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Opinion

Running Caltrans: A Tough, But Important, Job

By Russell W. Snyder

Shortly after I joined the California Department of Transportation's Los Angeles district in 1991, I attended a meeting of top Caltrans managers regarding the Century Freeway, then under construction in South Los Angeles after more than 30 years of planning, lawsuits and political wrangling. To



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lighten the mood before the meeting got underway, I tossed out what I thought was a clever joke.

"Hey, I heard they called it the Century Freeway because it's going to take a century to build," I chirped. The response? A room full of icy stares.

A couple of years later I was called out to an incident on the Pomona Freeway: A bad wreck involving a suspected drunken driver and a Caltrans maintenance crew. As TV news choppers circled overhead, I arrived to discover a grim reality for highway workers: one dead and one seriously injured. Just then my shoebox-sized cellphone rang. It was the frantic brother-in-law of the dead worker. He told me the family was watching live news coverage of the crash and were desperately trying to reach maintenance worker Jerry Alcalá. His lifeless body was lying on the pavement just a few feet away from me. I did not have the heart, or the authority, to tell them that Jerry would not be coming home that night. His funeral procession of orange Caltrans trucks is something I'll never forget.

If I learned nothing else during my 11-year career at Caltrans, I learned this: Caltrans employees are deadly serious about their jobs. I'm reminded of this as I heard the news earlier this month that Caltrans Director Will Kempton will be leaving the department to head up the Orange County Transportation Authority. Kempton, appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2004, is a no-nonsense leader who demanded 100% of himself and everyone who worked for him. When your department has more than 22,000 employees, that's no small feat.

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Although I did not know Kempton when I was at Caltrans, I knew him by reputation. In my current capacity representing the construction industry, I came to know and admire Kempton's manner of plain speaking and ability to motivate his people to perform under difficult circumstances. I liked to say he possesses the determination of Gen. George S. Patton and the diplomacy skills of Gen. Colin Powell. It's a sad truth that most of the red tape that ensnarls the department was unspooled by politicians and others who know very little about transportation.

Caltrans is everyone's favorite whipping-boy partly because they touch every Californian. Although it's been showing some wear recently, the Golden State's system of freeways and highways still moves people, goods and services at an impressive rate. Think about it: your driveway connects you to a transportation system that reaches every corner of the state and is ready any time you are. And, for the most part, it's already been paid for.

In recent years Caltrans has piled up an impressive string of accomplishments, from the rapid rebuilding of a melted freeway ramp in Oakland to an overhaul of Interstate 5 in downtown Sacramento that was completed with minimal disruption to traffic. And they are still talking about the legendary rebuilding of the L.A.

freeway system after the 1994 Northridge earthquake in that made busy contractor CC Myers a celebrity.

When Caltrans drags its feet, I'm the first to give them a swift kick in the posterior. But I've also seen firsthand that when the politicians and activists get out of Caltrans' way, the department can do amazing things.

Taking over for Will Kempton is Randy Iwasaki, a career civil servant who most recently served as Kempton's chief deputy. I had the pleasure of working with Randy, and I'm pleased to say the governor made an outstanding choice. A talented engineer and superb manager who has the respect of everyone who has come in contact with him, I'm certain Randy will keep the momentum going even in the face of the state's current budget crisis.

In these gloomy economic times, people everywhere are re-evaluating our institutions and our priorities. In Caltrans, taxpayers can be confident that their money is being spent wisely by a department that actually does something tangible that benefits everyone. I hope state budget-cutters take notice.

Caltrans: It's a tough job, and I, for one, am glad they're willing to take on the challenge.

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