

DAVID D'ALESSANDRO

The bright side of the Big Dig

"SO, HOW'S your giant ditch?" The cabbie asked after we had been trapped in a London traffic jam for over an hour.

"My what?" I asked, trying to make certain I heard him right.

"You know, mate, Boston's Chunnel!"

No matter where you travel these days, once someone hears you are from Boston, the discussion inevitably turns to the Big Dig. It seems the fame and infamy of this project transcends oceans, cultures, and languages. The publicity surrounding shoddy workmanship, project-related deaths, indictments, and cost overruns has reached almost every corner of the earth.

Locally, it seems to add to Boston's misguided inferiority complex of being a second-class city to New York in size, culture, business, and sports. People here have added the Big Dig to the regular list of acceptable daily complaints, which also includes the weather, the Yankees, and the Legislature.

It may be fashionable to bash "the Dig," formally known as the Central Artery/Tunnel Project. The deaths associated with it, including workers and one tunnel user, have been terrible and inexcusable. The people responsible for these deaths and financial problems need to be held accountable. However, despite these tragedies and other problems, the community should begin taking universal pride in what has been accomplished.

I remember my first encounter with Boston's traffic woes. The date was June 25, 1984. At the end of business on my first day of working in Boston, I looked out my window from Boston's tallest building and could not believe my eyes. As far as I could see north of Boston — on Route 93, Route 1, tunnel entrances, Storrow Drive — there were miles and miles of brake-lit, bumper-to-bumper traffic. Ribbons of cars and trucks almost melding into a bizarre conga line. I walked over to the other side of the

building and saw the same phenomena stifling the coastal roads leading to the South Shore. You could almost hear the drivers' frustration from atop the Hancock Tower.

The traffic I saw was a result of a "modern" Central Artery completed in 1959 that was designed to hold 75,000 cars and was overflowing at 200,000 and climbing. It was predicted that by 2010, without a new harbor crossing and roadways, much of Boston would have stop-and-go traffic for 16 hours a day.

And so the Big Dig was born. Ronald Reagan vetoed the federal funding, but Tip O'Neill, Ted Kennedy, and Mike Dukakis fought and won a congressional override by one Senate vote.

The result was a colossal two-decade-long inconvenience and staggering costs of at least \$14.6 billion. As far as I am concerned, it was worth every dime — even the graft, bribes, and corruption.

No longer are the Waterfront and North End disconnected from downtown. You can get to Logan Airport directly from the Mass. Pike courtesy of the Ted Williams Tunnel. The Lenny Zakim Bridge, mirroring the Bunker Hill Monument, majestically connects over the Charles River. The Tip O'Neill Tunnel efficiently replaces many lane miles of overground and elevated highways.

All in all, it is an engineering marvel 25-plus years in the making. The project built 161 lane miles of new roads — half in tunnels. New bridges, roadways, and other spectacular engineering feats make our Boston a vibrant and attractive world-class city. If this incredible project had not been launched and accomplished, I shudder to think of the consequences. In all probability, many companies would have fled, the Waterfront and Southie development areas would have atrophied, the convention business would be nil, and we probably would be starting the project now begging for \$30 billion in federal fund-

ing. The added attraction is that instead of ugly, decaying elevated asphalt, we have 300 acres of new parks and open space. Most of the 27 acres of prime downtown land will remain open. The rest will be used for commercial development, retail, housing, and nonprofit buildings. There are also 40 new acres created along the Charles and 105 new acres at Spectacle Island.

Almost 10,000 shrubs and trees will be planted in downtown alone. Not many cities are making new green space these days.

What city in the world is not jealous of what we have? Ask the residents and commuters in London, Tokyo, Paris, and Rome. Or ask the ones in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Ask them if they could use \$14.6 billion of primarily federal money to boost their economies and relieve their choking vehicular traffic. In a heartbeat.

But too bad for them. We were smart enough and lucky enough to get the money while we could. No city will ever receive this kind of highway funding again. And while it has had its share of problems, all major public works projects do.

For those who use the new construction and move around faster than ever, be thankful to the people who made this happen. O'Neill, Kennedy, Dukakis, Fred Salvucci, and Jim Kerisiotos overcame great criticism to keep the project on track. For those who still whine and complain, try using the surface roads and see how far you get.

So, let's take the Big Dig off the "bash Boston list" and place it on the same list with the Red Sox, Paul Revere, and baked beans.

David D'Alessandro, a guest columnist, is former CEO of John Hancock Financial Services.