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Daniel Weintraub: Buy design? The fight over engineers at Caltrans

By Daniel Weintraub -

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When California voters approved Proposition 1B last year, thus agreeing to spend billions building new roads, ramps and bridges around the state, they triggered the need to hire hundreds of professional engineers to design those projects.

They also poured gas on an old debate around the Capitol: Should the state put all of those new engineers on the government payroll or use private consulting firms to perform much of the work?

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signaled last week that he likes the private option. The governor hailed a state Supreme Court ruling that ended six years of litigation by the state's union of state engineers, which sued to block a voter-approved ballot proposition that was supposed to make it easier for the government to use private-sector road designers.

The court decision, Schwarzenegger said in a statement, would bring the Proposition 1B projects and the traffic relief they promise to commuters "faster and more efficiently." He pledged to work with the Legislature on the details of such a policy.

But the government engineers won't be giving in so easily. The people and the Supreme Court may have ruled against them, but there is still the Democratic majority in the Legislature.

Those Democrats have long been allied with the state-employed engineers.

The union -- the Professional Engineers in California Government -- contributed more than \$1.5 million to Democratic Party candidates and causes in 2006 alone. Democratic lawmakers, meanwhile, joined the union's lawsuit to try to block the will of the voters, arguing that only the Legislature had the power to authorize Caltrans to use private engineers. And though that argument has now been rejected, the Democrats still control the purse strings and must approve any spending plan that contemplates using more engineers from the private sector.

"The decision-maker is still the Legislature," Bruce Blanning, the union's executive director, told me last week. "We will be talking to the Legislature as we have every year. There will be a battle in the budget."

Blanning asserts that private engineers cost the state nearly double what it pays to keep an engineer on the Department of Transportation payroll. A state engineer, he said, costs about

\$105,000 per year in salaries and benefits, while a private engineer averages nearly \$200,000.

And he says there is no evidence that the private sector does a better job.

"We will be encouraging the Legislature not to spend twice as much, because it means that much less money for construction projects," he said. "We don't like the idea that the people approved \$20 billion in bonds and are only going to get \$10 billion in work out of it."

You probably won't be surprised to hear that the private engineers disagree with Blanning's numbers. They have commissioned a study of their own that concluded the full cost of an in-house engineer is closer to \$200,000 when all of the benefits and overhead are counted.

And that cost comparison tells only part of the story, says Paul J. Meyer, executive director of the Consulting Engineers and Land Surveyors of California. Private engineers, he said, tend to be midcareer and fully trained, while the government, if it hires hundreds of new people, will be getting mostly students straight out of college who must be trained on the job. Then, once the work is done, a private engineering company goes away, but a state engineer is still on the payroll and will be underemployed or must be laid off.

"We think there are huge benefits to using consultants to do the work," he said.

The state's nonpartisan legislative analyst agrees. That office concluded recently that Caltrans doesn't have the ability to hire all the engineers to design the projects now in the pipeline, nor find the office space to house them. The analyst recommended that the Legislature authorize Caltrans to use more private engineers to fill the gap.

Traditionally, about 90 percent of the design work at Caltrans has been done in-house, with 10 percent going to the private sector. But Meyer said nationwide, private engineers do about half the work. And even in California, local governments use private engineers almost exclusively to design their roads. So this is not exactly a radical idea.

There are some signs that the politics of the issue might be shifting.

Labor unions representing construction workers who build the highways have been working quietly behind the scenes for years to get the Legislature to lessen its devotion to the government engineers. And last week, a bill that would have required all public highway projects in California -- state or local -- to use Caltrans designers was shelved in committee.

Schwarzenegger is required by law to submit a plan to the Legislature estimating the number of engineers Caltrans will need for each of the next five years to design the projects financed by Proposition 1B. That report will also estimate how many of those engineers will be state employees and how many will come from the private sector.

That will be the first indication of whether Schwarzenegger has the stomach to confront the Legislature on this issue.

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