Streamline Bus Stop Permitting and Installation on Caltrans Right of Way

Preliminary Investigation 0392

Suresh Ratnam (Caltrans), Robin Van Valkenburgh (Nevada County Transit)

Streamlining Bus Stop Permitting, Installation on Caltrans Right of Way

Why this matters:

Basic access infrastructure.
Permitting delays slow project delivery.
Rural and small agencies are hit hardest.

Opportunity:

Strong agreement for change, streamlining process has immediate payoffs

Core Question:

How to make the permitting process predictable, proportional and consistent statewide

How the Preliminary Investigation Was Conducted

Goal: Identify bottlenecks, impacts and actionable improvements

Strategy: 26 survey questions, and feedback on challenges and best practices

50 agencies

31 responded

26 usable cases

62% response rate; 84% with permitting experience

Solid practice informed snapshot of rural, semi-urban and Tribal conditions.

By the numbers

Engineers on staff: 28% had, 38% contracted out, 34% neither

Permit review timelines: 31-90 days for most, 4 reported 91+ days

Backlogs: handful to 103, median: 15 stops.

Cost impacts: exceeds $50,000 for simple signage. Contracted engineering ~2x total project cost

Process consistency: 69% agencies routinely worked with same Caltrans staff, ***(31% did not)***, 73% work with multiple Caltrans units (***27% did not)***.

Agencies Told Us: The Process Is Not Broken Everywhere— Just Inconsistent

Process Inconsistency

Experiences vary by district, staff, project type

Process can be slow, difficult to navigate

High Burden, Limited Resources

Agencies lack in-house engineers, $$ for consultants

Engineering requirements often disproportionate

Delays and Backlogs

Review: 31-90 days, some report 91+ days

Backlogs: handful to more than 100 stops

Santa Monica CA

Top Pain Points for Transit Agencies

- High Engineering Burden
- Limited Staff and Funding
- Complex Slow Process
- Backlogs of unbuilt stops
- ADA constraints unclear/ expensive

What's Already Working: Practices Worth Scaling

Early coordination with district staff, local partners.

Template packets that meet submission requirements.

Standardized bus shelter designs and installation guidance.

Phased improvements over time.

Context-sensitive approaches for sign-only or low-ridership stops.

Examples in the draft report include:

- Standardized shelter guidance
- Large-batch permit submissions
- Less-intensive design methods for some upgrades

Summary of Key Themes

1. Inconsistent Caltrans engagement across districts
2. Permitting delays and procedural inefficiencies
3. Overly complex engineering requirements for simple projects
4. Disproportionate impacts on small and rural transit agencies
5. Backlogs of unbuilt bus stops
6. Flexibility of phased improvements
7. High compliance and infrastructure costs
8. Communication and administrative coordination issues

The Real-World Consequences

- Draft Final Report PI-0392 • March 2026

Bus stop networks never get completed

Communities left without bus stops

Reduced safety and accessibility

High costs make projects infeasible

Operational impacts on transit agencies

Limited local agency capacity

Claremont CA

A Practical Framework for Caltrans

Triage by	Match	Issue	Use	Clarify
Stop type: sign-only, amenity upgrade, full stop buildout.	Match requirements to project complexity and risk.	Issue early deficiency notices instead of full-cycle denials where feasible.	Use standard drawings, details and a statewide checklist.	Clarify roles across districts and functional units.

Opportunity to turn a fragmented process into a clear and consistent approach.

Recommended Near-Term Actions

- Streamlined path for sign-only stops, simple shelter replacements.
- Develop model permit package with examples of acceptable submissions.
- Create a standard review flow and decision tree.
- Phased improvements where full buildout is not immediately feasible.
- Document maintenance agreement options, operational responsibilities.

These can be implemented without legislative changes and create immediate improvements

Answering the Core Question:

How to make the permitting process predictable, proportional and consistent statewide

Predictability

Standardized permitting process, tiered reviews and a uniform workflow.

Proportionality

Reviews match project complexity, reduce engineering burdens and allow phased improvements.

Consistency

Statewide technical standards, uniform district practices with standard review guides and a ‘by-right’ pathway for routine transit infrastructure.

Bottom Line

This is a *solvable problem*.

Transit agencies are asking for *consistency, proportionality, and speed*.

A more *predictable process* can improve safety, accessibility, and transit access statewide.

Desired outcome

More stops delivered with less delay and less friction.

Thank you