

GSA Readies Bidding Process for Consolidated ETS

Posted on November 4, 2022 by Business Editor



The U.S. General Services Administration next year will submit a final request for proposals for the next generation of its E-Gov Travel Service, which will consolidate the service to a “single, enterprise-wide travel and expense solution,” GSA director of strategy execution Ryan Edelstein said at BTN’s recent Government Travel Summit.

GSA awarded the contract for the current second-generation ETS platform to Concur in 2012 and in 2013 awarded a share of the platform to CWT. GSA now is “ready to prove we can consolidate and centralize our requirements and deliver a single solution” with ETSNext, Edelstein said.

While ETS over its history has simplified what used to be a burdensome, paper-based process in booking and expensing government travel, travelers across the 59 agencies using the service still often report a “frustrating, time-consuming” experience, according to Edelstein. While the blame often is laid at the feet of the tools themselves, “that’s not entirely fair,” given the complexity of needs among travelers, he said.

“We have 313 pages of federal travel regulations,” Edelstein said. “We’re asking those tools to take those 313 pages of policy and make it easy to use. On top of that, we have 59 agencies with 59 different versions of how they interpret and want to apply the policy.”

The planning work on ETSNext already is well underway, having started not long after the implementation of ETS2. From 2017 to 2020, the focus was on defining needs and getting buy-in among agencies via the government’s Federal Integrated Business Framework as it moves toward standardization. That meant identifying common needs across the agencies as well as needs unique to each agency to make sure all are addressed, he said.

Last year and into this year, GSA’s focus has been on market research, meeting both with current providers and new entrants to the market to get feedback on the model and solicit ideas, Edelstein said. GSA already has issued one request for information and will issue a second one in the coming weeks.

The financial system integration has been a particular area of focus of late, he said.

“We know it will be a challenge,” Edelstein said. “We have a model shifting from each agency connecting their travel solution to their financial system, and with a centralized model, all of a sudden you have many financial systems needing to connect to a single solution.”

By about March 2023, the GSA expects to issue a draft RFP, where GSA can “be more detailed about the process” and pave the road for a final RFP around September 2023. GSA expects to award the contract in the

2024 fiscal year, which will leave a few years for the implementation process prior to the current contract expiration in June 2027, he said.

Part of the goal of ETSNext will be to get the process “much closer to the commercial travel experience,” with features such as a mobile app available to all, such cost-saving features as reshopping tools—which will work especially well given the government’s City Pair Program, which gives travelers access to discounted, refundable fares—and duty-of-care features making it easier to communicate with travelers. Ultimately, however, the goal of ETSNext is around simplifying the process for government travelers, Edelstein said.

“We know where the tech is today,” he said. “We can make the travel experience more streamlined, automate processes and guide them through policies so they don’t have to be an expert. The system can help them make smart, compliant decisions for travel.”

Even though it will be a single system, Edelstein said it will need to be interoperable to leverage open APIs and bring in multiple components. Additionally, the procurement process separates out travel management company services, meaning individual agencies will still have the capability to work with their own preferred TMCs.

“We know a lot of customer agencies have long-standing relationships and really value the experience and personal attention they get from their TMC, so it was an important calculus,” Edelstein said. “The agencies all feel like they’re special and have unique needs—and they do.”

Michael B. Baker www.businesstravelnews.com

