

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-348](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent inquiries into WMATA's Metrorail system have revealed a range of serious safety issues. In response to some of these issues, as well as a backlog of track maintenance, WMATA announced in May 2016 that it was undertaking SafeTrack, a large-scale rehabilitation project. The SafeTrack project is overseen by FTA.

GAO was asked to review a range of safety and oversight issues regarding WMATA. This report examines the extent to which WMATA's (1) planning and (2) implementation of SafeTrack was consistent with leading project management practices as well as (3) the steps taken by FTA to oversee SafeTrack.

GAO reviewed documentation on WMATA's planning and project implementation, and FTA's oversight of SafeTrack. GAO also interviewed officials from WMATA, FTA, and local jurisdictions, and compared WMATA's planning and implementation of SafeTrack to leading project management practices developed by professional organizations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that WMATA develop a policy that requires and includes procedures for it to, prior to starting future large-scale rehabilitation projects: (1) use asset data to develop project objectives; (2) analyze alternatives; and (3) develop a project management plan for those projects that may not be designated as major capital projects. WMATA agreed with GAO's findings and said that it is working to address the recommendations.

View [GAO-17-348](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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WASHINGTON METROPOLITAN AREA TRANSIT AUTHORITY

Improved Planning of Future Rehabilitation Projects Could Prevent Limitations Identified with SafeTrack

What GAO Found

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority's (WMATA) planning of SafeTrack did not fully align with leading project management practices. While WMATA generally followed leading practices to coordinate with stakeholders, it did not comprehensively collect and use data on the condition of its assets, analyze project alternatives, and develop a project management plan before starting work. WMATA did not follow these practices because it believed it needed to start work immediately to address critical safety issues.

- Although WMATA inspected its track assets when planning SafeTrack, those inspections were not comprehensive and did not collect detailed data on the condition of all track infrastructure, such as all "interlockings," where trains cross from one track to another. As a result, WMATA's decision makers may not have used sufficient information to develop project objectives and to properly prioritize SafeTrack work.
- Though WMATA developed three alternatives for SafeTrack, it did not determine the costs and impacts of each alternative, or assess them to determine which approach may have resulted in greater efficiencies, lower costs, or less disruption for riders and local jurisdictions.
- Before WMATA began SafeTrack, it lacked a comprehensive project management plan, which is a key tool to ensure a project is completed on-time, within-budget, and according to quality standards.

WMATA does not have a policy that requires, and includes relevant procedures for how to carry out, these planning activities for large-scale rehabilitation projects. Without such a policy and procedures, WMATA lacks a framework to plan future rehabilitation projects so that they achieve their objectives.

WMATA's implementation of SafeTrack generally aligned with leading project management practices. Specifically, WMATA officials collected information on the work performed and the condition of assets repaired during SafeTrack. WMATA officials also collect lessons learned during and after each surge, and use those lessons during subsequent maintenance and planning efforts. Additionally, WMATA developed a new organization-wide quality control and assurance framework and is implementing it for the first time through SafeTrack.

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has used safety inspections and other tools to oversee SafeTrack and direct WMATA to undertake safety-critical work. FTA has relied on two different authorities to oversee SafeTrack: (1) FTA's public transportation safety oversight authority, and (2) its project management oversight authority. Prior to the start of SafeTrack and during the project, FTA conducted safety inspections and directed WMATA to make repairs to reduce the risk of smoke and fires on the rail system. After SafeTrack work began and estimated project costs exceeded \$100 million, FTA determined SafeTrack to be a major capital project, triggering the statutory requirement that WMATA prepare a project management plan. WMATA did not submit its project management plan until 4 months into SafeTrack. FTA found the plan lacked sufficient detail, and WMATA told GAO it is working to improve the plan.