

WESTERN REPORT

Unique Pacific Coast Highway Tunnel Projects

BY MICHAEL HOWE

Have you ever heard the saying that “there’s nowhere to go but up?” Well, with highway construction that is not always the case. In fact, sometimes down is the best direction – down and under, that is. Along the Pacific Coast there are two interesting highway tunnel projects, though both are uniquely different and interesting. Both are high profile and have garnered significant public interest, not only in their local communities but region wide. The George Massey Tunnel project in British Columbia and the Washington State Route 99 through (err, under) Seattle are both quite interesting.

GEORGE MASSEY TUNNEL

Opened in 1959 amid great fanfare, with Queen Elizabeth present, the George Massey Tunnel is 629 meters long, and was the first tunnel project in North America to use immersed tube technology. Now, in 2013, it assumed that the useful life of the original tunnel is nearing an end. In 10-15 years major components

of the tunnel will need to be replaced entirely, and thus the planning process for the tunnel replacement began in late 2012. Kate Trotter, Public Affairs Officer for the British Columbia Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, says, “The Government of B.C. recognizes the importance of the George Massey Tunnel to the movement of goods and people in the region, including cross-border truck traffic.”

According to Trotter, the George Massey Tunnel users face significant traffic congestion. The existing crossing is at capacity during the morning and afternoon rush, and near capacity throughout the day. “That’s why we’re committed to work with communities in Metro Vancouver to accelerate replacement of the Massey Tunnel,” says Trotter. Between November 2012 and April 2013, the government held public consultation meetings during which more than 2,000 people participated in those two phases (Phase 1’s consultation was focused on understanding the current travel needs,

and Phase 2’s consultation was focused on options for the tunnel replacement).

“This consultation was the first step in planning to ensure we have a timely solution in place to meet the needs of the communities, businesses and commuters that rely on this crossing,” says Trotter. “The summary report for this second phase of consultations is due later this year.”

According to the George Massey Tunnel Replacement website (engage.gov.bc.ca/masseytunnel), there are five potential scenarios for the George Massey Tunnel crossing: Maintain the existing tunnel, replace the existing tunnel with a new bridge, replace the existing tunnel with a new tunnel, maintain the existing tunnel and build a new crossing along the existing Highway 99 corridor, and maintain the existing tunnel and build a new crossing in a new corridor.

Based on those scenarios, it’s little wonder the British Columbia government is interested in public input and is starting the planning phase now. With only 10-15 years of useful

life on the original tunnel, it is important to start planning now as projects of this magnitude take significant time. Projects of this magnitude also have significant impacts (financial, convenience, other) on local communities and businesses that rely on the Tunnel. There is, of course, an international impact as well with a border crossing.

This is a project that those in the trucking industry should stay informed on.

WASHINGTON STATE ROUTE 99 UNDER SEATTLE

When the world’s largest tunneling machine arrived by ship in Seattle on April 2, 2013, it did so with great fanfare. This was, after all, the sign that digging would soon begin on a new Washington State Route 99 under Seattle. It was in 1953 that the original Alaskan Way Viaduct opened along the waterfront of Seattle, and now it is on the verge of being replaced by a tunnel dug by “Bertha,” a five-story tall tunneling machine that will ultimately create a new path for the route.

On July 30, 2013, Bertha



“Bertha” is a five-story tall tunneling machine that will ultimately create a new path for the Alaskan Way Viaduct.

began its job – digging a tunnel – but won’t be seen again for about 14 months when it emerges at the end of its underground track. Bertha will dig a 2 mile tunnel under Seattle’s downtown, and will remove over 850,000 cubic yards of soil (which will be reclaimed). With the project divided into 10 zones, the first one was just underway at the time of this writing. “We designed the project so that we would have opportunities to test the machine and make sure she’s functioning properly before we get beneath downtown,” said Linea Laird, Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) administrator for the Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Program. “If Bertha was learning to ride a bike, this initial section would be her training wheels.”

One of the reasons for the Washington State Route 99 tunnel project is that in 2001 an earthquake damaged the original viaduct and a decision was made to take it down and replace the route. The tunnel itself is expected to be very safe during an earthquake. According to the WSDOT’s web site (www.wsdot.wa.gov/Projects/Viaduct), “Structural engineers agree that tunnels can be one of the safest places to be during an earthquake. The SR 99 tunnel is being designed to withstand an earthquake that only happens every 2,500 years on average

(in the range of 9.0 on the Richter scale) without collapsing.”

The trucking industry will have access to the tunnel, though hazardous or combustible materials will be prohibited. The new tunnel maintains the current freight route through Seattle and preserves U.S. Interstate 5 for regional and state freight trips. Other improvements in the area related to the project will also result in better access to I-5 and I-90 from the Port of Seattle.

One of the downsides of the tunnel project, like so many new infrastructure improvements, is that tolling is likely once it is opened. “In 2013 WSDOT was directed by the Washington State Legislature to raise \$200 million from tolls for the SR 99 Tunnel Project,” states the WSDOT web site. At this time an advisory committee has been established to consider tolling options.

After 14 months of tunneling and moving 850,000 cubic yards of soil, Bertha’s job will be complete. Then, the work begins on building the roadway and tunnel structure. This impressive \$3.1 billion project will have a significant impact on travel through the Seattle area.

Safe digging Bertha, see you next year! Follow Mike on Twitter @TruckingDC. Like Mike on www.facebook.com/TruckingPoliticsMore. ■

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