



# WHEN DISASTER STRIKES

Projects with no regulatory playbooks

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Recent catastrophic events brought back vivid memories of working during the aftermath of the 1994 Northridge earthquake in Los Angeles, California. Lasting for approximately 10 to 20 seconds, those few moments of earth movement and the subsequent aftershocks led to 57 deaths, over 8,000 injuries and an estimated \$50 billion in private and public property damage. The first responder emergency teams were challenged with rescue operations in damaged residential buildings and high-rise towers, as well as fires from broken gas mains and downed power lines.

The damage to the regional freeway infrastructure was unprecedented. Interstates 10 and 5, as well as State Routes 14 and 170 all suffered complete bridge collapse and failure. Additionally, hundreds of bridge columns under the remaining freeway structures were tagged unsafe and required safety retrofitting. Repairing the freeway system was the highest priority for immediate public safety, commerce and area recovery.

Caltrans marshalled emergency teams of engineers, geologists, construction managers and right of way professionals to accomplish the seemingly impossible task of immediately and simultaneously constructing and repairing six collapsed freeway bridges. Under the best of circumstances, each collapsed bridge would normally take five years to plan, design and construct—but there was no such time to spare.

### An Unprecedented Situation

Freeway construction projects normally go through years of environmental and design process before going out to competitive bid and actual construction. But in this unified collaboration effort between federal, state and local officials, each agency sidestepped their internal bureaucracies and agreed upon an approach that was later labeled as “private sector innovation and market incentives replac[ing] business as usual.”

The agreed upon solution was to prepare the bridge design plans and have them ready within 10 days for a qualified contractor to build the structure. The twist on this construction project was that the contractor would have a fixed time frame to complete the project, but if the project was completed and accepted before the time allotted, there would be a per day bonus incentive of \$200,000. The contractor had no limitations on when they could work and could even choose to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

### Unforeseen Dilemmas

Only a few mentions were included in the construction contract for mitigation measures addressing dust, vibration, noise and traffic inconvenience to surrounding neighborhoods. The properties within a quarter mile of the Interstate 10 and State Route 170 projects were mostly single family residential. The unintended and unanticipated consequence of a contractor working 24 hours a day, seven days a week is 60 days of uninterrupted noise,



vibration and dust. This unfortunate scenario was discovered only after the contractor began their projects in earnest. Telephone call after telephone call came flooding in with complaints.

Since this wasn't a typical acquisition, relocation or property management issue, there weren't any state regulations or directives on how to resolve the barrage of complaints. The Right of Way Relocation Department immediately sent out staff to personally assess the impacts. Upon confirming that the complaints were warranted, the Right of Way Department contacted several local hotels to secure rooms for the adversely affected residents.

There were no immediately available funding sources to pay the temporary hotel accommodations, so the Caltrans Construction Department and Right of Way Department reached an agreement with the contractors for a construction change order that directed the contractor to pay the hotel accommodation bills directly. The contractor would be reimbursed for the hotel costs upon submission of their regular progress payment invoices. This allowed the residents

immediate access to quiet hotel rooms and secured a method to pay the hotel vendors promptly.

### A Measure of Success

The hotel displacement option was not without issues, but it accomplished the task of addressing the immediate needs of persons directly impacted by the accelerated construction projects. After all, there were no regulatory playbooks to rely on in this situation. Ultimately, no lawsuits were filed by the residents and if that is a measure of success, then kudos to the Right of Way Relocation Department for a job well done.

As for the contractor, spurred by the promise of an extra \$200,000 for every day that work was completed ahead of schedule, the contractor finished the project 74 days before the deadline and secured a bonus of over \$14 million for the company. Ultimately, the final \$30 million project price tag was more than offset by the economic losses that Los Angeles would have experienced if the freeway had remained closed until the original project deadline. ✪



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