



## ACCREDITATION PROGRAM GUIDELINES

The purpose of accreditation is to promote excellence in the operation and management of a public works agency, its programs, and employees. Accreditation is designed to assist the agency in continuous improvement of operations and management, and in providing a valid and objective evaluation of agency programs as a service to the public and the profession.

### Accreditation Council

The Accreditation Council determines the policies and criteria for accreditation, grants agency accreditation, and approves revisions to the *Public Works Management Practices Manual*.

The council is comprised of public works professionals and members of allied professions such as city/county management, government finance, law, public administration, human resource management, planning, and others involved in administration of local, regional, state, provincial and federal government agencies.

The number of members of allied professions may not exceed the number of public works professionals. Members of the council may not serve as accreditation or re-accreditation site evaluators during their term on the Council.

Should a member of the council be in a possible conflict of interest with respect to any public works agency scheduled for review by the council at any particular meeting, the member must recuse him or herself and not participate in any discussion or vote. Furthermore, the council may in its judgment determine that a member is in possible conflict of interest and ask that member to withdraw from discussion of and decision on a particular public works agency. All members of the council shall sign a Confidentiality and Conflict of Interest Agreement prior to service.

### Accreditation Process

The accreditation process includes five major phases:

1. Self-Assessment
2. Application
3. Improvement
4. Evaluation
5. Accreditation

#### 1. *Self-Assessment Phase*

The first step toward accreditation is the completion of a self-assessment process using the *Public Works Management Practices Manual*. Self-assessment is an internal review of an agency's practices combined with a comparison of the recommended practices contained in the manual. At the completion of the self-assessment, the agency will have a broad knowledge of its strengths and areas where improvement is needed to bring the agency into compliance with the recommended practices. To become accredited, the results of the self-assessment must be thoroughly documented using the APWA Self-Assessment Tracking Software. This documentation establishes the basis for setting goals and evaluating the agency's effectiveness in attaining compliance with the recommended practices. The self-assessment is required before requesting a site evaluation, and is the core element in the accreditation process.

#### 2. *Application Phase*

Once the decision has been made to commit to the accreditation program, the agency begins the process of submitting a formal application with the applicable application fee. APWA will review the *Application for*



*Voluntary Accreditation* and, if acceptable, enter into an accreditation agreement with the agency.

### **3. Improvement Phase**

Once the agency has completed the self-assessment and identified areas needing improvement, the agency will work to bring all practices into an acceptable level of compliance with the recommended practices. Refinement and improvement to policies, practices, and procedures are encouraged even if the agency's practices might be considered in compliance with recommended practices. Those seeking accreditation are encouraged to pursue a peer-review by an evaluator or currently accredited agency. Continuous improvement is the ultimate goal of the self-assessment process; therefore, the improvement phase is extremely important. Agencies are encouraged to make continuous improvements to processes and procedures regardless of their status in the accreditation process.

### **4. Evaluation Phase**

Once an agency determines they have adequately completed the improvement phase, they are ready to request a site visit. The site visit will consist of a review and evaluation of the agency to determine the level of compliance with all applicable practices. Following the onsite evaluation, a final report will be developed and shared with the agency.

### **5. Accreditation Phase**

The Accreditation Council will review the site visit results and recommendation from the team. The Council may then grant full or provisional accreditation or may modify the recommendation of the evaluation team. Accreditation is granted for a set period, four (4) years, at which time the agency must apply for re-accreditation or the accreditation shall expire. Biennial written updates are required to demonstrate continuing compliance and progress with self-imposed goals for improvement. The effective date for first-time accreditation is the date the Accreditation Council grants the designation. Subsequent accreditations will keep the most recent effective date regardless of the date of the evaluation.

## **Accreditation Participation**

Participation in the Accreditation Program is voluntary and self-motivated, with the goal to objectively evaluate, verify and recognize compliance with nationally recognized "recommended" practices developed by members of APWA. The objectives of the accreditation program are to:

- create impetus for organizational self-improvement and stimulate a general raising of standards;
- offer a voluntary evaluation and education program rather than government regulated activity;
- recognize good performance and provide motivation to maintain and improve performance;
- improve public works performance and the provision of services;
- increase professionalism; and
- instill pride among agency staff, elected officials and local community.

## **Accreditation Eligibility**

Any government agency with responsibility for public works functions is eligible for accreditation. Divisions and/or departments of a public works agency that operate as a semi-autonomous unit may also be eligible for accreditation. Accreditation is awarded to the agency, department or division within the agency that provides the public works service.

Membership must be maintained throughout the accreditation term by at least two individuals from the agency.



## Application Requirements

The complete application for accreditation consists of a letter of intent, a completed application, and a signed agreement. The application letter from an agency **must be signed by the chief elected or appointed official of the agency**. The accreditation application form may be signed by the chief public works officer(s) responsible for the department being accredited.

When applying for accreditation, the agency declares which practices apply and which are not applicable based on the most current *Public Works Management Practices Manual*. Agencies are required to identify each functional area (represented by a chapter in the manual) where the agency has any responsibility. Each agency is required to comply with the recommended management practices specifically applicable to the functional areas. Each agency must consider its mission, legally mandated responsibilities, and the demands of community in determining which practices are applicable and how to comply with them.

Waivers for specific practices may be requested for agencies that cannot comply due to legislation, labor agreement, court orders, case law, or other legitimate reasons. Prior to the site visit, the agency must submit the request for the waivers in writing, citing the extenuating circumstances that preclude the agency from complying with the recommended practice. Simply not having funding or staff resources will not be considered a valid reason for non-compliance.

## Extensions

In the event an agency is unable to schedule their evaluation within the contracted time period, the agency may apply for an extension.

### Accreditation:

- Agencies may apply for a one-year extension. The Accreditation Council will be responsible for reviewing and approving one-year extension requests. Those agencies approved for the one-year extension will be required to pay a 25% extension fee and must be evaluated on the current or previous edition of the manual. There is no limit to the number of extensions that may be requested; however, the Accreditation Council has the authority to approve or decline all extension requests.

### Re-accreditation:

- Agencies may apply for a six-month extension with no penalty. APWA Accreditation Managers will be responsible for reviewing and approving six-month extension requests. If an extension is granted, the date of accreditation will remain unchanged.
- Agencies may apply for a one-year extension beyond the six-month extension. The Accreditation Council will be responsible for reviewing and approving one-year extension requests. Those agencies approved for the one-year extension will be required to pay a 25% extension fee and their date of accreditation will be extended by one year. No further extensions will be allowed beyond the six-month and one-year extensions.

## Practices and Compliance

Practice statements contained in the *Public Works Management Practices Manual* do not represent standards since they do not dictate how a function or activity must be accomplished. Nor do they represent quotas or unit productivity. The recommended practices provide a series of statements and commentary designed to help an agency conduct self-assessment of each aspect of its performance and determine how the practice ensures effective delivery of public works services.



The agency must determine whether it complies with the recommended practices. The level of compliance must be classified as one of the following:

- Full Compliance (FC) – Fully complies with the practice, without exception.
- Substantial Compliance (SC) – Indicates the agency consistently meets all major provisions of the practice. However, it may be lacking in one area or the practice may not have been implemented so that success is unable to be demonstrated at the review.
- Partial Compliance (PC) – Indicates the agency meets some of the provisions of the practice. Additional work needs to be completed to achieve accreditation.
- Non-Compliance (NC) – Indicates the agency fails to meet any of the provisions of the practice.
- Non-Applicable (NA) – The practice does not apply to the agency.
- Waived (WV) – The practice has been waived. Requires written approval before the site visit.

Waiver requests must be made in writing, citing the reason for requesting the waiver. Proof of compliance must be demonstrated by review of written records, interviews, and field observations during the onsite evaluation by the accreditation team. To be accredited, the agency must be able to demonstrate it is in full or substantial compliance.

### Mid-Term Report

Agencies awarded accreditation must submit a mid-term report, due two years from the anniversary date of accreditation. The submittal of the report has three purposes.

1. Verification of the status of each organization as to any changes that may have occurred in the last two years and to ascertain the agency's interest in the program.
2. Promotion of organizational development by promoting the concept of continuous improvement regarding its management practices.
3. Assistance to organizations in its efforts for re-accreditation, utilizing the latest edition of the *Public Works Management Practices Manual*.

The report must include an overview of changes in the parent agency that might affect management or operation of the agency. It should be submitted to APWA at [accreditation@apwa.net](mailto:accreditation@apwa.net).

### Accreditation Status

**Full Accreditation:** An agency that meets full or substantial compliance in all applicable practices. Practices meeting substantial compliance for accreditation may not exceed 5% of all applicable practices. Practices meeting substantial compliance for re-accreditation may not exceed 3% of all applicable practices.

**Provisional Accreditation:** An agency that does not meet full or substantial compliance upon completion of the site visit is considered provisional for a maximum of 45 days. After 45 days, the agency must reach full accreditation or will be considered in non-compliance. In addition, agencies that are due for re-accreditation may petition for a six-month extension during which time they are considered provisional. At the end of the six-month extension, if the agency has not conducted their re-accreditation site visit, their accreditation expires.

**Revoked Accreditation:** The Council has the authority to revoke an accreditation award when sufficient documented evidence exists that the public works agency no longer meets accreditation criteria. At a subsequent time, the public works agency may reapply for accreditation without prejudice.



**Expired Accreditation:** An agency that has let their accreditation expire will no longer be considered accredited. The agency may apply for re-accreditation within one year of expiration without prejudice. After one year, an agency may reapply for accreditation without prejudice.

**Withdraw Accreditation:**

The chief elected or appointed official of the public agency in which a public works agency is located may request the removal of a public works agency from the published list of accredited agencies. At a subsequent time, the public works agency may reapply for accreditation without prejudice.

**Appeal Process**

Only the following decisions may be appealed:

1. Denial of an application;
2. Denial of a site visit;
3. Denial of full or provisional accreditation;
4. The award of provisional instead of full accreditation; and
5. In the case of a provisionally or fully accredited public works agency, a denial of full accreditation or revocation of accreditation.

**Appeal Filing:** The chief elected or appointed official of the public agency or the chief public works officer may appeal any of the decisions outlined above within 30 days of notice. The appeal must specify the grounds on which the appeal is made. The burden of presenting the argument initially, and/or persuading the appeals body, rests with the public works agency filing the appeal.

**Appeal Panel Formation:** Within 30 days of receipt of the appeal, the executive director or their designee will name three members of an ad hoc Appeal Panel and three alternates when a conflict of interest prevents the Accreditation Council from serving as the Appeal Panel. None of the designees will have had affiliation with the public works agency filing the appeal or with the accreditation process relating to that public works agency.

**Appeal Panel Meeting:** The Appeal Panel shall meet within 90 days of the date on which the public works agency submits an appeal or on a date mutually acceptable to the public works agency and the Appeal Panel. The public works agency may have one or more representatives appear before the panel to make an oral and/or written presentation and to respond to questions from the panel. Those individuals originally rendering the decision may appear before the Appeal Panel to support the decision and to respond to questions of the Appeal Panel. Either party may be represented by legal counsel at their own expense; however, the proceeding is conducted on an informal basis. The Appeal Panel may request the assistance of counsel to provide guidance in the interpretation and resolution of legal or procedural problems that may arise in the context of an appeal.

**Appeal Panel Decision Reporting:** The report of the panel, including the decision and reasons for such, is prepared within 30 days and is addressed to the Chief Executive Officer of the American Public Works Association. Copies are forwarded to the chief elected or appointed official of the public agency, to the chief public works officer, and to the chairperson of the council.

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