

The Boston Globe

MONDAY, JUNE 5, 2006

Big Dig event honors a hometown hero

Tip O'Neill's name lives on via a tunnel

By Sean P. Murphy

GLOBE STAFF

A generation ago, the state's congressional delegation rippled with political muscle, beginning with the heavyweight House speaker, Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. of Cambridge.

"Let me tell you something about Washington," O'Neill told an interviewer in 1992, when asked how he had persuaded the federal government to pay most of the cost of the project, now known as the Big Dig, the largest public-works project in the country's history.

"The squeaky wheel gets the grease," he said. "Maybe that's not the way to run a government, but that's the way the government runs. When you have a delegation with the speaker being from Massachusetts and everybody else in powerful positions, Massachusetts did tremendously well."

O'Neill left the House in 1987. He died in 1994, long before the Big Dig reshaped downtown Boston and loosened clogged highways. But few ever questioned whose tunnel it was.

Today, it becomes official. The two-mile Interstate 93 tunnel beneath downtown Boston is the Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr. Tunnel.

To mark the moment, the O'Neill family will host a ceremony aside the new open space where the elevated steel Central Artery once ingloriously divided the city and its waterfront.

Scheduled to speak at an invitation-only gathering beneath the rotunda of the Boston Harbor Hotel are O'Neill's son, Thomas P. O'Neill III, a former lieutenant governor and now the head of the lobbying powerhouse O'Neill and Associates.

The event, at 11 a.m., promises to gather one of the greatest concentrations of political power brokers in Boston since the national Democratic Convention at the FleetCenter (now TD Banknorth Garden) in 2004, a short distance from today's festivities.

As master of ceremonies, Chris Matthews, the "Hardball" television political commentator and former O'Neill aide, is being given the task of allotting time at the podium among Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Senator John F. Kerry, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, US Representatives Edward J. Markey, Barney Frank, and Michael E.

Capuano, Mayor Thomas M. Menino, Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey, labor leader Joseph Nigro, Turnpike Authority chairman Matthew J. Amorello, and US Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta, according to event organizers.

Notably not on the list of speakers and not expected to attend is Governor Mitt Romney, event organizers say.

Shortly after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Romney said that he wanted the underground highway to be named the Liberty Tunnel, in honor of Massachusetts veterans. State legislative leaders initially indicated support for the plan, which would have named a lesser section of the project for O'Neill, involving the portion of Interstate 90 between the Fort Point Channel and the entrance to the Ted Williams Tunnel.

The naming rights of the interstate highway system, however, belong to Congress, which acted in 2005 on behalf of O'Neill. Capuano, who holds the seat that O'Neill once occupied, sponsored the measure.

Eventually, signs will direct motorists to the O'Neill Tunnel, although the highway will continue to be named for John F. "Honey Fitz" Fitzgerald, former mayor of Boston and grandfather of Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

As champion of the project from the middle 1970s until he left office, O'Neill took his lumps for orchestrating what some derided as pork-barrel spending. At the time, the project's estimated cost was about \$2 billion; today, its cost is pegged at \$14.6 billion.

O'Neill persevered for 12 years, relying on many friendships, among Republicans and Democrats, he had built in 34 years in Congress.

Interviewed for the book "Mega-Projects: The Changing Politics of Urban Public Investment," by Harvard's David Luberoff and Alan Altshuler, O'Neill in 1992 said he always considered the tunnel project critical to "the rebirth and rebuilding of the city."

Sean P. Murphy can be reached at smurphy@globe.com.

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THOMAS P. O'NEILL JR.