

## **Tunnel Vision: Cutting Massachusetts Taxpayers' Costs on the New Central Artery**

**By Stephen Adams**

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On December 20, 2003, the new submerged Central Artery opened, replacing the elevated section of I-93 through downtown Boston. With completion of the submerged artery -- more or less on time, but more than \$4 billion over budget -- Boston's other green monster, the barrier between the North End and the rest of the City, is coming down, bathing once darkened sections of town in broad swaths of sunlight. It is a new beginning for Boston and the North End. It is also an excellent time to reassess how the new submerged roadway should be operated and maintained.

The newly submerged artery is part of Interstate 93. Although it is not a toll road, the section running under Boston is owned and operated by the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority. Original plans called for MassHighway to operate the submerged artery as it does the rest of the Interstate system. But ownership of the artery was transferred to the Turnpike Authority in 1997 to justify the use of toll hikes to help pay for the Big Dig.

While the Turnpike owns and operates the Central Artery, Commonwealth taxpayers nonetheless pay the artery's operating costs to the tune of about \$35 million per year.

Turnpike management and the Legislature successfully fended off proposals to merge the Pike and MassHighway again this year. The Legislature rejected Governor Romney's plan as well as competing House and Senate proposals to combine the small but expensive Turnpike bureaucracy and road crews with the more efficient and politically accountable state highway agency.

One of the defenses used by Masspike officials to justify its continued existence is its ownership of the submerged Central Artery and the new Ted Williams Tunnel. The "state-of-the-art" requires the deft hands of Turnpike staff to make it work most efficiently, according to the Pike. This argument was given a serious work-out earlier this year when it was revealed that Pike electricians working on the tunnel and artery were racking up six-figure overtime pay. Still, the Turnpike lives on.

If we can't do away with the redundant Turnpike Authority, the least Pike management can do is adopt some of the efficiency measures practiced by MassHighway on the taxpayers' piece of the road. Specifically, the Pike should contract out to private sector bidders the operations and maintenance of the submerged central artery.

Since 1992, MassHighway has put maintenance work on several state highways up for competitive bid. Under the plan, state highway employees compete with private sector contractors for the work. When first piloted in 1992, competitive contracting of one district (Essex) saved the state about \$8 million in direct expenses and added services and in reallocating state workers to fill vacancies rather than add new hires. Today, about 40 percent of the state's highways are maintained by private contractors, resulting in better service and lower costs. The competition has also had a positive effect on state highway workers. Unionized state employees dramatically improved their productivity to match the private contractors.

So why not put operation of the Central Artery out to bid? Skeptics might say that road maintenance is one thing, but is the private sector equipped to operate and

maintain the high tech Central Artery? In a word, yes. One need only look to our neighbor to the north for evidence.

In 1997, the government of Ontario, Canada opened the world's first all-electronic, open access toll highway. Now the 67-mile long the highway is owned and operated by a private company. It is a technological wonder whose sale landed the Ontario government a tidy \$1.5 billion (Canadian) profit.

This is not a call for putting tolls on I-93, or privatizing the central artery. Rather, it is a modest proposal to let competition reduce operating costs and reduce tax dollars now going to the Turnpike. If the Canadians can find a private company to operate an entire highway, surely there is a private operator who will operate one tunnel and do the job for less than Turnpike employees.

There is no legitimate reason for two highway departments in Massachusetts. The Turnpike Authority exists, not to protect toll revenues, but to preserve jobs for the politically-favored. While tollpayers lack the political clout to force changes at the Pike, taxpayers should demand more accountability for their part of the road.

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