

Panel urges more funds to keep tunnels safe

The Boston Globe

Big Dig needs regular upkeep, letter warns

By Noah Bierman, Globe Staff | August 14, 2008

The Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, already struggling with debt and rising costs, must find a way to dedicate more money to the regular maintenance and long-term rehabilitation projects necessary to keep the Big Dig tunnels safe, according to an influential panel appointed after a ceiling collapse in 2006 killed a woman.

A June 27 letter from the panel to Governor Deval Patrick, obtained by the Globe, said the agency must revise its long-term spending estimates and find a reliable source of money "commensurate with the scale of the system" to keep the \$15 billion tunnels and the rest of the turnpike from deteriorating.

The warning was given as the Turnpike Authority faces dire financial challenges; it recently borrowed from its reserve accounts to patch a deficit and sought help from the Legislature last month to stay solvent. The possibility of a second toll increase in as many years has been lurking since the authority raised rates in January.

The letter summarized the final report of the long-awaited \$9.8 million "stem-to-stern" safety review of the eastern portion of the turnpike and the tunnels, which was delivered to the governor's office with the letter, but has yet to be made public. It was ordered in two phases, initially by former governor Mitt Romney in 2006, after Milena Del Valle died when heavy ceiling panels fell on the car in which she was riding. Patrick's office has declined requests from the Globe to release the engineering report from the second phase, saying the document is still in draft form as officials review it and remove sensitive security information.

The letter does not delineate how much money will be needed to keep the tunnels maintained as the structures age.

Mac Daniel, Turnpike Authority spokesman, said the agency plans to spend about \$33 million on operations and maintenance for the nontolled portions of the Big Dig next year. But he could not provide exact projections for maintenance or a long-term spending plan for preserving the tunnels, which were officially completed last year.

"Until the stem-to-stern [report] is presented to the board next week, we haven't been asked nor has it been possible to calculate what the full needs of this are going to be," he said.

Daniel suggested that some of the financial burden will be eased with the help of a \$458 million legal settlement reached with Big Dig contractors in January. Most of the settlement money was set aside in a trust fund primarily for future nonroutine repairs, according to initial announcements, and requires federal approval before it can be spent. That could rule out many of the foreseeable maintenance and rehabilitation issues outlined in the letter, but could cover the costs of some larger repair projects linked to defective work.

Transportation Secretary Bernard Cohen said in January that as much as \$100 million could be spent within a year. None has been used yet, Daniel said.

Executive Director Alan LeBovidge declined a request to be interviewed for this article because the letter to Patrick has not been released publicly.

Outside transportation specialists say it is difficult to generalize what the authority should be spending on regular maintenance and capital projects because the tunnels are unique in their complexity.

But observers inside and outside the agency have expressed concern that the Turnpike Authority does not have enough money to properly maintain the tunnels, calling a \$25 million annual payment from the state too small a figure to cover both meaningful repairs and about \$70 million a year in debt payments related to the project.

LeBovidge has warned in the past that segments of the Big Dig are aging faster than the public realizes, noting that the Ted Williams Tunnel opened more than a decade ago - in 1995, when commercial traffic was first allowed to use it.

In the past, the turnpike has delayed major spending in order to avoid higher tolls. Last fall, the board declined to spend \$250 million on a five-year road, tunnels, and bridge plan - deemed necessary by its staff - because board members wanted to limit the size of this year's toll increase.

In addition to overall maintenance issues, the letter points to several specific concerns previously identified during the engineering review. Together, they are a further reminder that spending on the project is far from over. The panel cited:

the need for a long-term program to plug leaks. The panel said water levels in the tunnels are "consistent with the most stringent US and international requirements." But builders had promised the state the tunnels would have no leaks at all. The letter does not say how extensive the leaks currently are, but previous reports put the number at 670 late last year. The Turnpike Authority continues to spend money plugging them, approving a \$5 million contract in June.

lingering concerns that some Ted Williams Tunnel ceiling anchors cannot be inspected because of the lack of crawl space. Engineers, who began inspecting the ceilings after Del Valle's death, recommend retrofitting these sections with additional support to ensure safety.

the poor condition of the Sumner and Callahan tunnels, which predate the Big Dig by decades. Repairs to ceilings in both will be "costly," the letter says. Engineers said in the letter that a plan to fix the Sumner ceiling should be developed within two years.

the need to continuously monitor fire safety standards in the tunnels. The US Department of Transportation's inspector general has recommended that tunnels meet a higher fire safety standard than the one in place when the Big Dig was designed.

After listing the specific concerns, the panel wrote that it was important to look beyond the current review.

"Continued and safe operation of the [Big Dig and turnpike] can only be achieved with vigilant operational monitoring, thorough inspections on regular schedules, and timely maintenance and rehabilitation of any degraded components of the system," wrote the panel, led by Robert E. Skinner Jr. of the Transportation Research Board, which is affiliated with the National Academy of Sciences.

Skinner declined an interview request because Patrick's office has yet to release the letter publicly. Robert Rooney, the Patrick administration official who is overseeing the review, also declined to be interviewed.

Outside transportation specialists have a hard time quantifying the ongoing maintenance and rehabilitation costs of the Big Dig, because nothing of its scale and complexity has ever been built. A Federal Highway Administration spokeswoman said it is up to states to develop maintenance plans for megaprojects.

Mary Connaughton, a member of the Turnpike Authority Board, said the authority does not have the money to maintain the Big Dig and that costs will only continue to go up. "The only way the turnpike is going to have that money is to increase tolls," she said. "Where else could it come from?"

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