A Tale of Two Systems

How significant savings can be realized by developing a comprehensive system to better manage a department's fleet inventory

Shonte' Eldridge, PMP
Chief, Special Projects
Department of Public Works
City of Baltimore, Maryland

The City of Baltimore Department of Public Works' (DPW) is, among other things, responsible for providing safe drinking water to approximately 1.8 million people daily, the collection of mixed refuse and recycling from 210,000 households, and keeping the city's alleys, waterways and roadways clean and clear of debris. None of which can be done efficiently if the Department's fleet is not well maintained.

"The residents in our region depend on DPW to respond when there is a water main break or a street needs to be plowed during a snowstorm," said DPW's Director, Rudolph S. Chow, P.E. "We don't have the luxury of not showing up because our car is in the shop."

Currently, the Department of General Services (DGS) is responsible for monitoring and servicing almost all City agency vehicles, but the day-to-day management and monitoring of a vehicle's location, preventive maintenance, emissions testing, and taking it in for repairs is the responsibility of the individual agencies and their coordinators. The big challenge is ensuring the data maintained by both matches.

In early 2015, Director Chow determined that he was not sure the City had the right tools. He was unable to quickly ascertain the overall health of his Department's fleet. He also wondered if the over thirty coordinators, who monitored approximately 1,900 vehicles and motorized equipment had what they needed to manage their portion of the fleet —potentially leading to the loss of time and money.

To correct this, DPW began the process of evaluating how to provide the Director and others with better access to fleet information and the ability to ensure that vehicles and equipment are maintained according to schedule.

Step 1: Determining the Need
Before a new system could be created, the current business practice had to be dissected. Several meetings were held with the coordinators to discuss topics such as what they believed their role as a coordinator was, how they were currently monitoring their assigned vehicles, and what features a new system should have that would best assist them and the Department.

It was determined that most of the coordinators had a good understanding of their duties, but often fell behind in their monitoring because they were using spreadsheets or paper filing—not the most efficient way to track items over time. The use of spreadsheets also made it difficult to track the various information associated with a vehicle in one view. Coordinators had to often

switch between several programs and pieces of paper to get the complete history and status of a vehicle.

Coordinators also expressed frustration in the time it took to reconcile their maintenance records with the City's fleet system. Because data on their vehicles were in various formats and locations, they often had to review several bits of information just for one record. If there were discrepancies, they had to spend even more time identifying the source.

Based on the information collected, it was determined that the establishment of a main fleet coordinator position and the development/acquirement of a centralized database would provide the Department with the best results.

Step 2: Implementation

The first step in implementation of a new DPW fleet system was to assign a person with the full-time task of monitoring DPW's overall fleet. This person would serve as the single point of contact for all DPW coordinators as well as DGS. Each coordinator would work directly the main fleet coordinator who could efficiently resolve the discrepancies, rather than involving multiple people in the process.

This process has already proven beneficial in saving time and money as each of the coordinators is taking on fleet coordinator responsibilities in addition to their other duties within DPW. So the less time they spend on correcting discrepancies, the more time they can spend other duties. The overall fleet coordinator is also responsible for monitoring DPW's fleet to ensure vehicles are serviced according to schedule, vehicles are placed in the shop immediately when behind schedule, and coordinate with DGS if vehicles have been in their shop for an unusually long period of time.

The second part in implementing the new fleet system was the installment of a centralized database. Although there are several fleet management programs on the market, DPW opted to first internally create a database. The database DPW created not only provides a centralized system for all of the coordinators to enter maintenance and repair information, but it also has the ability to generate Department-wide and individual coordinator reports. Other databases will be considered if the internal database fails to meet needs.

These reports help the Department and coordinators quickly cross-check for discrepancies in the City's systems. It also provides valuable information on each vehicle including:

- maintenance and testing within the next 30, 60 and 90 days,
- maintenance is past due
- complete repair history of a vehicle
- nearing the end of their life cycle
- down for repairs, and having
- recurring or similar maintenance issues in vehicles
- help with financial and usage planning

Conclusion

Although improvements can still be made and we must maintain two separate systems for now, we have made great progress. The establishment of a main fleet coordinator and the creation of centralized database have certainly made fleet management within the Department more reliable and efficient.

Shonte' Eldridge can be reached at (410) 396-3317 or Shonte.Eldridge@baltimorecity.gov.