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Dozing on the Dig: Idle hands raise ire

By Casey Ross

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A stunning lack of oversight is allowing [Big Dig](#) workers to sleep on the job, read newspapers in idling vehicles and drive backhoes aimlessly through city streets – all while pocketing their \$49-an-hour taxpayer-funded pay, a Herald investigation found.

During a five-day surveillance, a reporter watched heavy-equipment operators nod off or simply sit idle for hours on construction sites along Atlantic Avenue. At times, workers who are supposed to be fixing prior construction blunders napped in full view of supervisors and passing commuters.

“There is no explanation or justification for anyone sleeping on the job,” Massachusetts Turnpike Authority spokeswoman Mariellen Burns said in a statement. “It is disrespectful and in this case infuriating to residents, businesses and commuters who are being inconvenienced as work proceeds.”

Big Dig crane and backhoe operators caught snoozing, reading and joy riding are paid about \$102,000 a year, according to prevailing wage rates.

Despite the presence of company supervisors on Atlantic Avenue sites, work to rebuild city streets and repair a steam line damaged in previous construction progressed slowly or not at all during much of the five-day surveillance. The sites, located just north of the Boston Harbor Hotel, were often vacant or only occupied by a few workers for hours at a time.

Big Dig construction continues to crawl. The Turnpike Authority recently pushed back a deadline for substantial completion of construction to Oct. 31 from Sept. 22.

The Turnpike and private manager Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff are responsible for overseeing and inspecting construction on work sites, but it is the duty of contractors to supervise the daily activities of their employees.

The lead contractor on the sites monitored by the Herald is Modern Continental Co. – a Cambridge firm that won several major Big Dig contracts but fell into financial difficulties and merged with Jay Cashman Inc. Cashman is now financing and managing Modern Continental's work.

While poor productivity does not mean the project's \$14.6 billion price tag will increase, taxpayers who have already signed the check for construction are literally paying workers to do nothing.

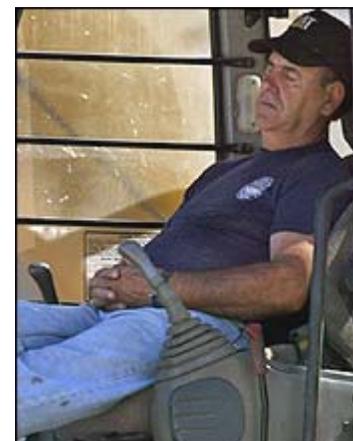
Among the most blatant examples of worker sloth:

- A backhoe operator drifted in and out of sleep for several hours Sept. 22 while sitting atop a 50-foot dirt mound along Atlantic Avenue. He took an hourlong break at noon and began dozing again after working for 40 minutes.
- A crane operator read books and newspapers for hours at a time during three days on the sites. He was seldom asked to do any work and remained idle for long periods during eight-hour shifts.
- Another backhoe operator on an adjacent site drove in circles around the Financial District on Sept. 28 with no cargo and no destination. He returned after 30 minutes and nodded off between 10 a.m. and 11:30 a.m.

A spokesman for Jay Cashman/Modern Continental issued a brief statement in response to the Herald's investigation.: “This behavior does not represent the commitment of the vast majority of Modern Continental employees and the excellent work they do on a daily basis,” the statement said.

A supervisor who was monitoring three of the four work sites declined to comment when asked why workers were sleeping on the job. Moments later, the supervisor approached a reporter with another worker who began shouting, “Stay the (expletive) off my (expletive) work sites.”

During the Herald's surveillance, construction began each day about 7 a.m. and ended between 3 p.m. and 4 p.m. At times, activity was buzzing on all four sites, but those periods were rare amid long stretches when crane and backhoe operators were inactive.



A backhoe operator snoozes.
(Staff photo by Mike Adaskaveg)

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Down time is routine for heavy-equipment operators on any large construction project, but the conduct viewed by the Herald drew sharp rebukes from project overseers and even union leaders.

“It’s disappointing to hear this. We do represent these people and we certainly don’t condone sleeping,” said Lou Rasetta, business manager for Local 4 Heavy Equipment Operators.

The Turnpike Authority vowed to crack down on misbehaving workers. “We have contacted the contractors . . . to advise them of your observations and they agree the situation is unacceptable,” Burns, the Turnpike spokeswoman, said. “We fully intend to follow up and make sure appropriate action is taken to ensure this work is done on schedule and that workers are conducting themselves responsibly.”

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