	\$22,434.00	62%
* Bearmouth	\$3,500.00	\$42,000.00	58%
Lost Trail Pass	\$3,500.00	\$21,000.00	58%
* Sweetgrass	\$3,417.18	\$41,006.16	57%
Hathaway	\$3,350.00	\$23,450.00	56%
Gold Creek	\$3,200.00	\$20,800.00	53%
* Quartz Flats	\$3,100.00	\$37,200.00	52%
Custer	\$3,000.00	\$21,000.00	50%
Hardin	\$2,850.00	\$19,950.00	48%
* Hysham	\$2,800.00	\$33,600.00	47%
* Clearwater	\$2,650.00	\$31,800.00	44%
* Emigrant	\$2,375.00	\$28,500.00	40%
Vista Point	\$2,350.00	\$11,750.00	39%
* Teton River	\$2,200.00	\$26,400.00	37%
* Bad Route	\$2,130.00	\$25,560.00	36%
* Dearborn	\$2,006.00	\$24,072.00	33%
* Armington Junction	\$1,981.30	\$23,775.60	33%
Jefferson City	\$1,800.00	\$12,600.00	30%
* Troy	\$1,750.00	\$21,000.00	29%
Raynolds Pass	\$1,720.00	\$10,320.00	29%
* Divide	\$1,575.00	\$18,900.00	26%
Roberts	\$1,300.00	\$9,100.00	22%
* Culbertson	\$1,280.00	\$15,360.00	21%
Glasgow	\$1,250.00	\$7,500.00	21%
Locate	\$1,250.00	\$8,750.00	21%
Bridger	\$1,199.00	\$8,393.00	20%
Dupuyer	\$1,090.50	\$6,543.00	18%
Flowing Well	\$750.00	\$5,250.00	13%
TOTALS	\$78,856.64	\$766,937.68	

* Denotes year-round operations

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division.

It should be noted, as of October 3, 2002, Bozeman was under a temporary contract, but the monthly cost is expected to increase for the regular contract. Also, as noted in Chapter II, MDT rest area

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costs such as major maintenance, repairs, and supplies are not included in these costs.

Noticeable Cost Differences

Table 5 above shows a noticeable difference in costs. Greycliff and Columbus costs are considerably higher than other rest areas. In fact, Greycliff is 42 percent higher in cost than Bearmouth, which is a similar facility (same general age, both sides of Interstate, apparent high use).

We asked MDT personnel why Greycliff and Columbus have such a high cost. The department did not have information to explain these differences, but suggested high use and prevailing wage rates as probable reasons. High use of rest areas may increase costs because the caretaker may spend more time at the facility to adequately address responsibilities. The previous caretakers of these two rest area facilities said MDT increased coverage requirements resulted in increased costs. Again, no one is certain of why this situation is occurring. In addition, due to variations in when caretaker contracts are awarded, some contracts may be up to three years old and could increase in cost when renewed.

Our analysis of costs for Greycliff and Columbus for the past ten years indicated costs have not always been high. The following table provides costs for Greycliff and Columbus for the past ten years.

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Table 6
Greycliff and Columbus Monthly Costs

Year	Greycliff	Columbus
1992	\$1,944.22	\$1,295.00
1993	\$1,665.00	\$1,295.00
1994	\$1,665.00	\$1,295.00
1995	\$1,665.00	\$1,395.00
1996	\$1,745.66	\$1,395.00
1997	\$1,745.66	\$1,395.00
1998	\$2,460.58	\$1,395.00
1999	\$2,460.58	\$2,300.00
2000	\$2,460.58	\$2,300.00
2001	\$6,172.05	\$2,300.00
2002	\$5,996.83	\$4,996.83

Source: Compiled by the Legislative Audit Division from department records.

The cost data shows an increase of 151 percent at Greycliff from 2000 to 2001, and an increase of 117 percent at Columbus from 2001 to 2002.

Rest Area Traffic Data is Not Collected

There is no data to verify that Greycliff and Columbus are the highest use rest areas in the state. The last statewide rest area usage study conducted by the department was completed in 1992. This data indicated Lookout Pass was the highest use rest area with Bearmouth second, Quartz Flats third, Homestake fourth, Greycliff fifth, Gold Creek sixth, and Columbus seventh. An update of some rest areas was completed in 2000, but this did not include Greycliff or Columbus. The 2000 data indicated Lookout Pass had increased by 62 percent. Bearmouth and Gold Creek had both dropped off by 42 percent and 35 percent respectively. Due to data variations and traffic fluctuations, we could not project traffic volumes for either Greycliff or Columbus.

While the department does not regularly conduct traffic counts at rest areas, average daily traffic (ADT) counts are regularly conducted

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throughout Montana. ADT counts could be used to estimate rest area use.

Maintenance Costs are Not Formally Compared or Analyzed

MDT does not formally compare costs of maintenance between rest areas. Each district is responsible for the rest areas within its boundaries, so a statewide comparison has not occurred. However, district personnel do not formally compare costs within their districts. As mentioned previously, MDT is using in-house labor to maintain the new Sweetgrass rest area. This will provide data for comparison between in-house and contracted maintenance costs. Currently, Sweetgrass costs are 43 percent below Greycliff costs. However, because in-house maintenance only started in June 2002, it is probably too early to use these costs for a comparison.

There is no Standard for Rest Area Maintenance Costs

The department has not developed a standard rest area maintenance cost or a threshold to measure against. Currently, MDT uses the cost of the previous contract as an estimate of cost. According to MDT personnel, as an informal rule-of-thumb, if bids are more than 10 percent over the cost estimate, MDT should consider other options, such as re-bidding or seeking alternative methods. Based on figures in Table 6 above, it appears this informal procedure is not always followed. According to department management, in-house costs for maintaining the Sweetgrass rest area will be used to help establish a benchmark. An important consideration for this analysis is the fact that contracting rules and regulations are different than those for employees. The department can direct an employee on when, where, and how long to be at a rest area, but it does not have this authority over private contractors.

Summary and Conclusion

MDT's RAP contains policy to use in-house or contracted personnel to maintain rest areas, whichever provides the necessary service at the lowest cost. The department has not conducted a cost analysis or established a framework for determining which way is more cost effective. In order to accomplish this, the department should establish a formal process for analyzing rest area maintenance costs including:

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- ▶ Establishing a standard maintenance cost to measure bids against.
- ▶ Developing formal policy for rejecting bids that exceed the standard cost.
- ▶ Compiling rest area traffic data on a regular basis.
- ▶ Comparing maintenance costs statewide.
- ▶ Comparing contracted costs to in-house costs.
- ▶ Reviewing costs on a regular basis to determine whether in-house or contracted maintenance is more cost effective.

Analysis of cost-related data will provide the department assurance that rest area costs are reasonable. Comparing contracted costs to in-house costs, as well as comparing costs between rest areas, will enable managers to establish a standard to measure against. An ongoing analysis will ensure the department continues to achieve desired results.

Recommendation #6

We recommend the department:

- A. Continue to compile comparative cost information.**
- B. Establish an ongoing process for compiling and analyzing data to determine if in-house or contracted maintenance is more cost effective.**

Department Response



Montana Department of Transportation

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December 4, 2002

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LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIV.

Subject: Response to performance audit recommendations – MDT's rest area program

Dear Jim,

Thank you for the copy of the performance audit of Montana's Rest Area Program. I have attached MDT's responses to the specific audit recommendations.

Although MDT has made significant improvements to Montana's rest areas in the last few years in response to public input and the 1999 Rest Area Plan, the audit recommendations provide us with valuable direction that will lead to further improvements to these essential safety facilities. The audit team did an admirable job of researching this complex issue and I especially appreciate their willingness to interview the many MDT employees involved in rest area planning, construction, and maintenance.

Please call me at 444-6201 if you have any questions about MDT's responses to the recommendations and please pass along my thanks to the entire audit team – Angie Grove, Angus Maciver and Kent Rice – for a job well done.

Sincerely,

Jim Currie
Deputy Director

Montana Department of Transportation



Response to recommendations in Performance Audit
of
MDT's Rest Area Program

Recommendation #1

We recommend the department:

- A. *The Planning Division develop formal procedures to ensure all aspects of the Plan are reviewed on a regular basis and reported to the Transportation Commission.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation and will institute a regular review of the Plan for the Transportation Commission in place of the current practice of briefing the Commission on rest area issues only when discussing proposed changes in the rest area plan. Although the performance audit does not suggest an annual schedule for these reviews, we believe an annual review would help institutionalize this process.

- B. *The department management team coordinate statewide plan priority setting with the Transportation Commission.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation and will continue to involve MDT's management team in the process of establishing rest area construction priorities. However, because rest area projects must compete directly with other highway projects for funding, we believe the current practice of assessing rest area needs in the context of other highway needs and funding levels is appropriate given the many unmet transportation needs. Although this does result in some fragmentation of rest area prioritization, we believe the increased use of MDT's Performance Programming Process (P³) to guide overall funding distribution based on MDT and Commission policies will produce a more consistent approach to this issue.

Recommendation #2

We recommend the department:

- A. *Update the RAP to reflect the temporary status, availability of funding, service levels, and long-range planning impacts of CPRA program.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. Although the City Park Rest Area Program has allowed MDT to meet some of Montana's rest area needs at a low cost

and has benefited participating communities, increasing demands for state funding as well as changes in MDT and Commission policies support the need for this recommendation.

- B. *Establish a process for ongoing review and update of the RAP to inform the Transportation Commission of changes in the status of CPRA facilities.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation and will ensure that the planned annual review process considers the status of City Park Rest Areas.

Recommendation #3

We recommend the department:

- A. *Design standardized information content and presentation for rest areas.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. We have instituted a process to review and provide for more consistent information content at each rest area. Information boards have been purchased and installed. Basic content includes “you are here” maps and other pertinent basic information for the traveling public such as speed limits and road information. In addition to the standard information, each rest area’s information boards have information that is specific to the surrounding location and may not be consistent from area to area. The maintenance program has proposed legislation to allow more kiosks and information content to provide a standardized improved information source. See response to 3-B.

- B. *Assign information posting and maintenance responsibilities.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. We will implement, within the next six months, a committee to address information posting. The committee will include field personnel, planning staff, the facility manager, and public information officer. The field maintenance chief is responsible for maintenance activities within each administrative area, and that includes rest areas and information boards within the rest areas.

- C. *Establish a process for regularly updating rest area information.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. We have been working on, and will continue to improve information posting and maintenance of information boards. The committee mentioned in 3-B will meet at least once a year to review rest area information board content. The field maintenance chief will perform at least two yearly reviews of each rest area, in the spring and fall. Included in the review will be the condition and content of the information boards.

Recommendation #4

We recommend the department:

- A. Modify the evaluation form to include documentation of follow-up/resolution.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. We have been working on improving our rest area maintenance including an enhanced evaluation process that will include follow-up documentation. We agree that there is room for improvement in rest area reviews, contractor notification, and follow-up. The evaluation form will be modified to facilitate documentation of needed corrective actions and actions taken.

- B. Enforce policy on completing monthly evaluations through increased supervision.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. We will continue to support and enforce rest area evaluations. Monthly evaluations are the responsibility of the section superintendent under the direction of the maintenance chief. The maintenance chief will review and sign all monthly rest area evaluations.

- C. Implement a formal rest area complaint tracking system, including changing its current method of contractor involvement.*

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. Every two years the maintenance program conducts a customer survey, one element of which addresses rest areas. The *Perception of Highway Maintenance in Montana in 2002* was just completed, and the survey results indicate we have made significant improvements in rest area maintenance. To further improve customer service, each maintenance area will institute and maintain a rest area complaint log file (may be hard copy or electronic). Complaints will be shared with the contractor and appropriate corrective actions will be determined and documented.

Deficiencies discovered during the monthly reviews, or other inspections, will be reviewed with the contractor. Appropriate corrective actions will be determined and documented. Follow-up review maybe conducted prior to the monthly inspection, or at any other time, to ensure corrective actions have been implemented.

A comment/complaint phone number, with the phone number of the administrative area responsible for the rest area, will be posted at each rest area.

Recommendation #5

We recommend the department develop design, location, and maintenance standards for pet areas to ensure all areas are clearly designated, safe, and in usable condition.

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. Future rest area designs will include pet rest areas. Design criteria will take into consideration the location of designated pet areas to ensure sanitary conditions, and the safety of the pet and owner. When practical, existing rest areas will have designated pet areas. Signing of designated pet areas and leash requirements will be reviewed and improved where necessary. Maintenance contracts will address the care and maintenance of designated pet areas.

Recommendation #6

We recommend the department:

A. Continue to compile comparative cost information.

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. The maintenance program will continue to gather costs.

B. Establish an ongoing process for compiling and analyzing data to determine if in-house or contracted maintenance is more cost-effective.

MDT Response: We agree with this recommendation. We will continue to review the functionality and cost-effectiveness of the department-maintained rest areas in comparison with contracted sites. Future rest area maintenance recommendations will be based on the findings of the ongoing test and comparative cost comparisons.