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Local control of Caltrans sought

Orange County leaders will seek power to force Caltrans to clean up properties and sell land.

By KIMBERLY KINDY and NATALYA SHULYAKOVSKAYA
The Orange County Register

A group of Orange County government officials said Sunday that this week they will begin seeking authority to force the California Department of Transportation to clean up and sell properties it owns in their communities.

The leaders want to form local committees that will meet with Caltrans officials to troubleshoot problems uncovered in a Sunday Orange County Register investigation.

The story showed Caltrans bought homes and businesses it didn't need for dozens of highway projects that were never built. Former property owners have watched as freeway projects died and their homes and businesses fell apart during decades of neglect in state's hands. By holding onto unused land, Caltrans has deprived local governments of as much as \$300 million in lost taxes.

City officials and neighboring landowners have grown frustrated with their inability to get Caltrans to fix the statewide blight.

"We must determine how we can have more oversight," said Yorba Linda Mayor Michael Duvall, who sits on the Orange County Transportation Authority board. "I plan to bring this up at the next (OCTA) meeting. We must sit down with them and figure out how we get a voice in this."

Duvall, chairman of the transportation board's finance committee, which is scheduled to meet Oct. 25. Duvall, who is running for Assembly, said he will seek an official deadline for how long Caltrans has to fix properties. After that, he wants cities, counties and local transportation agencies to have the power to make repairs, do clean up, and then charge Caltrans for the work.

Orange County Supervisor Chris Norby agrees, but he doesn't want to wait until something formal is established. He said one of the problems is most cities and counties stopped issuing code violation citations years ago because Caltrans ignores them.

He will now work to organize local governments, he said, and ask that they begin issuing citations and fines again but coordinate with one another to calculate the volume of problems.

"We need to unite," Norby said. "We need to embarrass them into change."

On Sunday, the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency, which oversees Caltrans, released a statement saying the department is "working hard" to correct problems and that a lot of progress has been made over the past three years.

Caltrans Director Will Kempton was not available for comment Sunday but has already announced a number of reform efforts. In previous interviews, he said he wants to work as "partners" with local governments, and concedes that this has not been the department's traditional approach.

He has already taken some steps to change that. For example, in August, after Register inquiries about unused land in the Bay Area, Kempton scheduled a meeting with Hayward city officials. Together they toured the area, discussing how the department could work with them to sell off about 470 acres of land.

Kempton has also said the department should get out of the property management business by either selling off land or having someone else care for the property until a project is built. He hopes to hand the job over to another state department that has greater expertise in the area.

However, Caltrans' tenants said they like the idea of local control better.

"The cities could do a much better job of managing these properties," said Lynn Bryan, a Caltrans tenant and board member of the Caltrans Tenants of the 710 Corridor. "They are in their communities and I believe they would care more."

Bryan also said that prior to the Register's investigation she thought Pasadena was the only community experiencing landlord problems with Caltrans.

"It was absolutely frightening to think we are not the only people – that this is a statewide problem of an agency out of control," Bryan said. "We thought the worst treatment was on the 710, and obviously, that isn't true."

Caltrans land holdings

Counties

County	Properties	Acres
L.A.	824	283
Alameda	734	676
San Diego	664	3,522
Fresno	284	1,082
San Bern.	235	305
Orange*	66	49

* Included for comparison

California cities

City	Properties	Acres
Hayward	559	477
L.A.	368	106
Santee	310	142
Fresno	184	241
Pasadena	160	49

Caltrans properties in Orange County cities

City	Properties	Acres
Anaheim	26	9

Buena Park	19	16
Newport Beach	3	5
Orange	2	14
Yorba		
Linda	1	1

Source: Caltrans September 2006 Property Management data

Analysis: Natalya Shulyakovskaya/The Register

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