

MSNBC.com, Bill lets Caltrans skip newspaper notices (6.21.12)

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California newspaper publishers objected Thursday to a bill sent to Gov. Jerry Brown that would let the state's transportation department post legal notices on its own website instead of in newspapers and trade journals.

Jim Ewert, general counsel for the California Newspaper Publishers Association, said the timing is suspicious because the department has been in a dispute with The Sacramento Bee over articles raising questions about the construction of the East Span of the Bay Bridge between Oakland and San Francisco.

Posting notices only on the Internet would make it more difficult for the public and the media to track major projects and to hold the California Department of Transportation accountable, he said.

"It's curious that this happened just on the heels of that investigation," Ewert said. "It's tantamount to the fox guarding the henhouse, because the public will not be notified of any of these projects any longer."

Though the notices would be available online, Ewert said few people would be likely to see them.

The newspaper industry has a financial interest in seeing the paid advertising continue.

Caltrans Assistant Director Tamie McGowen said in an email to The Associated Press that the proposal would save taxpayers \$700,000 a year. She says the proposal was first sent to legislative budget committees in February, before the department's dispute with the Bee.

Gil Duran, a spokesman for Brown, declined to comment.

The measure is in a budget bill approved last week and awaiting Brown's signature.

The publishers' objections came the same day as Brown and legislative leaders announced they had reached an agreement on remaining budget issues, with final votes expected in the Legislature next week. Lawmakers passed a \$92 billion budget June 15, but several companion bills must still pass before the state's spending plan can take effect.