Lynch criticizes delays in road projects

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Inspector General Bill Lynch issued a report Monday criticizing delays in completion of construction projects under the supervision of the state Department of Transportation and Development.

Lynch said both the department and contractors are responsible in part for some of the delays. But he said sometimes factors controlled by neither the department nor contractors contributed to the completion lags.

Lynch listed some of the major reasons for delays as:

- Contractors deliberately delaying work on long-term state projects to juggle work among several projects.
- Changes to plans due to errors after contracts are awarded.
- Problems in relocation of utilities such as water, sewer, gas and telephone lines.
- Flaws in specifications.

Among his recommendations, Lynch said the department should adopt a program of screening contractors to determine which are qualified to bid on construction contracts.

Transportation secretary Neil Wagoner said he agreed with most of the points Lynch made in the report, but he said a system of prequalifying contractors would cause a great deal of litigation over which firms would qualify and which would not.

Wagoner said under the present system, in order to qualify to bid on a state highway project, contractors must possess a state license and have the required bond.

Wagoner said among the things under consideration in the department is a contract provision requiring the name of the contractor to be posted at construction sites with a phone number for anyone who has any complaints to be able to contact the contractor.

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The primary objective of a contractor is to make a profit. In order to accomplish its objective, the construction company must have several simultaneous projects,” Lynch said. “However, not all contractors have the capability to have done the proper planning to complete multiple projects in the most expeditious time frame.”

Lynch said his office reached the conclusions after reviewing five projects in the department.

Among other things, Lynch said his review revealed there were many plan changes for each project. Construction on the Jefferson Highway widening project in Baton Rouge, for example, required a plan change to add a contract for the removal and reinstalling a drainage structure because the elevation in the plans was off by 2.2 feet, Lynch said.

Plans are drawn by consultants under contract to the department. Lynch recommended that the department adopt a policy or seek legislation to allow the state to collect damages from consultants responsible for errors in plans.

Lynch cited long delays in the widening of Perkins Road in Baton Rouge due to lack of cooperation among some utility companies in moving utility lines from beneath the roadway rights of way.

The Perkins Road project was scheduled to be completed in 240 working days. However, it actually took three years and 230 days.

Lynch recommended that the department pursue legislation to require utility companies to relocate utility lines within a specified time.

Lynch said some contractors take advantage of what he called lenient regulation by the department in connection with the number of “working days” allowed contractors to complete projects. The department in effect doesn’t, for example, count days when weather conditions are bad toward the working days on a project.

Lynch also recommended that the department set priorities for completion of projects based on how much the construction affects existing businesses and the general public.

Wagoner said the department is making progress. He said the department is making improvements to help ensure that the public gets quality construction work on highway projects. Lynch said his review was prompted to help assure that the $1.4 billion construction program supported by the Transportation Trust Fund through gasoline taxes is efficiently and effectively administered.