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Major "Big Dig" contractor faces federal charges

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BOSTON (Reuters) - Federal prosecutors have charged the largest contractor in Boston's \$15 billion "Big Dig" road and tunnel construction project with lying about faulty work on a section where a ceiling panel killed a woman.

The U.S. attorney's on Friday charged Modern Continental Construction Co in federal court with knowingly using the wrong epoxy to suspend concrete anchors that failed in the 2006 ceiling collapse that crushed a car.

The collapse killed a woman passenger and damaged public confidence in the costliest public works project in U.S. history.

If convicted, Modern Continental faces criminal fines of up to \$500,000 for each of 49 counts, or a total of \$24.5 million. The counts range from making false statements to wire fraud and submitting phony time and materials slips.

"It is critically important that federal and state tax dollars needed to fund important public work projects like the Big Dig, are safeguarded against waste, fraud and corruption," U.S. Attorney Michael Sullivan said in a statement.

Cambridge, Massachusetts-based Modern Continental said the charges were "completely unfounded and without merit" and that it would "defend against them vigorously."

The company was also named in a November 2006 civil lawsuit brought by the Massachusetts attorney general against 15 companies that worked on the project.

With 7.5 miles of underground highway and a 183-foot (56-metre) wide cable-stayed bridge, the "Big Dig" replaced an ailing elevated expressway to fix chronic congestion and reunite downtown Boston with its historic waterfront neighborhoods.

But cost overruns, leaks, delays, falling debris, criminal probes and charges of corruption plagued the 16-year project that was formally completed in December.

Despite a "stem to stern" inspection that found it fundamentally safe after the 2006 collapse, many Bostonians still regard it with trepidation, citing years of mismanagement and stubborn problems such as leaks.

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board blamed the collapse on the wrong kind of glue used to hold up the concrete ceiling, and criticized the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority for poor oversight and noted mistakes by contractors.

(Reporting by Jason Szep. Editing by Jackie Frank)

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