

Article Last Updated: 9/14/2006 02:56 AM

Agency's director lauds Caltrans-formation

Chief claims new focus on customer service

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Inside Bay Area

Caltrans Director Will Kempton trumpeted a string of his agency's recent successes — chief among them the smooth Labor Day weekend closure of half of the Bay Bridge — and said Californians should look forward to a "New Caltrans."

The incarnation of what had been seen as a somewhat heavy-handed bulldozer of an agency has come about through an emphasis on communicating with the commuters and residents affected by its projects.

"We are talking about a new Caltrans," one that listens better, works more efficiently and provides better customer service, Kempton said.

On the Bay Bridge West Approach demolition project, which required multiple weekend closures and rerouting of on- and off-ramps at the San Francisco end of the bridge, that policy meant going all-out to make sure anyone living outside of a cave would know when, how, why and where there would be changes and how people could minimize their impact on their lives.

"I think it was hugely successful," said Kempton during a visit to Caltrans' Bay Bridge project offices, where he also went down a list of Bay Area projects.

The effort was exemplified by Caltrans public relations representative Margena Wade trolling the neighborhood of the massive Labor Day demolition project and placing free car wash certificates under dusty vehicle windshield wipers.

He also noted that concerns about heavy dust contamination in the area were allayed by the use of water misting machines and workers who doused demolition areas with hoses. The pro-

ject managers also took pains to allow buses to pass through the work area once an hour to provide some use of the bridge, as well as maintain a temporary traffic control center that alerted motorists to use the Dumbarton Bridge when the San Mateo-Hayward Bridge was backed up.

Kempton, who was appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger nearly two years ago, has kept his job longer than many others who preceded him. Delays and cost overruns on the Bay Bridge project, as well as the usual frustration with traffic problems up and down California, make the Caltrans director a politically tricky job to keep.

Asked about progress with the long-delayed new Bay Bridge eastern spans, he said the westbound span should open by 2012 and the eastbound span the following year, but made a prediction that might have made other officials cringe:

"I am confident that working collaboratively together, we can shave some time off that schedule."

The director also said the agency's community outreach went farther than usual during the monthslong Devil's Slide closure of Route 1, which isolated communities on either side of the coastal landslide.

On a project in the Santa Barbara area, Caltrans sprung for the hotel bills of local residents who were deprived of access.

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