



# Legislative Audit Division

## Performance Audit Summary

### Rest Area Program

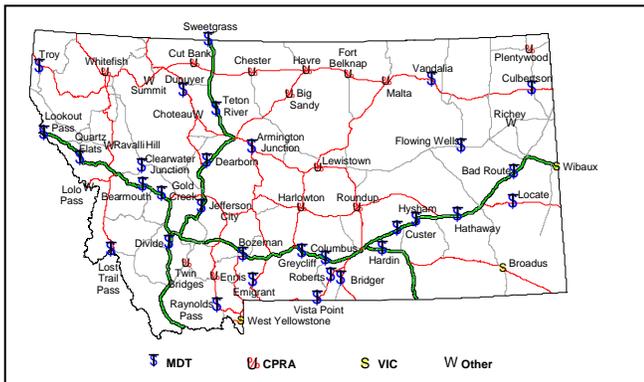
December 2002

#### Introduction

In response to travelers' complaints, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) 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 subsequently approved and prioritized an audit of the program.

#### Background

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.



Analysis of the two newest facilities and MDT's planned construction program for other new facilities indicates **Rest Area Plan (RAP) policies are being implemented for new and planned construction.** The new construction MDT is planning will replace or abandon nearly all the older generation facilities.

While MDT's progress on planning, as compared to other states, is more advanced, the department can further improve program development. MDT needs to establish a greater level of strategic control over program planning through formal procedures and comprehensive reviews of RAP policy.

**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 Commission.

#### City Park Rest Area Program

MDT and the legislature established the City Park Rest Area (CPRA) program in 1991. The main purpose of the program was to address a problem with rest area provision on Montana's primary highway system. MDT provided 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 current rest area program. The CPRA 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 minimum standards enforced at MDT facilities do not apply to CPRA facilities. Providing rest area coverage in remote areas of the state is still a need. MDT is planning new rest area facilities at some of the CPRA locations.

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

#### Spacing of Rest Areas

MDT's spacing policy requires one hour of travel time between major resting locations. MDT translates this into a distance ranging from 60 to 100 miles between rest areas. Deficiencies still exist on certain highway routes.

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 improve rest area distribution.

| Current and Projected Rest Area Spacing |                  |                  |                  |                   |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Route                                   | Max <sup>1</sup> | Min <sup>1</sup> | Ave <sup>1</sup> | Diff <sup>1</sup> |
| I-90 (current)                          | 138              | 24               | 68               | 114               |
| I-90 (future) <sup>2</sup>              | 102              | 38               | 68               | 64                |
| US-89 (current)                         | 119              | 24               | 68               | 96                |
| US-89 (future) <sup>2</sup>             | 112              | 24               | 80               | 88                |
| MT-200 (current)                        | 166              | 59               | 112              | 107               |
| MT-200 (future) <sup>2</sup>            | 158              | 58               | 100              | 100               |

<sup>1</sup> distance measured to nearest mile  
<sup>2</sup> 20-year projection

### Visitor Information

The visitor information policy requires MDT to 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.

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. 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.

During our visits to Montana rest areas, we noted variations in the presentation, amount and type of information posted. Some information was limited and/or faded and hard to read. 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.**

### Seasonal Closures

The policy on seasonal closures states that 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. 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 contacted.

The main factor in 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.

### Rest Area Maintenance

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.**

### How are Caretakers Evaluated?

The department has an informal policy on completing evaluations of rest area caretakers on a monthly basis, and this is not occurring consistently. Some evaluations are completed weekly, some monthly, and others sporadically. **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

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 and potential safety issues in pet areas around the state. MDT considers pet areas important because the majority of Montana rest areas include them. **MDT needs to ensure each rest area has a designated pet area clearly marked and easily accessible. The area should receive proper attention to ensure it is useable and safe.**

### 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 exists because there are different amenities and services provided at rest areas. However, our analysis of these monthly costs indicated noticeable differences. RAP policy requires use of in-house or contracted personnel to maintain rest areas, whichever provides the necessary service at the lowest cost. The department has not conducted an analysis of cost effectiveness. **MDT should establish a process for analyzing costs to determine effectiveness.**

For a complete copy of the report (02P-10) or for further information contact the Legislative Audit Division at 406-444-3122; e-mail to [lad@mt.gov](mailto:lad@mt.gov); or check the web site at <http://leg.mt.gov/audit>.