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STATE COMPTROLLER



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STATE OF NEW YORK
OFFICE OF THE STATE COMPTROLLER

February 11, 2000

Mr. Wilbur L. Chapman
Commissioner
New York City Department of Transportation
40 Worth Street
New York, NY 10013

Re: Report 99-F-51

Dear Mr. Chapman:

Pursuant to the State Comptroller's authority as set forth in Article X, Section 5 of the State Constitution, and Article 3, Section 33 of the General Municipal Law, we reviewed the actions taken by officials of the Department of Transportation Bridge and Roadway Division as of January 6, 2000, to implement the recommendations contained in our audit report, *Improvements Needed in Emergency Bridge Repair Program* (Report 96-N-14). Our report, which was issued January 30, 1997, examined the emergency bridge repair program.

Background

The New York City Department of Transportation's (Department) Bridge and Roadway Division (Division) was established in 1988 to design, inspect, construct, repair and maintain the City's 769 bridges and the connected roadway system. Based on mandated inspections by State and City inspectors, hazardous condition reports, known as flags, are issued on the structures found to be defective. The Division should correct the hazardous condition identified within specified time frames in order to prevent further deterioration of the City's bridges, and protect the public from damages and injuries.

The Division resolves hazardous conditions by assigning flags to appropriate in-house repair units and outside contractors. These emergency repairs are funded through the City's expense budget, which for fiscal year 1999 was about \$9.9 million for in-house repairs and \$7.4 million for outside contracts.

The objectives of our prior audit were to determine whether the Bridge and Roadway Division of the New York City Department of Transportation reported and completed emergency repairs for the City's bridges in a timely manner, and accurately reported the status of hazardous conditions requiring repairs.

Summary Conclusions

Our prior audit found that improvements were needed in making emergency repairs to bridges and in communication of the reported status of flags between Departmental units. For example, we found considerable delays in the Division making emergency repairs to its bridges and that many of the repairs, when made, were temporary in nature and did not address the underlying problem. We also found conflicting data from various Departmental units on whether repairs were completed and flags opened or closed.

In our follow-up review, we found that Department officials are in the process of taking steps to strengthen controls over flag reporting and monitoring processes. The Department is also involved in bridge rehabilitation projects and improved bridge maintenance designed to upgrade bridge structures. We also found that improvements were still needed to the processes designed to make sure that delayed repairs are appropriately managed. The Department has taken some actions to improve their processes designed to accomplish this objective. The Department has not studied the feasibility of preparing repair cost estimates, and it does not see the benefits of reconciling activity reports between the various units.

Summary of Status of Prior Audit Recommendations

Of the four prior audit recommendations, Department officials have partially implemented two recommendations and have not implemented two recommendations.

Follow-up Observations

Recommendation 1

Develop a comprehensive action plan to resolve outstanding flags in a timely manner.

Status - Partially Implemented

Agency Action - Department officials disagreed with this recommendation to the extent that we did not consider temporary fixes as timely repairs of flag conditions. They added that temporary repairs can be an appropriate resolution in those cases where permanent repair of flagged conditions will be completed as a part of a planned major reconstruction project and initiating a permanent repair on heavily-traveled structures will have a major adverse effect upon traffic. However, we noted that the Department has recently installed a new information system to better track all events related to flagged conditions. Management plans to use this system to better monitor and manage events

related to flagged conditions. The Department also combined the Division's Internal Design and Construction Bureaus. One of the benefits expected to be achieved by the combined unit is better coordination of engineering services related to flagged work. Both of these actions appear to be positive steps toward implementing this recommendation.

Recommendation 2

Study the feasibility of including a cost estimate as part of the inspection process.

Status - Not Implemented

Agency Action - NYC Department of Transportation does not view cost as a factor in prioritizing the timing of when repairs will be completed. It believes that the cost of mobilizing staff to effect repairs is the most significant aspect of repair costs. It generally views material costs, including any additional cost of not making repairs sooner, to be small in comparison with the cost of mobilization. As a result, it has not explored the feasibility of preparing repair cost estimates for use as a tool to manage the process of making repairs.

Recommendation 3

Periodically review and determine that the flag monitoring and reporting documents correctly reflect the present status of flagged conditions.

Status - Partially Implemented

Agency Action - The Department has recently installed a new information system to better track all events related to flagged conditions. This system is designed to make it easier for management to monitor the status of flags and review events associated with flags.

Auditors' Comments - The Department eventually plans for field staff to enter events that impact the current status of flagged conditions into its new information system. Currently, administrative staff make these entries. Field staff do not always submit information concerning flag events timely. As a result, the information in the system may not correctly reflect the present status of flagged conditions.

Recommendation 4

Reconcile the activity reports and improve the communication between different units involved in flag operations so that differences are corrected.

Status - Not Implemented

Agency Action - The Department does not see a benefit to reconciling activity reports between the various units. It believes that the main purpose of these reports is to track the workload within a unit, while the Division monitors the flags from the standpoint of the City as a whole. The Department did agree to take steps to make sure that completed flags are promptly reported to the Division. No action has been taken yet. The Division expects to enter its events directly into the new information system. It views this as a first step to make sure that the present status of flagged conditions is accurately reflected in both Division and Department records. It also recognizes a need for work crews to be more timely in communicating events to engineers to make sure that the present status of flagged conditions is accurately reflected in all records.

Major contributors to this report were Stanley Evans, Santo Rendon, and John Lang.

We would appreciate your response to this report within 30 days, indicating any actions planned or taken to address any unresolved matters discussed in this report. We also thank the management and staff of New York City Department of Transportation for the courtesies and cooperation extended to our auditors during this review.

Very truly yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Carmen Maldonado". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Carmen Maldonado
Audit Director

cc: H. Perahia, Deputy Commissioner
T. Mathews, Auditor General
E. Reilly, Mayor's Office of Operations