

Debate reignites over private entities doing work for California

By Jon Ortiz, Sacramento Bee

The debate over whether government runs best with civil service workers or privately contracted help is re-igniting in the Capitol over legislation that, among other things, would give state workers first dibs whenever the state has work to do.

Assemblyman Roger Dickinson, D-Sacramento, contends the civil service-first provision in his "Public Employees Bill of Rights" would produce better and cheaper government. Unions backing the measure agree.

Critics say the bill reads like a union wish list and could make government more expensive.

"If your goal is for the state to provide the best services and do it most efficiently, you shortchange yourself by limiting the ability of qualified individuals to compete for and earn the job," said Mitch Zak, a Republican strategist whose firm, Randle Communications, works with a number of trade organizations.

The tense business relationship between government and the private sector has existed since the Revolutionary War, said James Fossett, a senior fellow at the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government.

"George Washington wrote memos griping about the poor quality of (military) clothing," Fossett said, "and how rations arrived spoiled."

Today, California state government writes checks to private

business for a vast assortment of goods and services, from lawyers to levee work.

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