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.

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.

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.

March 2017

WASHINGTON METROPOLITAN AREA TRANSIT AUTHORITY

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

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