

The Boston Globe

Key ramp may stay shut past holiday *Newfound problem adds to tunnel work*

By Mac Daniel and Raja Mishra, Globe Staff | August 23, 2006

Big Dig and state highway officials disclosed yesterday that unanticipated repairs mean that a key westbound ramp connecting the Ted Williams Tunnel to Interstate 93 is unlikely to open until well after Labor Day, prompting state and local transportation officials to develop plans to prevent massive traffic jams after college students return and schools reopen.

Big Dig officials said that recent inspections by state engineers found that 3,300 steel brackets, which support concrete ceiling panels in Interstate 90 connector tunnels and ramps, need to be replaced, and that the task will extend the repair schedule. The bracket work is in addition to repairs and replacements of the epoxy-and-bolt system that apparently failed in the ceiling collapse that killed Milena Del Valle July 10 in the I-90 connector .

Earlier this month, Governor Mitt Romney said he hoped that both the eastbound and westbound ramps to and from the Ted Williams Tunnel would reopen before Labor Day, allowing traffic to flow more easily to and from Logan International Airport. State studies have found that opening both ramps would reduce traffic congestion and delays in and around the Big Dig by 40 percent.

The eastbound ramp into the Ted Williams Tunnel, known as Ramp A, opened Aug. 8.

City officials and business leaders are looking for ways to handle the anticipated increase in post-Labor Day traffic on the assumption that the second ramp, known as Ramp D, will not reopen in time and that thousands of cars will continue being detoured onto surface roads.

Boston's acting transportation commissioner, Thomas J. Tinlin, said he has asked officials with Boston public schools to place buses around the city to make trips shorter and avoid congestion.

Business groups are urging commuters to stagger their work schedules and use public transit. Richard A. Dimino, president of A Better City Transportation Management Association, said he and other private transportation managers are trying to encourage employers to allow flexible schedules for workers.

The Massachusetts Port Authority has agreed to speed a paving project on the Tobin Bridge so it is done by Labor Day. NStar has agreed to finish the placing of electrical cable through South Boston, especially on Day Boulevard, by Labor Day. And the Massachusetts Highway Department has agreed to delay the closing of the Congress Street bridge until the Ted Williams Tunnel and the I-90 connector reopen.

Business leaders said transportation consultants told them traffic after Labor Day increases between 15 and 25 percent in Boston.

Because the I-90 connector remains closed, drivers must take the Callahan Tunnel or Ramp A to get to Logan, and motorists leaving Logan must go through South Boston to get to I-93 and the Massachusetts Turnpike.

Tinlin plans to meet with state Transportation Secretary John Cogliano next week to work out details of a post-Labor Day traffic plan for the city.

``We're just trying to get a better understanding of what we're going to be dealing with and how we're going to be dealing with it," Tinlin said. ``We can easily take three steps back if people jump back into their vehicles."

Jeff Larson -- general manager of SmartRoute Systems Inc., a traffic-monitoring firm in Cambridge -- said that if Ramp D remains closed after Labor Day there will be slightly more traffic delays during the morning commute and on trips to and from Logan. But he said that delays would not be that much worse than they have been this summer.

``I don't foresee any huge traffic impact," said Larson. ``It's basically going to be more of the same with additional annoyance during the morning rush hour. The Big Dig problem is primarily going to be affecting business travelers going to and from Logan Airport."

The Boston Police Department, meanwhile, is spending roughly \$22,000 a day to station officers at Big Dig work sites and detours. A spokeswoman said the department will continue to do so as long as required.

``Until the time when things return to normal, we'll continue to man the traffic posts as necessary to help to ensure smooth flow," said spokeswoman Elaine Driscoll.

State transportation spokesman Jon Carlisle said the tunnel closings and detours have had ``a significant impact" on Boston's traffic congestion. ``And we're cognizant of the fact that traffic tends to increase after Labor Day," he said.

He said the work necessary to reopen Ramp D would have to be ``very aggressive" to be completed by Labor Day, and said it was unlikely that deadline would be met .

Carlisle said work remains to be done on the epoxy-and-bolt fasteners in Ramp D. In addition, Carlisle said 3,300 steel brackets in the ceilings of I-90 connector tunnels and ramps, including Ramp D, need to be replaced because they do not meet the project's safety standard for how much weight they must be able to support. Engineers had not discovered that problem when Romney estimated the reopening timetable.

State crews plan to replace the 3,300 brackets, which have four bolts, with stronger ones that use five bolts, a switch that required additional design work, Carlisle said. Work could start by the end of this week in Ramp D and the eastbound I-90 connector tunnel, where Del Valle was killed.