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Good ruling

High court decision could mean road projects are built faster

On Thursday, the state Supreme Court gave a choice to Caltrans and self-help counties like Sonoma: They can wait for state engineers to design highway expansions and other road improvements -- or speed up the process by hiring private engineers to do the work.

If you think this issue was already decided by the voters, you're right. In 2000, Californians approved Proposition 35, which allows public agencies to contract out engineering services.

But state engineers took the issue to court on a technical question, arguing that the initiative didn't repeal state laws that only allowed contracting in rare circumstances. The lower courts disagreed, and so did a unanimous California Supreme Court.

In practical terms, Caltrans and local agencies will continue using less-expensive public engineers for most projects. But, when the state has a backlog of projects and material costs are rising, agencies could save money by getting the engineering work done quickly so construction can begin.

While nearly seven years -- and a lot of money -- have been wasted on legal battles, the timing of this latest decision couldn't be better as funds begin flowing from the \$20 billion transportation bond.

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