

Opinion: Caltrans needs to go on a staffing diet

By John Moorlach

This year, the majority Democratic Party found new ways to spend the \$6 billion to \$9 billion in additional tax revenue, passing the largest state budget in California history.

Funding to fix our roads and bridges, however, was woefully inadequate.



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Now the majority party has decided that California's roads are a mess. The governor has called the Legislature into a special session, which has manufactured a sense of urgency. Statistics have been gathered; analyses have been performed; bills to address the problem have been put forward. What is the one common component? The majority wants more of your money to "fix" the situation.

In fact, the "transportation" special session appears to be an exercise designed to pressure legislators into supporting a tax hike on gasoline – even though Californians already pay the nation's highest taxes.

Raising revenue is one option. However, cutting costs is a better one that should not be passed over. A great place to start is to review the agency charged with care and

maintenance of your state's transportation infrastructure – the California Department of Transportation.

In 2014, the non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office reported that Caltrans' Capital Outlay Support program, which oversees improvement projects and has been very opaque in its manpower management responsibilities, was overstaffed by approximately 3,500 full-time equivalent positions, at a cost of nearly \$500 million annually. That's a half-billion tax dollars – for salaries, health care and pensions for extra staffing – that does nothing to improve our roads.

Caltrans must become a lean and efficient agency with staff focused on projects and outside consultants utilized when workloads increase. It is much easier to reduce outside contractors than it is to reduce staff. Yet, early retirements are in order, and streamlining must be proven long before taxpayers are asked to contribute more.

During these special legislative sessions bills can be introduced. Consequently, I introduced Senate Bill X1-9, the Responsible Contracting for Caltrans Act. It addresses the glaring flaws at Caltrans.

First, SBX1-9 would prohibit the use of temporary funding sources, such as loan repayments, bond funds and grant funds, to hire permanent staff.

Second, SBX1-9 would increase the share of contract employees in the Caltrans' COS program by 5 percent annually, beginning in 2016, until a 50/50 ratio of state staff and contract employees is reached in 2023.

Controlling the hiring of permanent staff with limited-term funds and increasing the requirement to contract out are simple, no-nonsense approaches to reining in a department that has lacked forward vision. Who could be opposed to such common sense? You guessed it – the public employee unions – whose primary role is to increase their membership at any cost.

Does California have an infrastructure maintenance deficit? Absolutely. Reducing Caltrans' bloated size before proposing that California families pay even higher taxes to fix our roads is the right thing to do.

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