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# Idea was leaked, professors claim

By Thomas J. McLean
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A year after San Francisco's Loma Prieta earthquake, two UA professors allege that a California state agency leaked their research proposal for stronger freeway support columns to other competitors.

Mohammad Ehsani, University of Arizona associate professor of civil engineering, and Hamid Saadatmanesh, an assistant professor in the same department, said they submitted a research proposal to the California Department of Transportation suggesting a study strengthening freeway support columns by wrapping them with strips of high-strength fibers.

Caltrans rejected the professors' bid to research the idea, but accepted a California firm's similar proposal, Ehsani said.

Ehsani and Saadatmanesh submitted their proposal to Caltrans around the time of the Oct. 17, 1989, quake, Ehsani said.

Dozens of people died in the quake when a San Francisco Bay area freeway collapsed.

Ehsani and Saadatmanesh suggested that freeway support columns could be made stronger by wrapping them with strips of Kevlar, a fiber used to make bulletproof vests.

The professors also sent a letter dated April 10 to a Caltrans senior engineer asking that their idea be kept confidential if the department decided not to fund their proposal.

In May, Caltrans requested research proposals for strengthening support columns, and Ehsani and Saadatmanesh placed a $270,000 bid to research their idea, Ehsani said.

A $73,000 research contract to study a proposal similar to the professors' was awarded to Fyfe Associates, a one-man firm in Del Mar, Calif., said Jim Drago, chief of public information for Caltrans.

Edward Fyfe, owner of Fyfe Associates, subcontracted the idea to the University of California-San Diego, Ehsani said.

Ehsani said Caltrans leaked information about his project to competitors before the contract was awarded.

A letter dated April 13 from Caltrans to a California company, Fiber-Trench, mentions UA and UCSD proposals using fiber compounds. The letter said portions of the proposals were enclosed with the letter.

Drago said Caltrans shares information with a variety of institutions, many of them employed by Caltrans to do research on new concepts, but they did not share information about Ehsani's and Saadatmanesh's idea.

"That would be wrong," Drago said.

Drago added that Japanese researchers studied the idea of using nonmetallic fibers to support columns in 1987.

"Our technical people are telling me that this concept is not new," Drago said.

Ehsani said he was aware of the Japanese research when the proposal was made, but said his idea was substantially different from the Japanese study.

That study used carbon filaments, a material that was too brittle to be effective in strengthening columns, Ehsani said, adding that study made no mention of using a compound like Kevlar.

Ehsani and UA attorneys requested Sept. 19 that Caltrans provide them with copies of all correspondence between Caltrans and Fyfe, as well as copies of other proposals submitted. They have not yet received a response, Ehsani said.