



Local Views

Reject state engineers' bid to thwart private-sector help

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Hundreds of thousands of commuters rely daily on California's transportation systems to arrive at their destinations safely and as quickly as possible. But with a growing population and an aging infrastructure in need of repair, our transportation corridors have become congested, worn down and -- in some cases -- dangerous.

Some relief came in November 2006 with the passage of Prop. 1B, the \$19.9 billion bond aimed at upgrading the state's dilapidated highways and freeways, reducing congestion and making safety improvements to local roads. It is now up to our state officials to pass a budget and legislation giving Caltrans the tools to deliver the projects on time and on budget.

To fulfill the will of the voters, state and local agencies need the services of a large work force equipped with the experience and expertise to handle the job. The shortage of engineers looming because of retirements during the next three to five years, combined with the large infrastructure workload, clearly signals that both public and private-sector engineers are needed to expedite projects.

To speed the delivery of critical infrastructure, it is important that the Legislature pass a state budget giving Caltrans greater authority to increase the number of private-sector engineers used on state projects. In his May revision to the state budget, Gov. Schwarzenegger increased private-sector utilization to 15 percent of the workload on Caltrans transportation projects. It is now in the hands of the Legislature to approve this plan and ensure the prompt delivery of critical projects.

Moreover, the authority to use innovative project-delivery tools such as design-build and private financing of infrastructure should be expanded. These project-delivery methods allow public agencies to use consulting engineers to quickly complete good, safe projects while keeping costs down. Both of these tools have been used successfully throughout the United States and the world. But so far, the use of design-build and private financing of infrastructure in California has been limited.

Private engineers can deliver projects quickly because of their specialized expertise, resources and experience in designing and delivering large infrastructure projects. However, it is ultimately up to state officials to determine how and when to use private-sector engineers on state transportation projects.

A recent study conducted by William Hamm, the former state legislative analyst, finds that private-sector engineers are cost-effective, as well. "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,"

said Hamm.

By using private-sector engineers to help with the state workload, Caltrans avoids ongoing costs that accrue when hiring additional full-time employees. A private engineer's contract terminates upon project completion, while a Caltrans employee will continue on the state payroll long after a project has been completed, regardless of Caltrans' needs. Also, private engineers are held accountable to deliver safe and environmentally sound projects.

When asking why it takes so long for transportation projects to reach completion, consider this: In recent years, Caltrans has used private engineers for approximately 10 percent of its state transportation work, while the nation's other 49 state departments of transportation average about 60 percent. Clearly, California has some catching up to do before matching the other 49 states in their use of the private engineering industry.

Utilizing the resources of both public and private-sector engineers is the best, most practical way to meet voter expectations and quickly deliver much-needed infrastructure improvements. California's public officials should recognize this while determining the budget and considering legislation that would expand the use of design-build, private financing of infrastructure and other effective project-delivery tools.
