

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Down in the Big Dig

It finally arrived, my date with the Big Dig. Along with a dozen other legislators, I spent a rainy Tuesday walking through tunnels, climbing down ladders, mounting stairs to the new bridge deck. These are my impressions of that day.

The first order of business was to don safety gear. Helmets, glasses and day-glo vests. Everyone we saw throughout the day had similar attire. We got a quick look at an underground ramp leading to the Ted Williams tunnel that is scheduled to open this summer. The tiled walls and paneled ceilings showed us the end product that is envisioned for the project, and it is well on the way to being as polished as a model home. But we also saw some of the work in progress, and the contrast is extreme.

Touring a single tunnel showed us three different stages of construction. Climbing down the first sets of stairs, we were able to see a barren tunnel. The walls were concrete, reinforced at short intervals with steel beams. The floor, we were told, consisted of concrete that was 16 to 20 feet thick. The reason for such mass is the buoyancy of the tunnel. The weight anchors the tunnel and keeps it from shifting with tides in the bay. The idea that a tunnel could float unless it had a 20 foot concrete floor was only one concept that stretched my understanding.

We walked down a slope, and then down a ladder into a new section of the Dig. The project is divided into sectors working with separate contracts, and the next sector was more primitive than the first. For the first time we were glad to be wearing the winter boots that were part of our dress code. Water was running down the floor, either from the rain, the underground location or the construction process. Looking behind us, we could see the subsurface vent panels that will remove exhaust fumes. Workers were overhead, installing huge I-beams, each one the length of an oversized tractor-trailer bed. Each one, we were informed, allowed only a 1/4 inch deviation in its fit to the tunnel span.

Another ladder was ahead. This one led down to a rough floor that obviously still awaited most of those 20 feet of concrete. And the sky was visible in patches through the first roof braces. I asked where we were in relation to the city above, and in answer was told to look up. Overhead, through one of those holes in the tunnel roof, was the eagle that adorns the roof of South Station. Oriented now to the city, I understood that this entire worksite was the hole in the ground that I cross regularly right outside the bus station.

The three phases visible from the descent into a single tunnel provided a good summary of the work at hand. I gained new respect for the workers who go into that hole day after day to transform it into a road. In contrast, I was about to see the sunshine part of the project, the new bridge.

The sun had actually come out by the time we arrived at the site, and the bridge construction manager proudly gave us the sunny news that his part of the Big Dig is ahead of schedule. The span, being built out from both sides of the Charles, will meet in the middle. It is not a suspension bridge, but a work of art with triangular pillars at either end and cables that angle down both to solid land and to the bridge deck. The bridge is a little-noticed part of the project, even though its beauty will make it a new landmark on the skyline of Boston.

Bostonians complain about the cost of the Big Dig, and they will benefit from it daily. Those of us who live in Western Massachusetts complain because we may never even see this hole in the ground. But the hole is there, it is 2/3 filled, and the state must find the most responsible way to finish the project. If it improves the atmosphere in the city as much as the designers expect, maybe we will all be spending more time in Boston.