



CALTRANS DIVISION OF RESEARCH,
INNOVATION AND SYSTEM INFORMATION

TRANSFORMING IDEAS INTO SOLUTIONS

Research Notes

Planning/Policy/ Programming

May 2026

Project Title: Considerations for
Renaming Caltrans Facilities

Task Number: 4697

Start Date: April 1, 2026

Completion Date: September 30,
2027

Task Manager:

Kevin Spiker
Associate Transportation Planner
Kevin.spiker@dot.ca.gov

DRISI Division Chief:

Prakash Sah, PE
Prakash.Sah@dot.ca.gov

Considerations for Renaming Caltrans Facilities

The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is examining how the names of its roads, bridges, and other facilities reflect the values represented in public decision-making and whether current naming practices appropriately reflect the diverse communities the department serves. This research will examine how other public agencies and institutions have approached the naming and renaming of facilities, compare their policies and criteria, and apply those findings to an assessment of Caltrans' existing facility names.

The research will focus on facilities named after individuals and examine patterns in who is recognized, including trends related to professional or civic roles, gender, and race and ethnicity where reliable information is available. By examining how naming practices have evolved over time, the project will help Caltrans better understand who is represented—and who may be underrepresented—in its naming system. The findings will provide a foundation for considering more inclusive, transparent, and consistent approaches to facility naming and renaming in the future.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

There is a growing need to understand how the naming of roadways, bridges, tunnels, intersections, and other transportation facilities reflects the values and priorities embedded in public decision-making. Naming practices shape which histories are elevated, whose contributions are recognized, and which communities may be overlooked or underrepresented. As stakeholders increasingly call on public institutions to examine whom they commemorate and how, there is a clear research gap in understanding the equity implications of facility naming practices within the transportation sector.

This research is needed to systematically examine how transportation facility names are selected, changed, and maintained; identify the populations and contributions represented or underrepresented in existing naming practices; and assess the racial, gender, disability, and broader equity



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dimensions of these institutional decisions. The findings will provide transportation agencies with a stronger evidence base for evaluating current naming practices and considering more consistent, transparent, and inclusive approaches to naming and renaming facilities.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

The research will begin by examining how other institutions, particularly universities, have addressed the challenges of naming and renaming buildings, landmarks, and other facilities. Many of these institutions have already undertaken efforts to reconsider whom they honor and the historical circumstances surrounding those decisions, providing valuable lessons for transportation agencies. By reviewing and comparing these approaches, the research will identify common practices, key differences, and the criteria institutions use when determining whether a facility should be renamed. Rather than developing an entirely new set of naming or renaming standards, the project will provide a clear comparison of existing approaches to help Caltrans and state leaders understand available options and their potential implications.

The research will then examine Caltrans' inventory of named facilities, with the analysis limited to facilities named after individuals or groups of people. The research team will categorize those honored based on the stated or documented reasons for recognition, as well as gender and race or ethnicity when this information can be reliably determined. These categories will allow the research team to identify broader patterns in Caltrans' naming practices, including which types of individuals and communities are most frequently represented and which may be underrepresented.

The project will also examine how naming patterns have evolved over time. Building on these findings, the research team will develop a comparison tool that illustrates how different naming and renaming principles identified in other institutions could apply to the categories represented in Caltrans'

facility names. The tool will help identify potential challenges, implementation strategies, and measures that could support Caltrans in evaluating and tracking progress toward a more inclusive, transparent, and consistent approach to facility naming and renaming.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

The goal of this project is to help Caltrans evaluate the names of its roads, bridges, and other facilities through a fair, thoughtful, and consistent process. The research will identify approaches for addressing facility names that may contribute to exclusion or fail to reflect the diversity of the communities Caltrans serves, while considering opportunities to recognize and uplift California's diverse histories, communities, and contributions.

The project will also provide recommendations for improving Caltrans' facility naming and renaming processes. By identifying principles and practices that promote greater inclusivity, transparency, and consistency, the research will help Caltrans establish a more equitable framework for making naming decisions in the future.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

This research will provide Caltrans with a clear understanding of who is represented in its facility names by documenting the characteristics of individuals and groups currently honored, including their roles, gender, and race or ethnicity where reliable information is available. These findings will help Caltrans identify which communities and types of contributions are most frequently represented, which may be underrepresented, and where opportunities for greater inclusivity may exist.

The research will also examine how facility naming patterns have changed over time, providing insight into historical trends and shifts in recognition. Finally, the project will compare Caltrans' current naming practices with approaches used by other institutions, helping the department understand

potential challenges, alternatives, and opportunities for developing more fair, transparent, and consistent naming practices in the future.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

Data collection and evaluation activities are currently underway. The research team has begun compiling and reviewing Caltrans' inventory of named transportation facilities using the 2022 Named Freeways, Highways, Structures, and Other Appurtenances in California and the 2024 Named Freeways, Highways, Structures, and Other Appurtenances in California reports. These documents provide the primary source data for identifying facilities named after individuals and groups of people and for examining how Caltrans' naming practices have changed over time.

The research team is reviewing the identified names and compiling available information on the individuals and groups honored, including the reasons for recognition and demographic characteristics such as gender and race or ethnicity where reliable information is available. The team is also examining naming patterns across the two inventories to identify changes and trends over time.

In parallel, the research team is reviewing naming and renaming practices used by other institutions, particularly universities and other public organizations. This review will document the criteria, processes, and principles used by these institutions when evaluating existing facility names and making renaming decisions.

The next phase of the evaluation will compare Caltrans' current naming practices with the approaches identified through the institutional review. The findings will be used to identify patterns in representation, potential gaps or areas of underrepresentation, and opportunities to improve the consistency, transparency, and inclusiveness of Caltrans' naming and renaming practices.

IMAGES



Image 1: A "Welcome to California" sign on Highway 139. (UCG/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)