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Big Dig benefit: A quicker downtown trip *Turnpike Authority report cites business gain*

By Mac Daniel
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The \$14.6-billion Big Dig project has cut the average trip through the center of Boston from 19.5 minutes to 2.8 minutes and has increased by 800,000 the number of people in Eastern Massachusetts who can now get to Logan International Airport in 40 minutes or less, according to a report that is scheduled to be released today.

The report is the first to analyze and link the drive-time benefits of the project to its economic impact since the Big Dig built its final onramp last month. The report relies on data obtained since milestones were completed in 2003, such as opening of the Ted Williams Tunnel to all traffic and opening of the northbound and southbound Interstate 93 tunnels.



CENTRAL ARTERY
Through downtown

THEN  10 m.p.h. average
NOW  43



LEVERETT CIRCLE
Storrow Drive to I-93 North

THEN  4 m.p.h. average
NOW  21



HARBOR TUNNELS
Trip via all tunnels

THEN  13 m.p.h.
NOW  36

Officials at the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, which manages the project, released the executive summary portion of the report to the Globe yesterday.

The improved drive times are projected to result in savings of \$167 million annually: \$24 million in vehicle operating costs and \$143 million in time. The report estimates that the Big Dig will generate \$7 billion in private investment and will create tens of the thousands of jobs in the South Boston waterfront area and along the I-93 corridor.

The report was authored by the Economic Development Research Group, Inc., a Boston-based consulting firm, at the behest of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority, which paid about \$100,000 for the research, much of which was gathered from agencies such as the Boston Redevelopment Authority and the Boston Metropolitan Planning Organization, officials said. "We had nothing to do with how they analyzed it," said the authority spokeswoman, Mariellen Burns.

The report is to be made public this morning at a quarterly board meeting of the Artery Business Committee at the World Trade Center in South Boston.

The Artery Business Committee, the business community's voice on matters about the Big Dig, also reviewed the report to confirm the projected benefits.

The report issued several findings:

The project has reduced by 62 percent the number of daily vehicle hours traveled on both the central artery, the airport tunnels, and Storrow Drive eastbound. Speeds on Storrow Drive east to I-93 north have improved from 4 to 21 miles per hour. Afternoon peak travel times along the length of the I-93 northbound through downtown have dropped from 16 to 3.1 minutes.

"This is the first report done since the opening of the project, and it demonstrates that those commitments and promises made back in the 1980s were true," the authority chairman, Matthew J. Amorello, said yesterday.

The report says that one of the most far-reaching impacts the project has had involves giving more people faster access to Logan.

When the turnpike extension connecting Interstate 90 with Logan Airport, opened fully in 2003 and allowed drivers from the South Shore to avoid snaking through downtown Boston to the Callahan tunnel, the number of people who found themselves within 40 minutes of drive time of the airport grew by 800,000, to a total of about 2.5 million.

That extension, coupled with the opening of the Ted Williams Tunnel, resulted in less traffic on the Callahan and Sumner tunnels, where average weekday speeds increased from 13 miles per hour to 36 miles per hour.

The report projects that the highway improvements will attract \$7 billion in private investment, adding more than 43,000 jobs along the I-93 corridor and in the South Boston Seaport District. "Looking toward the future, the pattern of new development in the Back Bay that originally derived from the Turnpike extension project is being repeated in South Boston and along the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway as a result of the Central Artery/Third Harbor Tunnel project," the report says. The turnpike extension from Newton to Boston was completed in 1965.

The report estimates that property tax revenues from Big Dig development on the South Boston Waterfront, where large parcels remain undeveloped, will equal 9 to 11 percent of the city's 2005 tax base of \$1.13 billion when the waterfront is fully developed as planned, in about 20 years. The wages paid to construction workers along the South Boston Waterfront are predicted to yield \$5 million to \$6 million annually in state income tax and sales tax revenue, as long as development continues.

Analyzing developments built, under construction or being planned, researchers said completion of the Big Dig will mean several benefits. Among them:

About 7,700 new housing units.

About 1,000 affordable housing units.

About 10 million square feet of office and retail space.

About 2,600 hotel rooms.

The executive summary did not explain in detail how the researchers reached their conclusions. The summary refers to the full report for explanations on how their calculations were done. Richard A. Dimino, president of the Artery Business Committee, said report "demonstrates a wonderful story about how Boston's new central highway system sets the stage for economic growth going into the next millennium."

"It's been over 20 years since anybody has tried to take a thorough look at the economic impacts of the Central Artery/Tunnel project" he said, noting that the last economic impact statement was done in the 1980s before the project began.

"What's important and impressive . . . is that this combines the mobility benefits with the land development and economic benefits.

"While we all understood that the project would enhance the trip to downtown Boston through downtown Boston and to Logan," he added, "I think the report take it a step further and articulates the opportunities for the economic future of Boston, as well."