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FEATURED

Caltrain OK's $1.4M for deputy leader, over 3 times top-paid executive director's salary

By Alyse DiNapoli, Daily Journal staff
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After one Caltrain leader made over $800,000 in 2025 — double the salary of the top-paid executive director — she was subsequently approved for a one-year, $1.4 million contract to continue in the interim role, raising questions about the agency's consulting practices amid a dire fiscal predicament.

Caltrain maintains that Sherry Bullock, just recently named the agency's new deputy executive director, has such specialized knowledge that the high pay was necessary to get stalled projects over the finish line.

Others believe the exorbitant amounts are due to lack of oversight and unethical hiring and procurement practices.

Bullock has worked for Caltrain for nearly 20 years but, until the last few weeks, it's almost exclusively been as a consultant. Most recently, she held several roles, including interim chief of Design & Construction and Caltrain Modernization Program director, making at least $802,000 last year, according to public records data. By contrast, Executive Director Michelle Bouchard, the agency's highest paid employee, earns $392,000 annually.

Caltrain decided to consolidate Bullock's roles into one full-time employee position, deputy executive director of project delivery and Caltrain modernization. The role had a salary range of about $270,000 to $378,000 annually, according to a posting from October, when the agency kicked off a new job search.

In April, however, Caltrain still hadn't hired anyone for the role and extended Bullock's consulting contract as interim chief of Design & Construction for one year for up to $1.4 million.

"Some positions are really specialized in nature," Caltrain Chief of Staff Casey Fromson said. "It's hard sometimes to attract the people that we need."

Others, including more than five sources familiar with transit agency consulting practices, have called the figure exceedingly high and that it affirms concerning practices that have gone on for almost two decades.

Common and uncommon consulting practices

It's not unusual for transit agencies like Caltrain to rely on consultants. Doing so often saves money, as the agency doesn't have to pay insurance premiums, pension obligations and other employee-related costs.

But typically, consultants are more cost-effective only when working on time-limited, project-based contracts that are competitively bid. It also raises questions as to whether the issuance of those contracts has adequately followed proper procedure.

"It is more than a coincidence that she managed to find a place every time there was a change," said Arul Edwin, who previously worked as senior project manager. "For [18 years], that is very unusual."

Five sources familiar with Caltrain and transit agency practices said it was not normal how long Bullock's consulting relationship lasted. Another agreed it was peculiar, adding that "none of the agencies I've worked with on a regular basis have that type of arrangement" and that they always wondered how "[Bullock] was able to hang around there for so long."

One source said that for years, there was a typical pattern. A project would need a "global reset," then Bullock would be brought in to evaluate, determine the new needs of the project and usually receive the consulting contract to lead it without going through a competitive process.

Toward the end of last year, Audrey Brook, formerly a director of Capital Program Delivery at Caltrain, wrote a letter to the Board of Directors stating that leadership position she reported to for six months, the now-deputy executive director role, was filled “through a closed, non-competitive process that bypassed HR policy.”

“These actions waste public money and erode trust among both staff and taxpayers,” the letter stated, adding that “Caltrain has paid consultant rates for nearly 18 years for the same leadership. The issue is not cost — it is accountability.”

Fromson said the agency looked into such claims and did not find evidence of noncompliance with standard consulting practices and rules.

Legal trouble and concerning behavior

The letter was written around the same time that Brook filed a lawsuit against the agency, claiming she was terminated after participating in an investigation over Bullock’s behavior.

The complaint, filed last year, alleges that “multiple members of [Brook’s] team reported concerns regarding hostile and undermining conduct by Sherry Bullock,” which Brook reported to Human Resources. Almost immediately after participating in a separate workplace investigation involving her behavior, which took place on Oct. 15, Brook alleged in the lawsuit that she was terminated and that her participation “could reasonably be perceived as retaliatory.”

Several other sources, including those who have experience working in public transit leadership roles, have also mentioned concerning conduct.

“So many people have gone to [Human Resources],” one source said.

Another said it is “eyebrow raising” as to how the behavior has been able to continue.

In response to the original complaint, Caltrain alleges Brook’s termination on Oct. 16 was related to work performance.

Financial trust

Caltrain’s finances and operational management have been under a microscope lately, given it’s facing a long-term average deficit of $75 million annually and has been warning the entire agency could shut down within the next two years if voters don’t pass a regional sales tax measure this November.

With such a big ask from voters, any consulting practices perceived as wasteful negatively affect public sentiment, one source said.

“When retaliation replaces accountability and decisions are made without due process, the integrity of that public trust is lost — and with it, confidence in our leadership,” Brook’s letter to the board states.

Consulting do’s and don’ts

Between 2022 and June 2026, Bullock’s work directives approved up to at least $3.3 million — not including the $1.4 million approval — though the ultimate amount billed during that time is unclear. Last year, she was approved for 20 hours per week of overtime from July to December, in addition to up to 50 hours of overtime per month from March to the end of June, according to invoice records.

One source familiar with transit agency consulting practices, including at Caltrain, said consultants are only supposed to bill overtime in very specific circumstances and almost never for such long stretches of time.

Another source, Edwin, the former senior project manager, said charging overtime as a senior leader is also bad practice.

“Senior officers don't charge overtime. They make sure the work is done, and they delegate successfully to their people,” Edwin said, drawing on experience from when he worked for a consulting firm and managing consultants in house. “When you’re that senior, you have to finish the project and not charge for every single thing you did.”

Rico Medina, chair of the Caltrain board of directors, maintains that Bullock’s expertise is so specialized that it’s necessary to pay a higher cost.

“I know $1.4 million sounds like a lot to the average person … but really what we have noticed is that we are getting things done, and projects are getting completed and that is what is critical and important,” Medina said.

For instance, Bullock was moved over to the Guadalupe River Bridge project after it experienced massive cost overruns and delays.

“Some projects were off track, and I think it saved us money to have her come on board,” he said.

Because the $1.4 million was part of the contingency of an already-approved contract, according to a work directive request, it did not go before the Board of Directors for approval.

In an email, Caltrain also maintained that the $1.4 million annual contract for the executive-level consultant position is the industry standard.

Several sources, including Edwin, have cast doubt on the claim that such roles are so specialized as to justify paying such high rates, often two to three times higher than the executive director's salary.

"It's not that specialized," he said.

Other sources said the pay is unusually high, especially given it's a leadership role that doesn't involve rare technical expertise.

Soon after it was approved in April, the contract was amended from one year to a shorter, five-month contract for about $426,000, Caltrain spokesperson Dan Lieberman said via email.

Less than two months later, after 18 years as a consultant, Bullock decided to take the deputy executive director role, a $377,000 annual salary. Lieberman added via email that Bullock's work directives will be closed out as she has officially joined the agency as an employee, reiterating that the awarded contract amounts are not equivalent to actual expenditures.

"Caltrain was paying a lot in consultants, and this was an opportunity to solidify Sherry to do the job and to move projects forward," Medina said.

"Now there is more accountability."

Note to readers: The headline has been updated to reflect that Caltrain approved the $1.4 million contract but had not paid the amount.

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