

AUTOMATING THE PROCESS

Relocation Software Helps Streamline Uniform Act Compliance



BY DAVE LEONARD

With any relocation project, calculating the amount of compensation is a critical component. It must be fair and accurate, and it must follow regulatory compliance. For those working as relocation assistance specialists, the process had become tedious.

FACING THE ISSUES

The relocation assistance benefits provided to individuals, families, and businesses displaced as a result of public construction projects must be made in conformance with the Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of 1970 (Uniform Act).

Historically, the process used in calculating relocation assistance benefits was inconsistent from one agency to another. Even within the same agency, there were inconsistencies in the way the benefit determinations and calculations are reviewed and approved. There was a dire need for an automated system that would streamline methods while ensuring consistency and compliance.

Agencies were facing other issues that warranted an automated process, including attrition and retirements, the loss of institutional knowledge due to downsizing and an increase in projects carried out by local public agencies requiring stewardship and oversight. In addition, a significant increase in the number of relocations was projected over the next several years.

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES

In January 2006, the member agencies of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) validated the need for a software product to automate the benefit determination and calculation of relocation assistance benefits. After forming a task force, drafting an RFP, and selecting BEM as the contractor, a new software system was delivered on schedule and on budget.

Analogous to popular tax software, the newly-launched Turbo Relocation software performs the calculations using a step-

by-step approach that guides the user through the complex Uniform Act regulations. The software not only accelerates the process, it ensures consistency in applying the federal, state and local regulations in compliance with the Uniform Act, while meeting 90% of specific agency usage needs out of the box.

The system operates in a web-based networked environment and supports a standalone mode which facilitates field use. It is also auditable and fully complies with federal requirements. The software has been made available to any federal, state or local agency and includes two classes of relocations:

- 1) **Residential:** determines benefits for residential owner and tenant relocations for owner/occupants, tenants, mobile homes and personal property. It provides the ability to manage and use a common set of real estate comparable listings for rental and non-rental relocation processes.
- 2) **Non-Residential:** determines benefits for non-residential relocations, including business, farm, non-profit organization and personal property only.

POOLING RESOURCES

AASHTO, which acted as a catalyst to solicit interest in its member agencies, worked to form a consortium of 13 state agencies who would contribute funds equally for the software development. They included agencies from Alaska,

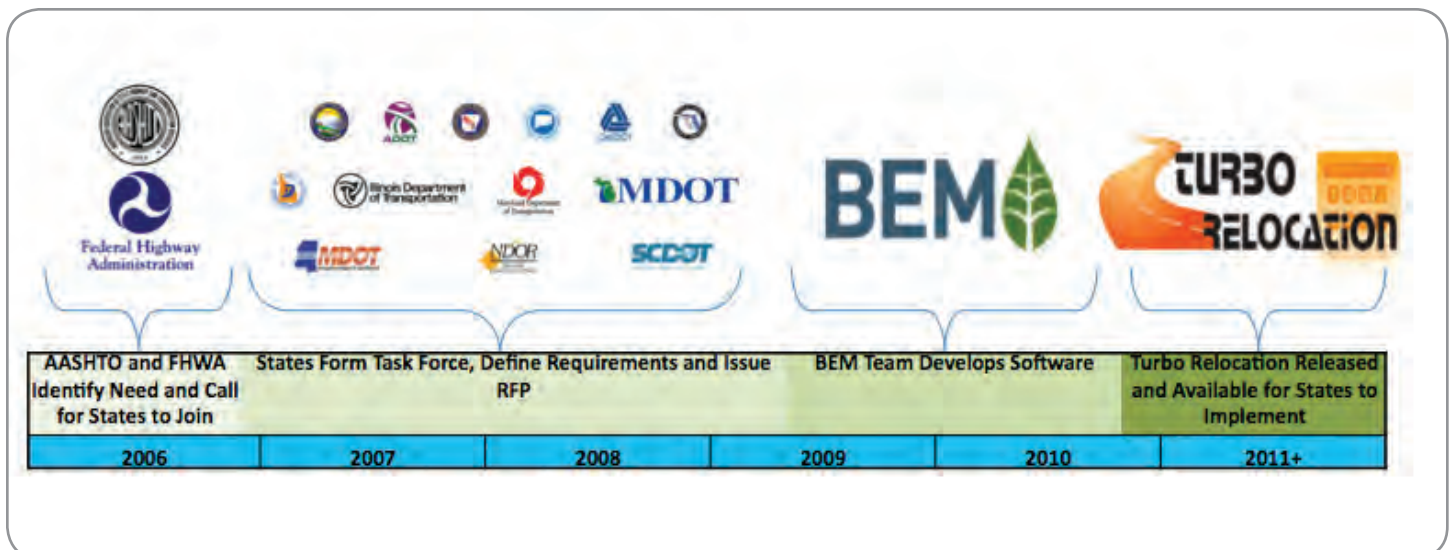
Arizona, Arkansas, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Nebraska and South Carolina. Nine of these states voluntarily contributed an expert in relocation to participate on the task force and oversee the software development.

By offering agencies across the U.S. the opportunity to combine financial and human resources, the project delivered enormous economies of scale. The shared savings could be applied to the initial development costs, as well as the long-term support and maintenance required throughout the product lifecycle.

The team established a consensus approach from the beginning, enabling each member to have an equal say in identifying the product needs, requirements and project decisions. Sabra Mousavi, Arizona Department of Transportation Chief Right of Way Agent and the Task Force Chair observed, “Coordinating nine task force members presented unique challenges, but there was a real sense of dedication from the team to develop a highly functional system and design it so that it could benefit all right of way agencies.”

BRINGING THE EXPERTS TOGETHER

The first step in developing the application was issuing a Request for Proposals. My company, BEM Systems Inc. (BEM) was selected based on their expertise in developing other right of way and property information management systems. Subject



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matter experts were added to the group, including FHWA representative Arnold Feldman, who provided guidance on the interpretation of the Uniform Act during the entire project. According to Arnold, “Consistency in relocation benefit computation is a critical part of ensuring that displaced persons receive appropriate Uniform Act benefits.”

The team met at critical development points to identify and discuss the issues and come to a consensus on how to address them. The working relationship was collaborative, and everyone on the task force shared a genuine willingness to be open-minded and responsive.

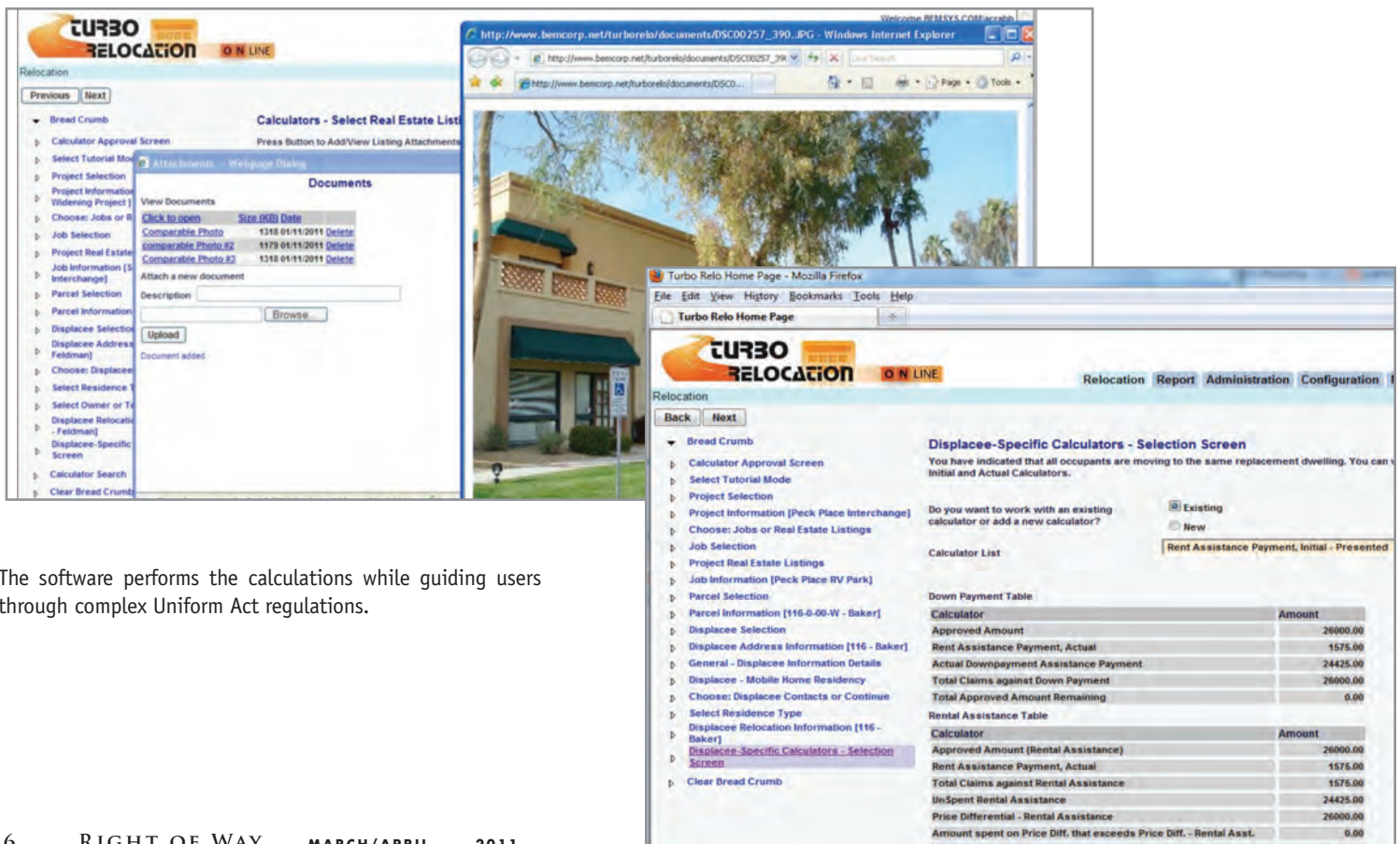
To reduce costs and improve communication, the team made extensive use of web conferencing and other technology. The frequent, interactive and lively dialog really maximized the involvement for each member of the team. As a result, everyone felt a sense of ownership.

Meeting each agency’s unique needs could have created some enormous obstacles. However, by ensuring each member had equal say, the task force was able to obtain consensus and

address nearly all the common needs that were identified by the agencies. The focus remained on developing a simple, user-friendly prototype. This was followed by extensive interactive team review, leading to alpha/beta testing to ensure the software met user expectations and Uniform Act requirements. The team also had the foresight to include the ability to integrate Turbo Relocation software with other database systems.

Upon completion of the test system installation, Don Grayson, Applications Development Manager at the Mississippi Department of Transportation was pleased to note that, “Turbo Relocation was so easy to set up that our regional office relocation testing team was using it within minutes of installation on our central web server.”

During the prototype and user testing phases, Tami Benson, SR/WA, RW-RAC, of Universal Field Services observed, “We were impressed with how seamlessly we were guided through the relocation process. The implementation of ‘bread crumbs’ on the left portion of the screen enables the user to navigate back to a screen they were at previously. It’s an innovative tool that can be used across the industry.”





Project Team from left, Carmen Reese, Idaho DOT; Annette McCrorey, South Carolina DOT; Kelly Ramirez, Michigan DOT; John Bennett, Alaska DOT; Tara Honold, Delaware DOT; Arnold Feldman, FHWA; Vicki Schofield, AASHTO; Sabra Mousavi (Chair), Arizona DOT; Gina Anthony, Maryland DOT; James Braden, Arkansas DOT; Kelly Rush, BEM; Andy Crabb, BEM and Dave Leonard, BEM.

Not pictured: Walter Mabry, Mississippi DOT; Daniel Belcher, Michigan DOT; Lisa Harrison, SR/WA, R/W-URAC, R/W-RAC, R/W-NAC of Pinnacle Consulting Group and Tami Benson, SR/WA, R/W-RAC of Universal Field Services, Inc.

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

With extraordinary teamwork across the participating state relocation experts, the BEM Team, FHWA and AASHTO were able to deliver a remarkable solution to the Uniform Act application problem. Several state agencies are actively deploying Turbo Relocation, including Arizona, Arkansas, Delaware, Idaho, Michigan and Nebraska. Many other state and federal agencies are planning to implement it in the near future.

Assisting the team with the Uniform Act requirements, Lisa Harrison, SR/WA, R/W-URAC, R/W-RAC, R/W-NAC, from Pinnacle Consulting Management Group noted, “The application needed to address a complex set of requirements and account for a multitude of relocation scenarios. Initially, I was skeptical that such a system could be developed, but the team did a great job of making it work.”

Tara Honold, Chief Information Officer for the Delaware Department of Transportation is a strong proponent of the software. She believes that, “Turbo Relocation has great potential for standardizing the right of way benefit computation process, as well as for making this process more efficient for relocation agents. Agencies will be able to better manage their relocation expenses and report accurately to state and federal regulators how they are spending relocation funds.”

The success of this project has laid the foundation for greater acceptance of collaborative development among the state transportation sector. This project really helped to substantiate the value of a consortium approach to software solutions. Task Force Chair Sabra Mousari summarized it best when she said, “I think we succeeded in accomplishing that goal and the end result is a product that exceeds our initial expectations.”

For more information about Turbo Relocation, contact Vicki Schofield, AASHTO Project Manager at vschofield@aaasho.org or Dave Leonard, BEM EMIS Director at dleonard@bemsys.com



Dave Leonard

With more than 30 years of experience in leading successful large-scale project delivery and software product development, Dave serves as the Director of Environmental Management Information Systems at BEM Systems. He is responsible for the company's software solutions business, including AASHTO Turbo Relocation and PAECETrak, a GIS-enabled solution for right of way acquisition and property management. Dave is skilled in managing diverse project teams, leveraging technology partners and industry experts, and he is recognized for bringing a collaborative approach to consortia-led software efforts.