

Beacon Hill Byline

February 27, 2000

The BIG Dig

As the years go by, the Big Dig stays with us and just seems to get bigger. Since it is a phenomenon that I see fairly regularly and since it is once again occupying substantial space in the newspaper, this seems like a good time to write for Longmeadow readers a little about this massive public project.

The official name of the endeavor is the Central Artery Third Harbor Tunnel Project, and the task is to depress the main north-south highway through the city of Boston. The project takes an aging superstructure that stands above the streets of the city and puts it underground. That may sound simple until you consider the size of Boston, remember that it is a city on the waterfront and recognize that the thousands of office workers cannot stay off of the road while that roadway is “depressed.”

The project was planned more than 30 years ago. Construction has been underway throughout the 1990s, and is expected to be completed by 2005. Some parts of the road have been completed. The Ted Williams Tunnel from downtown to Logan Airport has been open for several years. New interchanges have eased travel for the residents of Charlestown. But no part of the operation has been easy.

Planned routes have been changed to meet concerns of neighborhoods, including the complete repositioning of a new bridge. Unexpected conditions in the subterranean work areas have required expensive changes of plans, as in the discovery last summer of an underground area that was too spongy to work with. The problem was solved by bringing in refrigeration equipment to freeze the work surface.

Looking at the parts of the Big Dig that are presently visible, the original cost estimate seems incredibly naive. It was estimated to cost \$300 million, while daily construction costs are now \$1 million each day. By 1990 that estimate had risen to more than \$2 billion, and the most recent jump in the price tag puts the total at \$12.2 billion. How in the world can Massachusetts meet such expenses?

Much of the price tag was formerly carried by the federal government as the state's portion of ISTEA, the intermodal surface transportation enhancement act, which expired in 1997. Along with the Boston officials, I had some concern about retaining the federal contribution when a new ISTEA was negotiated, but I was stunned by the severity of the cut in Massachusetts highway funding. A total of 49 states received increased highway funding, while our state was cut by 40% from previous levels.

Those of us in the western part of Massachusetts resent paying for the Boston project, but we really did not suffer so long as the federal government maintained its early contribution levels. The inability of our Congressional delegation, working in their new minority status, to secure funding at the level of any other state has finally impacted on road projects throughout the state. While the latest jump in the cost figure has led to charges and finger pointing on Beacon Hill, I feel the project financing remains sound. These are my reasons.

First, the requirement for new revenue has prompted a knee jerk, pro-tax reaction from many Boston politicians. Governor Cellucci is supporting an initiative petition to roll back the state income tax to 5%, an initiative that is opposed by many Democrats in Boston. The Big Dig, as well as any other new government expenditure, becomes an excuse to retain our high income tax rate.

Second, the financial markets have not altered their assessment of the state's finances. That tells me the Wall Street bankers believe Massachusetts can meet our obligation.

I have been invited to tour the construction site itself, and will provide another report from that perspective. The warning sent to prospective visitors is, “Be sure to wear boots!”