

Boston's Big Dig tunnel riddled with leaks

By Steve Leblanc, Associated Press Writer | November 19, 2004

BOSTON --The Big Dig is a Big Sieve. In a burgeoning political and engineering scandal, Boston's gleaming new underground Interstate 93 highway is riddled with hundreds of leaks. And the builders may have known about serious flaws in the \$14.6 billion project as early as 1997.

The disclosures add to a long list of woes for the colossal highway, bridge and tunnel combination, already the most expensive road project in U.S. history. The Big Dig -- formally the Central Artery project -- opened five years late and billions of dollars over cost and has been plagued by allegations of waste and mismanagement.

Massachusetts' attorney general is looking into the case, and Gov. Mitt Romney has called on the head of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority to resign.

"Somebody obviously messed up big-time," Romney said last week. "And that's just one more example of a long list of blunders related to the Big Dig."

Transportation officials have given repeated assurances that the underground highway is structurally sound. But some drivers are steering clear of the tunnel.

"I'd been worrying about it. If there was any chance of the wall caving in, it would be like that movie 'Daylight' with Sylvester Stallone," said 39-year-old house painter Peter Carroll, referring to the action movie about motorists trapped in a flooded tunnel.

The first sign of trouble came when a wall deep underground sprang a leak in mid-September, sending water pouring into the tunnel and creating a 10-mile rush-hour traffic jam.

Investigators found dirt and other debris had become trapped in the wall during a botched concrete pouring job in 1999. Over time, the debris washed away, sending ground water and dirt through the hole.

It turned out to be a drop in the bucket.

Closer investigation of additional panels in the tunnel have turned up four other wall panels with defects that could cause holes. One of those panels has the same kind of defect, although on a smaller scale, as the one that sprang a leak.

To make matters worse, project officials have conceded they are struggling to plug 400 or 500 smaller leaks in the tunnel.

Over the past week or so, memos and reports have dribbled out showing that Turnpike officials and the project's manager, Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff, were aware of the leak

problem for years. One report by the state auditor and inspector general found Big Dig officials were warned as long ago as 1997 about the potential for widespread leakage.

Fixing the leaks could take years, cost untold millions and lead to the closing of some lanes of traffic, at least at night.

Project officials said some leaks are to be expected in a tunnel as large and complex as the Big Dig, especially during the final stages of construction. The project will not be finished until next September, and the roof has yet to be completed on some portions of the tunnel.

But they said the big leak that opened up in September and the defects found in other walls are clearly the fault of contractors.

The contractors have defended their work but said they are ready to cooperate with the Turnpike Authority to come up with a solution. Bechtel spokesman Andy Paven said the company is inspecting the tunnel walls and reviewing all records to get to the bottom of the problem.

Matthew Amorello, whose predecessor as chairman of the Turnpike Authority was ousted for failing to report the rising cost of the project in the late 1990s, has refused to resign, and assured the public: "There is no way that I or the Turnpike Authority or the engineers who work on the project would ever allow citizens to use an unsafe highway network."

The Big Dig project has transformed Boston: The old, hulking elevated Central Artery was demolished, and the highway was submerged underground.

The furor is clouding what Turnpike officials had hoped would be heady days for the Big Dig, which also includes the new Ted Williams Tunnel under Boston Harbor and the Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge -- with its futuristic web of suspension cables -- over the Charles River. ■

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[A History of Central Artery/Tunnel Project Finances 1994 – 2001. A Report to the Treasurer of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.](#)