

**South Carolina
Department of Transportation
2025 Research and Innovation
Peer Exchange:
“Creating a Culture of Innovation
within your State Department of
Transportation”**

FINAL REPORT

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*Peer exchange attendees at work
(Source: South Carolina Department of Transportation)*



*Toy building blocks from Minnesota Department of
Transportation's "I'm a MN-ovator" campaign
(Source: South Carolina Department of Transportation)*



*Group photo from the drone technical demonstration
(Source: Clemson University)*

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We would like to extend our sincere appreciation to all participants from other states, as well as to CTC & Associates LLC, for their time and contributions in making this Peer Exchange a great success. The insights and recommendations shared during the discussions will be invaluable in helping us enhance the quality of our Innovation Program.

We also wish to thank the FHWA South Carolina Division for their continued support. Their involvement is essential to the success of our program and is deeply appreciated.

Finally, we commend the South Carolina LTAP Service at Clemson University for providing outstanding support in hosting the event.

PEER EXCHANGE AT-A-GLANCE

Host Agency: South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT)

Participating Agencies: Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT), Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT), Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), and Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)

Guest Participants: CTC & Associates LLC, Clemson University

Format: Two-and-a-half day in-person peer exchange held in Greenville, South Carolina, from October 27-29, 2025

Funding Program: FHWA State Transportation Innovation Council (STIC) Incentive Program

PEER EXCHANGE TOPICS

The peer exchange concentrated on four focus areas related to transportation innovation, with an eye on helping SCDOT continue to advance and improve its annual Innovation Challenge. The four focus areas were:

1. **Identifying innovation** across a DOT, including through soliciting ideas or in-practice innovations for a challenge or competition and a showcase event.
2. **Recognizing and rewarding innovation** with awards, demonstrations, and implementation strategies.
3. **Sharing innovation** throughout a DOT, with local governments, and nationally.
4. **Inspiring innovation** to create an agency culture that encourages, promotes, and celebrates innovation across all geographic and program areas.

Several themes, such as the involvement of agency leadership, district staff, and public engagement offices, ran through the discussion of these focus areas.

TOP FINDINGS AND TAKEAWAYS

The peer exchange final report highlights these top findings among SCDOT and guest agency participants in the four main discussion areas.

Focus Point 1. Identifying Innovation

- **Engage agency leadership** to build support for the innovation program and to encourage participation.
- **Develop or enhance relationships** with public engagement offices to take advantage of the valuable outreach and communications support.
- **Identify innovation submission categories** that span operational and functional areas within the agency.

- **Motivate additional participation** with testimonials from innovation awardees or innovator explanations of need in videos or other promotional materials.
- **Engage in friendly peer pressure.** Reach out to districts and programs with low or no participation to encourage innovation.
- **Produce program videos** to illustrate and highlight the value and benefit of innovation in the agency.
- **Identify local champions throughout the agency** to assist with communication regarding the innovation program and encourage participation.

Focus Point 2. Recognizing and Rewarding Innovation

- **Revisit scoring and evaluation criteria** for innovation submissions to balance objective and fair judging process with flexibility to accommodate innovation types across the agency.
- **Incorporate traveling or rotating awards** to motivate friendly competition across the agency, in addition to consistent monetary awards.
- **Create powerful recognition tools**, such as banners or signs for award winners, for use at showcases and beyond.
- **Consider including other invitees** for showcase events, such as innovator family members, students, and a variety of field and program staff, to boost morale and publicize the benefits of innovation.
- **Encourage friendly competition for innovation** among districts and program offices to create energy and enthusiasm for innovation.
- **Recognize and reward** innovation by documenting showcases, including the stories of innovation winners.

Focus Point 3. Sharing Innovation

- **Create short videos** of interviews with competition winners to share their innovations' benefits and use and encourage other employees.
- **Innovation program staff can participate** in regular virtual or in-person meetings of other divisions, programs, or districts to share innovations and innovation program news.
- **Move highly beneficial innovations to best practices**, including developing standard operating procedures, to share the benefits and reasons to innovate.
- **Enhance collaboration with FHWA's Local Transportation Assistance Program (LTAP)** to broaden innovation program perspectives and increase reach for sharing innovations.
- **Share innovations nationally** by submitting to the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and other **transportation news publications**.

- **Innovation points of contact (champions)** in each district and office can share innovations and encourage implementation agency wide.
- **Public engagement offices can support** sharing innovation by posting seasonal or geographical innovations on messages boards or other mechanisms in field and program offices.

Focus Point 4. Inspiring Innovation

- **Videos interviewing innovators** illustrates their creations and tells the story of their motivations in their own voice for inspiration to others.
- **Increased communication from leadership** about innovation campaigns and events, and increased collaboration with communications divisions can highlight innovation as an agency priority.
- **Tracking the level of participation** in innovation competitions from districts and offices can support coaxing increased participation where needed.
- **Personalized “thank you” cards** sent to all innovation participants, signed by the Secretary or other leadership, can instill pride and sustain motivation to innovate.
- **Non-traditional communication** ideas such as podcasts or other regular short videos can help the public engagement office share innovations.

Top Strengths and Opportunities for South Carolina DOT

- **SCDOT’s Innovation Program is well-organized and promoted**, and the team is dedicated, passionate and open to new ideas. Participants agreed that expanding the Innovation Program agencywide as already planned, helping new areas understand what innovation might look like for them, and welcoming innovations big and small are great next steps.
- **In addition to strong leadership support**, leveraging the substantial collaboration with partners including FHWA and SCLTAP, and the close working relationship with SCDOT’s public engagement staff adds significant value to the program’s implementation.
- **SCDOT’s showcase video** and other promotional materials are fantastic and the agency could consider a marketing plan for a year-round approach.
- **SCDOT would benefit from district coordinators**, an internal innovation community of practice, or other “Innovation Champions” to support and promote SCDOT’s innovation program in all aspects.
- **SCDOT could promote innovation with additional methods** such as a tile on the SCDOT Intranet homepage, a program logo and taglines, and message boards.
- **Highlighting innovation winners as subject matter experts** at subsequent showcases, in districts, and at other conferences would provide strong inspiration across the agency for all to innovate.

NOTABLE QUOTES

Throughout the meeting, participants shared several memorable quotes and concepts:

Being an agent of change is the best job I've ever had—it's cool; I'm proud; it's fun.

— Indiana DOT

Everyone at MnDOT is an "MN-ovator"—problem solver, problem preventor, continuous improver, or inventor of a new future.

— Minnesota DOT

People who are experiencing the problem have an opportunity to solve the problem.

— Missouri DOT

Get innovations out there, and turn them into best practices that every district can use.

— Texas DOT

Every one of our districts and division offices innovates in some way. Our goal is a sustained culture of innovation and year-round creativity.

— South Carolina DOT

South Carolina Research and Innovation has done a great job of welcoming innovations, no matter how big or small.

— FHWA

Innovation can be within research, research can be within innovation, they can be completely separate, or they can be the same exact thing.

— CTC & Associates

Even small things become important innovations if they're done over and over.

— Minnesota DOT

If one innovation saves one life, it's worth it.

— Missouri DOT

MEETING OVERVIEW AND ORGANIZATION

South Carolina DOT (SCDOT) hosted a peer exchange from October 27 through 29, 2025, to discuss topics related to transportation innovation programs with other state DOTs, the FHWA, and other guests. The meeting and the subsequent publication of this report support continued growth of SCDOT's Innovation Program and full implementation of the agency's Innovation Challenge.

The peer exchange meeting and report were funded by the federal State Transportation Innovation Councils (STIC) Incentive Program funding with the required 20% match by SCDOT.

Peer exchange revolved around four focus points related to transportation innovation program.

1. [Focus Point 1 — Identifying Innovation](#): Considerations included types of innovations, submission requirements, and approval parameters.
2. [Focus Point 2 — Recognizing and Rewarding Innovations](#): Evaluation of innovations, the processes of competitions, and types of awards were issues under this topic.
3. [Focus Point 3 — Sharing Innovations](#): Discussed issues related to scope of innovation information shared, platforms, and strategies to disseminate the information.
4. [Focus Point 4 — Inspiring Innovation](#): Topics included how innovation programs have evolved, program benefits to DOTs, and creating a culture of innovation across agency functions and forums.

Throughout discussion of the four peer exchange focus points and at the end of the event, all participants had opportunities to complete Report-Out Worksheets to reflect upon, record and share [Opportunities for South Carolina DOT](#), note areas where South Carolina DOT is already excelling and leading, and identify areas for growth and improvement. Participants also recorded and shared their key takeaways.

PEER EXCHANGE PARTICIPANTS

The peer exchange included SCDOT, Clemson University (SCLTAP; Department of Construction and Real Estate Development), four guest state DOTs, one consulting firm, and the FHWA South Carolina Division Office, in order to represent a variety of agencies and perspectives. The following individuals participated in one or more of the sessions:

Host State DOT

South Carolina Department of Transportation

Clay Richter, Director of Construction

Merrill Zwanka, Materials and Research Engineer

Terry Swygert, Research Engineer

Daniel Cook, Innovation Manager

Jade Watford, Research Manager

Payton Lewis, Public Information Officer

Clemson University

Shaun Gaines, Director, SCLTAP

Dr. Joe Burgett, Professor, Department of Construction and Real Estate Development,
Clemson University

Nurudeen Lawal, Doctoral Student, Department of Construction and Real Estate
Development, Clemson University, Clemson University

Guest State DOTs

Indiana Department of Transportation

Todd May, Director of innovation and Process Improvement

Minnesota Department of Transportation

Katie Walker, Director of Research and Innovation

Missouri Department of Transportation

Kelly Backues, Statewide Innovations Challenge Coordinator

Texas Department of Transportation

Kevin Pete, Director, Research and Technology Implementation Division

Federal Highway Administration

South Carolina Division Office

David Cook, Performance and Asset Management Specialist

Transportation Research Consulting Firm

CTC & Associates LLC

Brian Hirt, Principal and CEO

Staff from CTC & Associates also documented the peer exchange.

FORMAT

Meeting participants (Figure 1) attended the in-person peer exchange in downtown Greenville, South Carolina. The meeting agenda for the three-day event is included as [Appendix A](#) to this report.

Prior to the meeting, participants were provided questions corresponding to each of SCDOT's four focus points. The questions, reproduced under each focus point discussion below, framed the agencies' program overviews and guided discussions of SCDOT's Innovation Program.

For each focus point discussion, SCDOT first presented its current practices, interest, and questions for innovation programs. Each state DOT participant then described how the focus

area is addressed in their program and discussed strengths and opportunities for SCDOT related to the focus topic. CTC & Associates participated as a subject matter expert.

Throughout discussions and at the meeting's conclusion, all participants identified current and potential roles of agency public engagement offices and their takeaways for consideration in their agencies.



Figure 1. Meeting participants

Pictured from left to right in Figure 1 are Jade Watford, Peyton Lewis, Daniel Cook, Clay Richter, Todd May, Kevin Pete, Merrill Zwanka, Terry Swygert, David Cook, Brian Hirt, Kelly Backues, Shaun Gaines, Katie Walker, Joe Burgett, Nurudeen Lawal.

INTRODUCTORY PRESENTATIONS

To establish a mutual understanding among participants and prepare for focus point discussions, SCDOT and each of the four guest state DOTs gave prepared presentations describing their innovation programs in the context of the discussion focus points. State DOT focus point highlights are presented in each focus point section. Throughout the presentations, a number of websites and resources were mentioned. These are mentioned for quick reference as [Appendix B](#) to this report

Peer exchange team members also shared their program strengths and challenges, and addressed questions posed by SCDOT beforehand in these topic areas:

- *Longevity, funding, and staffing of innovation program.*
- *Innovation program within agency structure and relationship with FHWA, EDC, and STIC.*
- *Expectations for peer exchange.*

CTC & Associates provided an overview of the intersection of research and innovation and highlights of innovation research including an NCHRP synthesis, No Boundaries Transportation Pooled Fund study, and Iowa DOT’s peer exchange.

The six introductory presentations are available as appendices for download from the SCDOT Research & Innovation website.

Appendix C. [South Carolina DOT Overview, Terry Swygert, Dan Cook, Peyton Lewis](#)

Appendix D. [Indiana DOT Overview, Todd May](#)

Appendix E. [Minnesota DOT Overview, Katie Walker](#)

Appendix F. [Missouri DOT Overview, Kelly Backues](#)

Appendix G. [Texas DOT Overview, Kevin Pete](#)

Appendix H. [CTC & Associates Overview, Brian Hirt](#)

HANDS-ON INNOVATION OPPORTUNITY: CLEMSON’S DRONE TRAINING PROGRAM

An illustration of how SCDOT’s Research Unit encourages innovation across and beyond the agency is through research on the application and benefits of drones. A joint effort between SCDOT and Clemson University, [Transfer of Unmanned Aircraft Systems \(UAS\) Technology to SCDOT for Enhanced Bridge Inspections](#), resulted in the development of online training and a hands-on boot camp to give SCDOT inspectors tools and skills to use high-resolution imaging for safer, more effective inspection practices. This research project won a prestigious AASHTO High Value Research Award in 2025.

An [SCDOT Research Summary](#) further explains the project need, outcome and benefits:

This project enhanced bridge inspection by integrating UAS technology, expanding on a 2018 pilot study. Key objectives included developing a UAS flight proficiency assessment, implementing a training program, and providing commercial-grade UASs to SCDOT bridge inspectors. Training combined online [FAA Part 107 Remote Pilot Certificate] prep with in-person bootcamps. The assessment featured scenario-based questions and control exercises. Of 21 participants, 20 passed the Part 107 exam. A satisfaction survey showed that 92% of the participants would recommend the workshop to a colleague.

On the afternoon of the second day of the peer exchange, Dr. Joe Burgett from Clemson University led a presentation on this project (Figure 2). After reviewing the research process and outcomes, he stepped meeting participants through the checklist procedures for planning and executing a photogrammetry flight mission with a drone.



Figure 2. Dr. Joe Burgett providing the pre-flight briefing

Immediately following the presentation and mission briefing, Dr. Burgett and the participants took part in a technical demonstration of the drones at nearby Unity Park in Greenville (Figure 3). All meeting attendees had the opportunity to pilot one of three drones at an altitude of 50, 75 or 100 feet while taking care to follow pre-, mid- and post-mission checklist steps.



Figure 3. Technical demonstration of drone photogrammetry mission at Unity Park

ADDITIONAL SHARING OPPORTUNITIES

Throughout the peer exchange, participants had opportunities through prepared presentations, Q-and-A sessions, round table discussions and live polling (Figure 4) to share their thoughts on state DOT innovation programs.



Figure 4. Attendees' responses to the prompt, "Provide a word to describe – or describe how you feel about – your agency's innovation program."

FOCUS POINT 1 — IDENTIFYING INNOVATION

OVERVIEW

Participants discussed how state DOTs in attendance at the peer exchange identify innovations as part of their innovation programs. These discussions happened throughout the event as part of the Day 1 presentations, during the Day 2 group discussions, and in the Day 3 report-out round table.

To drive the discussion of **Focus Point 1 — Identifying Innovation**, SCDOT provided the following questions in advance of the meeting.

- *How do you identify innovations?*
- *Do you accept innovations from any area of your agency? Are there any special requirements?*
- *Is the program for DOT only or do you include cities and counties?*
- *Do you have an Innovation Challenge or similar type of competition?*
- *Do you have a submission period, or do you accept innovations year-round?*
- *How are innovations submitted? Do you have a physical or digital submission form? What information is required?*
- *How are innovations vetted for safety concerns?*
- *Do you require supervisor or Director approval when innovations are submitted?*
- *Does your Public Engagement Office assist in this phase of your program?*
- *Do you get any assistance from your agency's LTAP Center?*

Discussion highlights presented below include challenges and best practices, working with communications programs, and potential next steps for SCDOT and guest participants.

DISCUSSIONS AND FINDINGS

The peer exchange provided a collaborative platform for sharing experiences, successes, and challenges in how participating DOT innovation programs identify innovations throughout the agencies. Attendees discussed the differences and similarities of their own programs and innovation competitions, as well as the ideas and strategies that have worked well within their own agency.

Focus point findings are grouped into these sections:

- Common challenges that emerged and the best practices that resonated with the participants.
- Current and potential future roles for public engagement staff.
- Next steps identified by SCDOT during and following the peer exchange.
- Next steps identified by guest participants in both group discussions and report-out forms.

Strengths and additional opportunities for SCDOT appear in the concluding chapter of the report.

Common Challenges and Promising Best Practices

Challenge: Identifying types and sources of innovations within the agency.

- **Innovation can come from anywhere and anyone** within the agency. MnDOT recognized that “everyone is an innovator.”
- **Innovation categories** help illustrate the wide scope of potential innovation across an agency, from district maintenance garages to DOT central offices.
 - MoDOT has three innovation categories: (1) Crafting or fabricating tools and equipment, (2) Enhancing productivity through process, materials, or product changes, and (3) Innovative projects driven by need or management directive.
 - Process-oriented innovations are an important category, though they can be complex and have broader implications.

Challenge: Encouraging broad participation across the agency in submitting innovations for competitions.

- **Discussions highlighted** overarching agency goals or plans that refer to innovation.
 - *Innovation* is a component of all participating DOT mission, vision, or strategy statements, such as INDOT’s Vision:

Be a leading innovator in transportation, with an exceptional workforce, that is driven by connecting Hoosiers with the world.
- **Ask leadership** to send out all-employee emails introducing innovation competition to demonstrate that innovation is an agency priority.
 - Agency leaders can play additional roles in promoting innovation, such as TxDOT’s Executive Director who highlights innovations in regular videos.
 - Ensure leadership at all levels can identify innovations that may be happening to encourage staff participation.
- **Outreach tools** such as posters, website banners or tiles, newsletters, and lunchtime webinars can advertise innovation competitions and encourage submissions.
 - Agency communications staff can support production of videos introducing the innovation program and competition or highlighting previous winners or other innovations, such as in [SCDOT’s 2025 Innovation Showcase video](#).
 - Telling stories through interviews can inspire others and can be used to demonstrate that “no idea is too small.”

- Outreach content, including the range of potential innovations and testimonials from previous participants can spark wider interest in participation.
- **Visits to district offices**, attending meetings of district staff or leadership, and creating friendly competition among districts encourages field participation in innovation competitions.
 - [MoDOT's District Innovation Coordinators](#) are an effective way to share innovation program and competition information across the agency.

Challenge: Ensuring submission forms and processes provide necessary information and are easy for all staff to use.

- **Consider the information** required for a submission, such as materials and parts lists.
- **Submission formats can vary**, from hand-written documents to videos or photos, which may communicate the nature of the innovation more clearly. Some submitters may be more comfortable orally describing a project than writing about their innovation.
- **Submission criteria** may vary depending on type of innovation (e.g., process or tool).
- **Understand the potential impacts** of requiring supervisor approval for submission and consider alternatives such as screenings based on safety or other criteria. Allowing INDOT employees to submit innovations directly, for example, avoids potential barriers related to reluctance to try new things.

Possible Public Engagement Office Roles in Identifying Innovation

- **Produce program videos** to illustrate and highlight the value and benefit of innovation in the agency.
- **Facilitate communications** announcing innovation competitions and sending reminders to participate.
- **Create posters and other printed materials**, website tiles or banners, and other broad-reaching communication tools.
- **Assist employees** in creating and transmitting videos as part of innovation submissions and/or produce a video or other instructions on how to make a submittal video.

Possible Next Steps Identified by SCDOT

- **Recognizing that every district and division office** at SCDOT is innovative and should be represented in the challenge, Research and Innovation (R&I) staff will encourage potential innovation submitters.
 - Increase field visits to enhance and build relationships.

- Reach out to newly eligible offices to share challenge information prior to the submission period.
- Request to attend pre-scheduled meetings (e.g., safety or staff meetings) or host a dedicated meeting to present the challenge, before or after submission period.
- Continue involving middle management to promote participation and support their staff with submissions.
- Track submissions from each area and send targeted reminders to those with lower participation rates.
- **To expand the Innovation Challenge** department-wide, the initial challenge announcement email could ideally come from the department’s Secretary of Transportation and go to all SCDOT employees.
 - R&I staff can work with the Office of Public Engagement to create a video to accompany the initial kick-off email, including an appearance from the Secretary of Transportation, to explain the submission process, highlight past examples of tool and process innovations, and emphasize newly eligible offices.
 - An interview with a past winner answering questions regarding their inspiration for their submission and what innovation means to them could help encourage participation.
- **Advertise the challenge** on high-traffic internal web pages including the agency’s Intranet home page, Director of Maintenance/Construction pages, and district pages.
- **Retain the successful poster format** used in 2024 and 2025 and print, deliver, and hang posters in each district and division office’s high-traffic areas such as on message boards, in restrooms, and in elevators.
- **A second video for the Innovation Challenge** website could provide guidance for submitters and demonstrate how to create and upload a video.
- **Identify local champions throughout the agency** to assist with communication regarding the innovation program and encourage participation.

Possible Next Steps Identified by Guest Participants

Each suggestion below is followed by the guest participant or participants who offered it, as identified by their organization. Some points represent a combination of ideas from multiple participants.

- **Engage agency leadership to build support** for the innovation program and to encourage participation. (InDOT, TxDOT)
- **Develop or enhance relationships** with public engagement office staff to take advantage of the valuable outreach and communications support they can provide. (InDOT)

- **Identify innovation submission categories** that span operational and functional areas within the agency. (InDOT, CTC)
- **Incorporate QR codes on posters** and other materials to link to more information. (MoDOT, CTC)
- **Request or require a video** explaining the innovation submission and why the innovation was needed. (TxDOT)
- **Motivate additional participation** with testimonials from innovation awardees or innovator explanations of need in videos or other promotional materials. (InDOT, MnDOT)
- **Engage in friendly peer pressure.** Reach out to districts and programs with low or no participation to encourage innovation. (InDOT, MoDOT)

FOCUS POINT 2 — RECOGNIZING AND REWARDING INNOVATION

OVERVIEW

Strategies of state DOTs in attendance at the peer exchange to recognize and reward innovations as part of their innovation programs were discussed throughout the event as part of the Day 1 presentations, during the Day 2 group discussions, and in the Day 3 report-out round table.

To drive the discussion of **Focus Point 2 — Recognizing and Rewarding Innovation** SCDOT provided the following questions in advance of the meeting:

- *Who judges/reviews the innovations?*
- *Do you separate innovations by type (e.g. tool vs process)?*
- *What is the evaluation method (e.g. scoresheet, rankings, etc.)?*
- *What criteria are used to evaluate innovations? Does this vary by department or innovation type?*
- *How many awards were given in your most recent cycle? Does the number vary by year, or is it fixed?*
- *How many innovations were received in your most recent cycle?*
- *How are awards named or categorized (e.g., 1st, 2nd, 3rd place; Top 10; by county; by department; honorable mentions)?*
- *What do winners receive? (e.g., monetary awards, trophies, stickers)?*
- *How are the awards perceived by both upper management and innovators?*
- *Do you have a showcase or event to share innovations?*
 - *Do all innovators participate, or only the winners?*
 - *Are innovators' family members invited?*
 - *Who from your agency or the industry is invited to attend?*
 - *What is displayed (e.g., posters, physical innovations, videos, etc.)?*
- *Does your Public Engagement Office assist in this phase of your program?*
- *Do you receive any assistance from your agency's LTAP Center?*
- *Do you send out a survey following your Innovation Competition?*
 - *If so, how have you responded to any feedback?*

Discussion highlights presented below include challenges and best practices, working with communications programs, and potential next steps for SCDOT and guest participants.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Peer Exchange attendees discussed ideas, strategies, and challenges involved in how participating DOT innovation programs recognize and reward innovation in their agencies. As

with previous chapters, this one is organized into common challenges and best practices to address them, the possible role of the public engagement office, potential next steps identified by SCDOT, and possible next steps identified by guest participants.

Common Challenges and Promising Best Practices

Challenge: Ensuring innovation submissions are properly vetted and fairly evaluated to encourage ongoing participation.

- **Safety is first** among all participating state DOTs in evaluating innovation submissions.
 - All submissions at MoDOT are reviewed by a safety lead and supporting team, followed by reviews for compliance with engineering and other guidelines, policies, and regulations.
 - INDOT's evaluation starts with safety and includes the state of development, potential benefits, and market readiness.
- **Consistent scoring criteria** helps set the expectations of innovation submitters, such as SCDOT's criteria ratings of 1 to 10 for increased safety, improved efficiency, cost savings, and ingenuity.
 - Flexibility with criteria and allowing submissions to include a narrative accommodates differences across categories or programs and submittals are not discouraged by a process perceived as too structured.
 - MnDOT innovation submissions are rated based on agency goals such as transportation equity, sustainability, and stewardship (asset management).
 - MoDOT's five judges for each of three categories range from senior leadership to maintenance crew supervisors and evaluate submissions based on originality, safety, productivity and customer service, and conserving resources.

Challenge: Determining awards for innovation categories that create incentives to participate and reflect appropriate recognition.

- **Monetary awards** to individuals and teams create significant motivation, particularly when the awards remain consistent and are advertised when the competition is announced.
 - If resources allow, awards for each innovation category or a tiered award system may increase participant interest.
 - Absent ability or approval for monetary awards, alternatives might include MnDOT's practices of requesting achievement awards, step increases, or using year-end funding to provide bonuses for innovation winners.
- **Non-monetary rewards** can provide meaningful recognition, team building, and employee engagement.

- INDOT provides decals and professionally printed signs—for individuals, teams, or districts—to allow winners to advertise their accomplishments.
- Symbolic items and gestures can enhance good-natured competition and create energy and excitement. Traveling trophies used by MoDOT are effective at motivating spirited inter-district or office competition, and peer exchange participants liked SCDOT’s practice of unveiling signs on easels announcing winners at innovation showcases.
- Superlative-oriented awards can signify respect and provide targeted recognition. MnDOT’s categories include “Innovation of the year,” “Upgrade award for adaptive Innovation,” “Flow award for process improvement,” “Spark award for inventive innovation,” and “People’s choice.”

Challenge: Organizing and hosting well-attended showcase events that recognize innovators, highlight the innovation program, and illustrate benefits to the agency.

- **Increasing showcase attendance** with a variety of invitees, as space allows, can increase interest and participation in innovation.
 - By including the entire senior management team, MoDOT signifies that innovation is an agency priority and participants will be recognized.
 - Inviting district and field staff, whether or not they submitted an innovation, can broaden perspectives and encourage broad interest.
 - Several attendees appreciated the idea of inviting family members of innovator contestants, as suggested by SCDOT, to add enthusiasm, boost morale, and generate employee pride.
 - Inviting students or newer employees can be a recruitment and retention tool, as recognized by MnDOT.
 - Several peer exchange participants supported the idea of inviting past innovation winners to attend, speak, or present their perspectives and updates on their innovations as a strategy to motivate other employees.
- **Showcase event practices** can enhance the competitions and participant experiences, and support innovation program outreach.
 - TxDOT opens its showcase to vendors to display or demonstrate new or innovative products.
 - Providing food—SCDOT provides breakfast and lunch; MoDOT provides lunch—can be a popular draw and enhance social connections.
 - Capturing images or videos of innovators with agency leadership can be a significant recognition tool and motivation for other employees.

- Consider asking innovation contestants if they would be willing to describe their innovation and their motivations in a presentation or other format.
- Multiple, smaller showcase events can provide a forum for recognition and reward for innovation, such as LTAP events or INDOT’s summertime district events.

Possible Public Engagement Office Roles in Recognizing and Rewarding Innovation

- **Assist employees** with showcase displays.
- **Take videos and candid photos** at the showcase and any awards ceremony.
- **Interview innovators and winners**, exploring their motivations and creating incentives for other employees.

Next Steps Identified by SCDOT

- **Consider ideas to expand** the capacity of the SCDOT Innovation Council, which reviews and evaluates innovations:
 - Keep the Innovation Council as is and engage subject matter experts from across the agency as needed, as suggested by TxDOT.
 - Add an Innovation Council member from Headquarters who oversees department-wide activities and could communicate closely with agency leadership, suggested by INDOT and MnDOT.
- **Continue using successful scoring criteria** and allowing the Innovation Council flexibility in scoring and selecting winners to ensure that offices across agency functions are fairly compared.
- **Enhance SCDOT’s culture of innovation and competitive spirit** surrounding the challenge by considering a “traveling” award like MoDOT’s to encourage competition among districts and offices and following INDOT’s recommendation to ask leadership to help foster friendly competition banter among districts and offices.
- **Increase participation** and demonstrate SCDOT’s ongoing commitment to innovation by following MoDOT’s example of making the monetary bonuses winners received in both 2024 and 2025 consistent from year-to-year and confirming them prior to submission period.
- **Support the Innovation Program’s agencywide expansion** and continue with the successful showcase layout and logistics:
 - Consider allowing each district and offices to send a few additional employees, similar to the SCDOT Research Topic Solicitation Forum.
 - Explore the possibility of inviting college students or interns to support workforce development.

- Investigate the potential of allowing innovators to invite a family member (INDOT and MnDOT may also consider).
- Invite past innovators to speak during the morning presentation or potentially display their posters in the 2026 showcase.

Next Steps Identified by Guest Participants

Each suggestion below is followed by the guest participant or participants who offered it, as identified by their organization. Some points represent a combination of ideas from multiple participants.

- **Revisit scoring and evaluation criteria** for innovation submissions to balance objective and fair judging process with flexibility to accommodate innovation types across the agency. (InDOT, TxDOT)
- **Incorporate rotating awards** to motivate friendly competition across the agency, in addition to consistent monetary awards. (MnDOT, TxDOT)
- **Create powerful recognition tools**, such as banners or signs for award winners and innovation demonstrations, for use at showcases and beyond. (MnDOT, MoDOT, TxDOT)
- **Explore other invitees for showcase events**, such as innovator family members, students, and a variety of field and program staff. (InDOT, MnDOT, TxDOT)
- **Hold district-specific events** to recognize innovations. (TxDOT)
- **Increase collaboration with communications** staff on messaging, awareness and participation, and showcase event support. (TxDOT, CTC)

FOCUS POINT 3 — SHARING INNOVATION

OVERVIEW

Peer Exchange attendees discussed consideration and strategies for sharing innovations across the agency, including what, when, and how sharing occurs. Discussions related to sharing innovations happened throughout the event as part of the Day 1 presentations, during the Day 2 group discussions, and in the Day 3 report-out round table.

To drive the discussion of **Focus Point 3 — Sharing Innovation**, SCDOT provided the following questions in advance of the meeting:

- *What information about the innovations is shared e.g. (materials/cost lists, technical sketches, construction guides, how-to videos, etc.)?*
 - *Is this done for all innovations or just the winners?*
 - *Where is this information displayed or shared?*
 - *Is this information required at time of submission, or collected afterward?*
- *What platforms or strategies do you use to share information across your agency and externally (e.g., videos, website, newsletter, booklets, etc.)?*
- *How effective are these platforms/strategies in engaging the appropriate recipients of the information?*
- *Who is involved in sharing the information and implementing innovations statewide? Is this encouraged by DOT leadership?*
 - *Does your Public Engagement Office assist in sharing innovations?*
 - *Do you receive any assistance from your agency's LTAP Center?*

Discussion highlights presented below include challenges and best practices, working with communication programs, and potential next steps for SCDOT and guest participants.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Peer Exchange attendees shared ideas, strategies, and challenges involved in how participating DOT innovation programs share innovations within their agencies, with local partners, and on a national level. As with previous chapters, this one is organized into common challenges and best practices to address them, the possible role of the public engagement office, potential next steps identified by SCDOT, and possible next steps identified by guest participants.

Strengths and additional opportunities for SCDOT appear in the concluding chapter.

Common Challenges and Promising Best Practices

Challenge: Sharing innovations agency wide to both create innovation culture and ensure innovations reach the staff members who need them.

- **Identify and offer to present** innovation information at regular division or program meetings around the agency, like MnDOT’s practice of sharing at annual operations and maintenance district meetings and monthly manager group meetings.
- **Be an innovation champion** by sharing innovations and encouraging participation throughout the agency, like TxDOT’s internal Innovation Community of Practice (ICOP).
- **Consider meeting staff where they are**, highlighting the subject matter of an innovation in addition to encouraging innovation for innovation’s sake.
- **Recognize the importance** of innovation implementation, both as a sharing strategy and to realize the benefits of new ways of doing business.
 - INDOT’s innovation team facilitates a systems engineering process to move winning innovations towards implementation and encourages winners to act as subject matter experts, training other districts and assist with developing standard operating procedures for their innovations.
 - MoDOT makes outstanding innovations that improve safety and reduce costs mandatory statewide and MoDOT’s internal “Innovations Store” allows districts to spend set budgets on new innovative tools.

Challenge: Sharing innovations outside the agency to transfer benefits locally and nationally.

- **Collaborating with LTAPs** can support showcasing and distributing innovations to local governments and others outside a state DOT, both through regular operations and events.
- **Consider submitting** state DOT innovation winners for national awards, such as FHWA’s [Build a Better Mousetrap](#), or adopt TxDOT’s practice of sharing innovations with the national (AASHTO) ICOP.
- **Advocate for and support** national efforts to collect innovations across all state DOTs and organize into an accessible repository.

Possible Public Engagement Office Roles in Sharing Innovation

- **Share seasonal or geographical innovations** on messages board or other mechanisms in field and program offices.
- **Share innovations at forums hosted by Public Engagement**, such as SCDOT’s [Transportation Forum](#).
- **Assist employees in preparing submissions** to present innovations at state and national conferences.

Next Steps Identified by SCDOT

- **Sharing innovations and encouraging implementation** at both the state and national levels are an important focus for 2026.

- **Identify a point of contact or champion** in each district and office to encourage adoption of winning innovations.
- **Work with innovators** to submit all information necessary for implementation (e.g., cost lists, sketches) as part of the submission form and continue assisting winning innovators in developing Standard Operating Procedures or “how-to guides” for implementation.
- **Coordinate with SCLTAP** to distribute winning innovations to counties and cities.
- **Collect website traffic data** to inform decisions regarding communication and sharing.

Next Steps Identified by Guest Participants

Each suggestion below is followed by the guest participant or participants who offered it, as identified by their organization. Some points represent a combination of ideas from multiple participants.

- **Create short videos** of interviews with competition winners to share their innovations’ benefits and use and encourage other employees. (InDOT, MnDOT, TxDOT)
- **Participate in regular virtual or in-person meetings** of other divisions, programs, or districts, to share innovations and innovation program news. (MnDOT)
- **Consider if and how to move** winning highly beneficial innovations to best practices, including developing standard operating procedures and performance tracking. (MnDOT, TxDOT)
- **Explore or enhance collaboration** with LTAP to broaden innovation program perspectives and increase reach for sharing innovations. (MoDOT, CTC)
- **Submit innovations to AASHTO** and other transportation news publications. (InDOT, TxDOT)

FOCUS POINT 4 — INSPIRING INNOVATION

OVERVIEW

Participants shared overarching thoughts, ideas, and strategies for inspiring innovation across their agencies. These discussions happened throughout the event as part of the Day 1 presentations, during the Day 2 group discussions, and in the Day 3 report-out round table.

To drive the discussion of **Focus Point 4 — Inspiring Innovation**, SCDOT provided the following questions in advance of the meeting:

- *How has the innovation program benefited your DOT?*
- *How has your program grown or evolved since its creation? How did you overcome major hurdles?*
- *Is innovation incorporated in other DOT events or conferences (besides your own showcase)?*
- *How does your DOT leadership advocate for inspiring a culture of innovation?*
- *What feedback do you have for SCDOT as we prepare to expand our challenge department-wide?*

Discussion highlights presented below include strategies for inspiring an innovative agency culture, working with communication programs, and potential next steps for SCDOT and guest participants.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Peer exchange attendees shared considerations and methods for inspiring ongoing innovation across a state DOT. In addition to overarching considerations, many strategies brought up in this session were reiterated from previous discussions on identifying, sharing, and recognizing innovation.

As with previous chapters, this one is organized into common challenges and best practices to address them, the possible role of the public engagement office, potential next steps identified by SCDOT, and possible next steps identified by guest participants.

Strengths and additional opportunities for SCDOT appear in the concluding chapter.

Common Challenges and Promising Best Practices

- **Strategies implementable and applicable across a DOT** support a culture where all employees feel encouraged to innovate in carrying out their duties.
 - SCDOT's program expansion to include all agency programs and offices will send a message that innovation can happen everywhere.
 - Including innovation as a metric in performance reviews encourages MnDOT employees to search for new ideas.

- **Showing appreciation to employees** for innovation efforts can help sustain motivation and create new interest in participation.
 - State DOT attendees were interested in the Utah DOT practice of providing all employees who submit innovation ideas, regardless of whether they win, with a customized thank you note signed by the agency director.
 - Celebrating successful innovations or improvements on previous innovations statewide is an effective morale booster at MoDOT.
- **Creating a fun atmosphere that rewards teamwork** in addition to individual innovative efforts assists in building and sustaining interest and excitement around innovation. Participants liked INDOT’s practice of friendly peer pressure based on observed participation rates.
- **Using consistent messaging and regular communications** highlighting innovations and advertising competition submission periods illustrates innovation as an ongoing agency priority.

Possible Public Engagement Office Roles in Inspiring Innovation

- **Assist innovation programs** with non-traditional ideas such as podcasts or other regular short videos, such as a variety of staff and managers answering the question, “What does innovation look like to you?” or staff sharing innovations with other staff.

Next Steps Identified by SCDOT

- **Creating a culture of innovation** requires inspiring creativity year-round and fostering innovation in the “off” season, not just during the submission period.
- **Public Engagement staff could help** launch an “Innovation” column in *The Connector* newsletter, perhaps with a seasonal innovation featured each month, similar to MnDOT and MoDOT practices.
- **The next year’s challenge could be advertised** as soon as the current one concludes, potentially using countdowns to build excitement and stay relevant.
- **Consider sending personalized “thank you” cards** to all participants, signed by the Secretary of Transportation or other leadership.
- **The R&I Unit can present at SCDOT events** upon invitation, such as conferences or leadership retreats.
- **Engage with districts or offices** with lower participation throughout the year. The R&I Unit plans to increase visits in 2026 and will consider an “innovation tour” of many offices over a short period.

Next Steps Identified by Guest Participants

Each suggestion below is followed by the guest participant or participants who offered it, as identified by their organization. Some points represent a combination of ideas from multiple participants.

- **Produce videos interviewing innovators** to illustrate their creations and motivations by telling their story in their voice. (InDOT, MnDOT)
- **Follow up with innovation winners** for updates on implementation or other next steps, such as fine tuning their innovations. (InDOT)
- Consider sending personalized “thank you” cards to all participants, signed by the Secretary of Transportation or other leadership. (MnDOT, TxDOT, CTC)
- **Advocate for increased communication from leadership** about innovation campaigns and events, and increased collaboration with communications division. (MnDOT)
- **Track levels of participation** from districts and offices in innovation competitions to coax increased participation. (TxDOT)

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOUTH CAROLINA DOT

A measure of a successful peer exchange is how the host state learns from others and identifies the tools and practices that may help overcome challenges and grow its program. Throughout the peer exchange and in submitted report-out forms, attendees praised the many impressive achievements of the SCDOT Innovation program and highlighted strategies to address the challenges and answer the questions that SCDOT had presented.

To frame the concluding discussion and encourage feedback regarding **Strengths and Opportunities** for the agency, SCDOT provided the following wrap-up questions in advance of the meeting:

- *What is the “highlight” of your program that other DOTs should take notice of?*
- *What strengths and opportunities for improvement have you identified from the SCDOT Innovation Program?*
- *What are your major takeaways from other participating DOTs?*

SOUTH CAROLINA DOT’S STRENGTHS

Participants noted the many ways that South Carolina DOT’s innovation program excels:

- **SCDOT’s Innovation Program ramped up quickly**, is well-organized and promoted, and the team is dedicated, passionate and open to new ideas. Participants agreed that expanding the Innovation Program agency-wide (Figure 5), helping new areas understand what innovation might look like for them, and welcoming innovations big and small are great next steps.

Beginning in 2026: The Innovation Program Goes Department-Wide!

Starting in 2026, every employee at SCDOT will have the opportunity to participate in the Innovation Program. Whether you’re working in the field, at a district office, or behind the scenes at headquarters — your ideas, insights, and creativity are essential to shaping the future of our agency.

This is your chance to:

- Share your innovative tools and processes
- Develop creative solutions that increase safety, efficiency, and cost savings
- Launch transformative initiatives
- Help build a stronger, smarter SCDOT

Stay tuned for more details on how to get involved.

Let’s think big, work together, and continue to spread a Culture of Innovation at SCDOT one idea at a time.

Figure 5. Announcement to expand South Carolina DOT's Innovation Program

- **In addition to strong leadership support**, leveraging the substantial collaboration with partners including FHWA and SCLTAP, and the close working relationship with SCDOT’s public engagement staff adds significant value to the program’s implementation.
- **Attendees were impressed** with SCDOT’s innovation submission process, evaluation rubric, and showcase details. Program staff’s follow up with winners supports expanded implementation of innovations.
- **Participants praised the SCDOT’s showcase video** and other promotional materials, and noted winning innovators received good recognition.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SOUTH CAROLINA DOT

Participants also offered suggestions to enhance South Carolina DOT’s innovation initiatives:

- **Written and digital endorsement and encouragement from leadership**, especially during the kickoff period, would support SCDOT’s Innovation Program expansion.
- **SCDOT would benefit from district coordinators**, an internal ICOP, or other “Innovation Champions” to support and promote SCDOT’s innovation program in all aspects.
- **SCDOT could consider a marketing plan** for a year-round approach. The innovation challenge should be promoted on a variety of digital and physical platforms, including SCDOT’s Intranet Homepage and other high-traffic webpages.
- **Highlighting innovation winners as subject matter experts** at subsequent showcases, in districts, and at other conferences would provide strong inspiration across the agency in addition to keeping the winners engaged.
- **Highlighting process improvement innovations** in marketing materials will encourage participation among newly eligible divisions.

APPENDIX A. AGENDA

South Carolina Department of Transportation Research and Innovation Peer Exchange “Creating a Culture of Innovation within your State Department of Transportation”

October 27-29, 2025 – Greenville, South Carolina

Monday Afternoon, October 27

Time	Session (Presenter/Lead)
12:00 – 12:15	Welcome and Introductions (Merrill Zwanka)
12:15 – 1:00	Lunch
1:00 – 1:15	Focus Points, Goals, Expectation, and Game Plan (Merrill Zwanka)
1:15 – 2:20	South Carolina Innovation Program Overview <ul style="list-style-type: none">• SCDOT Research and Innovation Unit (Terry Swygert/Dan Cook)• SCDOT Public Engagement (Peyton Lewis)• SCLTAP Center (Shaun Gaines)
2:20 – 3:00	Brief Overview of Participants’ Innovation Programs <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Indiana DOT (Todd May)• Minnesota DOT (Katie Walker)
3:00 – 3:30	Break
3:30 – 4:30	Brief Overview of Participants’ Innovation Programs, continued <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Missouri DOT (Kelly Backues)• Texas DOT (Kevin Pete)• CTC & Associates LLC (Brian Hirt)
4:30 – 5:00	Wrap-up and Announcements (Merrill Zwanka)

Tuesday Morning, October 28

Time	Session (Presenter/Lead)
8:30 – 9:45	Focus Point 1: Identifying Innovation (Merrill Zwanka)
9:45 – 10:00	Identification of Potential Takeaways, & Final Comments (Team)
10:00 – 10:15	Break
10:15 – 11:45	Focus Point 2: Recognizing & Rewarding Innovation (Merrill Zwanka)
11:45 – 12:00	Identification of Potential Takeaways, & Final Comments (Team)

Tuesday Afternoon, October 28

Time	Session (Presenter/Lead)
12:00 – 12:45	Lunch
12:45 – 1:15	Presentation on High Value Research Project, “Transfer of Unmanned Aircraft Technology to SCDOT for Enhanced Bridge Inspections” (Dr. Joe Burgett, Clemson University)
1:15 – 2:30	Unmanned Aircraft Demonstration - Unity Park (Dr. Joe Burgett)
2:30 – 3:15	Focus Point 3: Sharing Innovations (Merrill Zwanka)
3:15 – 3:30	Identification of Potential Takeaways, and Final Comments Team
3:30 – 3:45	Break
3:45 – 4:30	Focus Point 4: Inspiring Innovation (Merrill Zwanka)
4:30 – 4:45	Identification of Potential Takeaways, and Final Comments (Team)
4:45 – 5:00	Wrap-up and Announcements (Merrill Zwanka)

Wednesday Morning, October 29

Time	Session (Presenter/Lead)
8:30 – 10:00	Group Discussion, Identification of Potential Takeaways, and Final Comments (Team)
10:00 – 10:15	Break
10:15 – 10:45	Travel Expenses, Other Admin Activities (Shaun Gaines)
10:45 – 11:00	Closing Remarks (Merrill Zwanka)

APPENDIX B. INNOVATION RESOURCES

SCDOT and guest participants referenced Innovation Program websites and other resources related to identifying, recognizing and rewarding, sharing, and inspiring innovation.

South Carolina DOT

- [SCDOT Innovation Program](#)
- [SCDOT Research & Innovation](#)
- [SCDOT's 2025 Innovation Showcase video](#)

Indiana DOT

- [INDOT Innovation](#)
- [Indiana Local Innovation Masterminds Challenge](#)

Minnesota DOT

- [Office of Research and Innovation](#)
- [MnDOT Innovation Strategy](#)

Missouri DOT

- [MoDOT Innovation Program](#)
- [MoDOT Innovations Challenge](#)

Texas DOT

- [Innovative Transportation in Texas](#)
- [TxDOT Strategic Initiatives and Innovation Division](#)
- [Texas Innovation Alliance](#)

CTC & Associates LLC

- [No Boundaries Transportation Maintenance Innovations Pooled Fund Study \(TPF-5\(441\)\)](#)
 - [Study Phase III \(2020 to 2025\) Summary of Activities](#)
- [NCHRP Synthesis 633: Innovation Programs and Practices of State Departments of Transportation](#)
- [Transportation Innovation and Implementation, TR News, No. 351, Oct. – Dec. 2024.](#)
- [Iowa Department of Transportation, 2024 Innovation Peer Exchange](#)