



Private engineers offer expertise to local projects

by Leonard Osborne, 4/21/2007

Matt Hanson's commentary ("Caltrans' Outsourcing Means Waste," April 16) misses the mark on many points. In order to deliver the Proposition 1B transportation projects on time and on budget, Caltrans must utilize both public and private sector resources. The workload is huge, the voter's expectations are high and as a practical matter, Caltrans can utilize the specialized expertise of an engineering firm far more quickly than it can recruit, hire and train young engineers out of college.

Caltrans understood this fact when choosing to utilize private sector engineering expertise on the Willits Bypass project.

Mr. Hanson inaccurately reports that private sector engineers cost more than a Caltrans engineer. A study conducted by former Legislative Analyst William Hamm was released this week refuting these claims. After adding up overhead, salaries and benefits, the study found, "In fiscal year 2006-07, the amount that the state must pay to utilize an in-house engineer ranges from \$173,434 to \$209,212, while the amount paid for an outside engineer averages \$193,000." (Page 3, Cost to the Taxpayers of Obtaining Architectural and Engineering Services: State Employees vs. Private Consulting Firms, April 2007). When asked about the study, Mr. Hamm said, "Not only do private engineers cost virtually the same or less than state-employed engineers, they are able to accelerate the delivery of highway and transit projects."

At present, Caltrans uses engineering companies for only about 10 percent of its state transportation work, compared to more than 50 percent in the other 49 states. Other state Departments of Transportation have figured out that private engineering firms do not accrue the same ongoing costs as a full-time Caltrans engineer because their contracts are terminated once the project is complete.

The argument that private engineers do not have the public's safety in mind when designing and inspecting projects is false and offensive. Private engineers have a vested interest in delivering safe, high-quality, environmentally sound projects, and are bound by a strict code of ethics. Other layers of public protection include the legal duty to comply with building codes, design standards and Cal-OSHA requirements, liability for negligent work, potential loss of license and, in the worst case, criminal liability for deliberate wrongdoing resulting in injury.

Lastly, design-build and other project-delivery tools give public agencies the ability to implement best practices in their procurement and contracts. Long-established laws require an open competitive process for selecting professional services. When used properly, design-build accelerates project delivery and provides greater cost certainty.

Private engineers stand ready to assist the state with its increased workload and understand that the only way to fulfill the will of the voters is to work together toward the common goal of infrastructure delivery.

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