Imagine your family needed to make an important purchase, and you had a time-sensitive discount coupon that would save you a substantial amount of money. Everyone in the family knew the purchase needed to be made, but one member of the family decided to block the purchase for selfish reasons. What would you do under these circumstances?

Well, it just happened on an issue important to the L.A. region, as our latest legislative session ended on an especially sour note.

Our own employees — people we pay to work for the state — threatened a lawsuit to prevent the contracting out of engineering for the greatly needed I-405 carpool lane, resulting in failure of legislation to get the project going. This failure has not only increased the cost of the project by losing out on $130 million of federal funds, but also has probably delayed the project, condemning L.A. drivers to more time sitting uselessly on the highway. That’s a shame.

It should never have happened. Public projects should not be held hostage or delayed due to a lack of manpower. The voters said so when we approved Proposition 35, which allows Caltrans to “contract out” engineering services on high-priority projects if Caltrans’ own staff could not get the job done in a timely manner.

Somebody in Sacramento needs to ask the question: who do the legislators really represent — the voters in their districts, or their special-interest constituents?

Here’s the background. One of the few bright spots in the recent federal transportation bill was the $130 million Rep. Howard Berman (D-North Hollywood) secured for extending the carpool lane on the northbound 405 roughly between the 10 and 101 freeways. The catch was that the state had to come up with its own $320 million and begin work on a fast track or risk losing the money forever.

So far, so good. Congressman Berman packaged the goods. All we had to do was pick them up.

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We will spend more time in a future column talking about design-build, because it is so critical to cutting costs and speeding schedules on large projects. It is an issue on which Republicans and (at least some) Democrats can agree. We just need to get the self-interests of the state engineers in check, so that we can do the state’s business as the voters intended.

Meanwhile, with the legislature adjourning for the year one day early, it appears the clock has run out to capitalize on a rare funding opportunity, but let’s give credit where it’s due. The following lawmakers recognized that easing congestion on the 405 freeway is a priority: Villaraigosa, who lobbied last month with the Chamber for this funding along with L.A. City Council transportation chair Wendy Greuel; Rep. Berman; and Sen. Sheila Kuehl, who carried the legislation along with Assemblymember Fran Pavley. They each deserve recognition for their hard work.

Lastly, I think it is deplorable that the Legislature adjourned early, before both houses could pass important bills like this one. Some have speculated that this maneuver was retribution for the L.A. delegation blocking state funds to cover the Bay Bridge seismic
Retrofit. In this period of putting politics ahead of the common good, it sounds plausible.

Nonetheless, securing state money for this project remains a top priority. Unless the legislature acts on it when it reconvenes in January, this rare opportunity of federal matching funds will be lost forever — and so will the credibility of the Caltrans engineers and Valley lawmakers who side with them on this issue.

And that's The Business Perspective.

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