

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

July 23, 2006

### **Big Dig troubles**

The Big Dig! It is the project everyone loves to hate, particularly those of us who live far away and who are unlikely to drive on the roadway we have paid so many of our tax dollars to build. This month it became national news when a ceiling panel fell on a car, killing the woman riding in the front seat.

How did we get to this place, and where do we go from here?

For years the story about the project has been that it is complex and expensive and that part of that expense came from the work to assure safety and integrity of the tunnel system.

When one tunnel sprang a leak, the leak was repaired. When seepage occurred, new pumps were installed to get rid of the water. A wall collapsed, but it was not a carrying wall and it was soon replaced. Each incident was treated as an anomaly.

The first response to the latest calamity was consistent with earlier responses: the ceiling would be repaired and the roadway quickly reopened. Then Governor Romney stepped in and took command.

Here is the present status of the Big Dig.

As strange as it sounds, the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority is in charge of the project, so Governor Romney and the state highway department have no oversight responsibility over the massive job. After the latest failure, the governor asked for emergency legislation to give him control over Big Dig tunnel inspections and a \$20 million appropriation for a broad safety audit of the entire \$14.6 billion project. The authority was quickly granted, and he will lead “stem to stern” inspections.

Information that is now emerging about construction methods and shortcuts is shocking, with contemporaneous reports from some construction workers and engineers voicing concerns about the specific system that failed.

If you remember the years of the ‘90s when costs kept rising and deadlines were sliding, those were the times that the failed ceiling was developed. A suspended ceiling in the tunnel is required for ventilation, and the ceiling was to be lighter in weight and more difficult to install. When less expensive 3-ton concrete panels were selected to make the ceiling, the suspension system was not strengthened proportionately. Bolts used epoxy in their installation, and it appears that that bolt installation system failed, causing the ceiling to fall.

The days since the ceiling collapse have been filled with uncertainty about the tunnel system. An initial number of 60 problem bolts escalated to 230, then 1500 “areas of concern.” As of the beginning of this week, the connector from the Pike to Logan Airport, the site of the collapse, is closed. Some tunnels are open; the Ted Williams Eastbound is limited to buses, with scaffolding installed for added security.

Governor Romney said at a press conference that people should not have to drive through the tunnels with their fingers crossed. The full inspections of the road system may turn up design or construction flaws, but I believe the comprehensive inspections will bring the necessary corrections and repairs to Boston’s highway system. Now -- if we could only get it paid for.