

DIG IT? THOUSANDS TOUR THE \$14B PROJECT

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By Thomas C. Palmer Jr.

They're paying for it, they deserved a close-up look, and yesterday they got it.

On the last day of 2000, after nine years of Big Dig construction, thousands of taxpayers, from Massachusetts and elsewhere, took a walking tour of the largest highway construction project in the nation. "I'm impressed. If anything it's more than I expected," said David Jacobs, who set up his tripod and photographed the colorful construction tableau on a three-quarter-mile underground route.

"Everybody's read everything," said Jacobs, who is from Sharon but had stayed overnight Saturday in Boston after a party, expecting a snowstorm. "But to stand in the middle of what's going to be an underground 10-lane highway is really something."

It was a big undertaking, even for a megaproject, to get thousands of people safely in and out of a major construction site. But months of military-style planning paid off. The weather cooperated - sunny and cold, but dry - and crowds were steady but not overwhelming during the 11 a.m.-5 p.m. window.

A maze of fences set up to hold long queues at the Fulton Street entrance ramp (which will become an exit ramp for cars in November 2002) was barely used most of the day.

An estimated 20,000 to 25,000 people took the 15- to 30-minute walk-through, with the line at its longest at 4 p.m. Visitors were given fact sheets on the \$14 billion-plus highway, tunnel, and bridge undertaking, as they entered a section being built by McCourt Construction Co. The first 12,000 received Big Dig bookmarks.

"We took the train in specifically for this," said Steve Slater of Acton, carrying 3-year-old Eric, and trailing the rest of the family. "This is really impressive. I explained that in a couple of years we'll be driving through. I want them to remember what it's like to walk through."

Among those getting the most pleasure out of the tour was a person wearing an orange vest. One of about 70 volunteers from the Big Dig, John Rich, who works on the "finishing" contract, was the one who suggested a New Year's Eve public tour.

He paused from an explanation of the suction machine that lifts 3,000-pound ceiling sections into place, and recalled the moment two years ago when he

thought of throwing a big party for the public. Rich was working under Atlantic Avenue in the future northbound lanes of I-93.

He and other workers were awaiting some waterproofing material as they laid down the "mud mat," or base, of the roadway.

A crane lifted one of the huge concrete deck panels that form the temporary Atlantic Avenue surface overhead. "A shaft of light comes in, we're all standing in it," he recalled.

"Everybody was in awe," he said. It was one of those scenes you remember all your life. Stunning."

A big fan of First Night, Rich wrote out a proposal and submitted it to Turnpike chairman Andrew Natsios last May, just at the right time. Financial and political problems had put morale at a low point. Natsios jumped at the idea, and the planning began.

If many of the headlines about the project have highlighted cost runovers and other problems, those seemed forgotten yesterday.

"I think we have a happy crowd," said Martin Charney, a longtime project employee. "The comments are very positive."

Alison Arnstein of Brookline emerged from the tour at 3 p.m. with her husband, Ted, 2-year-old Jacob, and 5-month-old Sophie. She said the project probably isn't worth \$14 billion.

Still, "It's very cool," she said. "It's good to see where all the money is going." Like many others, the Arnsteins came to the city yesterday just for the Big Dig tour.

Nancy Alloway of Lexington peered up from the underground lanes through an opening near Commercial Street, where the rusting old green Central Artery is temporarily supported over its future replacement.

"Is that I-93 up there?" she asked, incredulously. "Are there cars up there?"

Some visitors moved along the roped-off path; others stopped to study the machinery or inquire of Big Dig staff.

"No clue," laughed one project lawyer, when asked what a large yellow piece of equipment is for. But Cynthia McCarthy, a resident construction engineer, said: "It's a lift. You might call it a person lift. Nowadays we don't call it a man lift."

Bob Bliss, Turnpike spokesman, said yesterday was a morale-booster. "It's a chance for them to show off their work publicly."

"I love this. Been watching this for five years," said Kate Bielaczyc, a North End neighbor of the sometimes noisy Big Dig.

Michael Lewis, recently bumped from acting project director up to permanent, wasn't working, but he came for the tour. Employees, including top project managers, welcomed the crowds.

"Ho, ho, ho," said a Santa Claus who looked suspiciously like Big Dig budget director William Edwards, greeting arriving visitors under the old Artery.

Down in the tunnel, filmmaker Kaluska Poventud, formerly with NBC, did interviews on videotape. "There's never been an over-the-counter documentary - something in stores for people to buy," she said. "We've not see the beautiful photography of this, with the grandeur."

Big Dig 2001 calendars went for \$10 each from a private entrepreneur on the street.

David and Stephi Schnirman of West Orange, N.J., were visiting friends in Nahant. "We've heard of the Big Dig before," David Schnirman said.

He thought a tunnel under New York City would be a good idea and was impressed by Boston's big tunnel. "It's an amazing endeavor," Schnirman said.