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PREMATURE POPS

THE MASSACHUSETTS Turnpike Authority is making a mistake with its plan for an elaborate ceremony to mark the opening of the southbound lanes of the underground Central Artery. The weather is marginal, the state budget is tight, and the entire Artery-tunnel project is far from finished. The authority had best wait a few months for a more innovative celebration.

Matthew J. Amorello, the authority chairman, has hired the Boston Pops to play at the Dec. 19 opening in the southbound tunnel. Not the best location for a concert, one would think, but an authority spokesman, Sean O'Neill, said this week that the pomp is necessary to commemorate the last of three major milestones for the Artery project this year.

But ceremonies to mark the opening of the connection between the turnpike and the Ted Williams Tunnel took place in January, and the opening of the northbound road was preceded by a ribbon-cutting in March. A separate ceremony was held to dedicate the Leonard P. Zakin Bunker Hill Bridge in October 2002. Is it really necessary to have another celebration when a fourth lane still needs to be added to the southbound side and the above-ground Artery has yet to be torn down?

O'Neill said the ceremony is needed to honor all the people who worked for years to make this project a success. But that could easily be accomplished with a party costing far less than the Pops extravaganza.

Citizens Bank is contributing \$250,000 to pay for the Pops. The bank can do what it wants with its money, but the Turnpike Authority is using \$100,000 for security from a separate account into which Citizens contributed in return for sponsoring the Fast Lane. That money would be better used for other purposes.

For people who live or work in downtown Boston, the project will not be complete until the elevated Artery is demolished. An ugly fixture in the area for almost 50 years, its passing deserves a celebration of its own. As the mile-long Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway comes into being, it will provide its own reasons — and locations — for many celebrations.

Andrew Paven, former spokesman for the project, believes that before the wrecker's ball descends on the final section, there ought to be at least two parties. One would have a high ticket price to help pay for the landscaping that will make the reclaimed surface green and inviting. Another, with a lower admission, would allow people of all income levels to view the city from this elevated perch for one last time.

Officials tell Paven they like the idea, but nobody is doing anything about it. Why not scrap or substantially downsize the Dec. 19 opening and when the weather is warmer put the money into a "Last Night" celebration for the demise of an urban eyesore and the prospect of beautiful new parks.