Bill would reassign highway-naming duties to Caltrans

Traveling from Chino Hills to La Quinta involves time on Highway 71, Highway 60, Interstate 10 and Highway 111.

Or, put another way, it means driving on the Mayor James Thalman and Mayor Michael Wickman Memorial Highway, the Pomona Freeway, the Christopher Columbus Transcontinental Highway and the Deputy Bruce Lee Memorial Highway.

Across the Inland area and the rest of California, almost 600 stretches of highway, rest stops, bridges, tunnels and other transportation structures are named after someone or something. Each year, state lawmakers approve others. About 25 dedication resolutions are pending in the Legislature.

"I have no problem with them. In fact I'm pleased to do it because it sends a message that we care about it," said Assemblyman Paul Cook, R-Yucca Valley, who is the author of a pair of highway dedication measures.

But now the Legislature is poised to leave the driver's seat on highway dedications.

Last month, the state Senate approved a bill on a bipartisan vote that would put Caltrans in charge. Supporters say the current process costs the Legislature thousands of dollars in staff time and resolution printing expenses.

Under the bill, each dedication would need to be reconsidered after seven years instead of Caltrans being responsible for maintaining and replacing the signs in perpetuity. A similar Caltrans program lets families and friends of drunken-driving victims memorialize them with a sign they pay for.

"We thinks it's a much more reasonable way," said the bill's author, state Sen. Alan Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, who leads the Senate's transportation panel. "Legislators end up not really knowing what they're voting on. They vote on people they're not aware of."

Shifting Responsibility
It costs about $280 to repair or replace the standard two-post sign along roads, bridges or other structures, said David Anderson, a Caltrans spokesman. He said the agency does not know how much it spends to maintain and replace signs for dedicated state roads. It also maintains and replaces thousands of signs for highways without dedications.

Caltrans has no position on Lowenthal's bill at this time, Anderson said.

The bill awaits Assembly consideration. Some lawmakers believe dedications should continue to be voted on in Sacramento.

"I think it's an important process that is not so frequent that we can't handle the work in the Legislature," said Assemblyman John J. Benoit, R-Bermuda Dunes, who has introduced a pair of highway dedication resolutions. "Caltrans isn't supposed to be making policy judgments."

But Lowenthal said the Legislature will still have a say.

"I'm not worried about Caltrans running amok with this," he said. "This is one area where if they do, the Legislature will know about it right away."

Lawmakers say they think the highway dedications are important, even if motorists are not aware of or do not remember the events behind the name.

**Honor, Reminders**

Gwen Esqueda, of Corona, said she sees the plaques for the Officer Shannon Distel Memorial Interchange at Highway 91 and Interstate 215.

Distel, a California Highway Patrol motorcycle officer, died in August 2003, when a motorist turned in front of him. The man later pleaded guilty to misdemeanor vehicular manslaughter. Within a year, the Legislature had unanimously approved a resolution by Assemblyman Todd Spitzer, R-Orange, naming the interchange after Distel.

Relatives of highway designees said the signs mean a lot.

"It makes you feel good to know that he is remembered and honored that way," said Patsy Lee of La Quinta, the widow of Riverside County Sheriff's Deputy Bruce Lee. Lee was killed on duty four years ago. A section of Highway 111 bears his name.

"Even though some people may not notice it, Bruce knew a lot of people and touched a lot of people in the community," Lee said by telephone from Washington, D.C., where she was attending ceremonies honoring officers killed on duty last year. "It keeps him alive in their memories."

The state Senate has no rules on designees. The Assembly, though, requires that the person be dead unless he is a former legislator.

Even then, there can be disagreements.

Former Riverside lawmaker Walter Ingalls was a leader on transportation issues during the 1970s and early 1980s. After Ingalls died in 1991, some Inland lawmakers proposed naming part of Highway 91 after him. But the legislation stalled because of unease about Ingalls' misdemeanor conviction for lewd conduct in the mid-1980s.

It became a campaign issue in last year's fight for an Inland Assembly seat.

Radio ads by Assemblywoman Bonnie Garcia, R-Cathedral City, attacked her opponent, former Assemblyman Steve Clute, who was the author of the Ingalls resolution in 1991. The ads accused Clute of trying to honor "a predator." Clute lost the race.
Do you recognize these names?

Inland highways, bridges, interchanges and others bear the names of the following people:

Representatives

JAMES A. GUTHRIE

*Interchange of I-10 and I-215 in San Bernardino County*

Guthrie served from 1943 to 1967 as a member of the California Highway Commission.

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BEN HULSE

*Route 78 in Imperial and Riverside counties*

California State Senator Ben Hulse represented Imperial County from 1933 to 1958.

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CHRESTEN KNUDSEN

Highway 30 interchange with Interstate 10 in San Bernardino County

Chresten Knudsen served as a member of the Redlands City Council and in the 1960's was appointed to the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board.

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WILLIAM E. LEONARD

*Interchange of I-15 and I-210 in San Bernardino County*

Leonard, a former member of the California Transportation Commission, has long been active in Inland civic and business affairs.

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DANIEL D. MIKESELL

*Interchange of I-15 and I-10 in San Bernardino County*

Mikesell led efforts beginning in 1955 to have the Devore Cutoff included in the California Freeway and Expressway System.

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Law enforcement officers

CHP OFFICER DANIEL J. MUEHLHAUSEN

*Highway 62, west and east of the intersection with Highway 177*
Muehlhausen was killed in 1997 when a pickup truck crashed head-on into his patrol car.

**CHP OFFICER LARRY J. JARAMILLO**

*Highway 395 at mile marker 66*

Jaramillo was killed in 1993 when his patrol car collided with a truck near a construction site on U.S. Highway 395.

**CHP OFFICER SHANNON DISTEL**

*Interchange of Highway 91 and Interstate 15*

Distel was killed on duty in 2003 when a truck towing a trailer turned in front of his motorcycle.

**DEPUTY BRUCE LEE**

*Highway 111 between Washington and Jefferson streets*

A Riverside County sheriff's deputy, Lee was attacked and killed while responding to a La Quinta domestic-violence call in May 2003.

**State employees**

**DONALD S. WIEMAN**

*Vista point on Highway 18, two miles south of Rimforest*

Wieman rose through the ranks of the Division of Highways to the position of Maintenance Superintendent, Special Crews, from which he retired in 1965. He was universally respected for his skill, integrity, and dedication throughout his career.

- **JOHN WILKIE**

*Rest stop on Highway 40, 45 miles of Needles*

During a 27-year with Caltrans, Wilkie rose from an equipment operator to a highway maintenance superintendent.

- **CLYDE V. KANE**

*Rest stop on Highway 15, 30 miles east of Barstow*

Kane was a former director of Caltrans District 8, which includes the Inland area.

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