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Mass. Investigating Big Dig Contractors

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By STEVE LeBLANC Associated Press Writer

BOSTON (AP) -- The Massachusetts attorney general is investigating two of the largest contractors in the \$14.6 billion Big Dig highway project amid new questions about the project's safety.

The civil investigation into Bechtel/Parsons Brinckerhoff and Modern Continental Construction Co. focuses on what Attorney General Thomas Reilly called poor oversight and shoddy work on the project, a system of bridges and tunnels plagued by cost overruns and riddled by leaks and other flaws.

Spokespeople for both companies said they were unaware of an investigation and refused comment.

The outside engineer who led an investigation into leaks at the project said in a March 9 letter to the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority that he can no longer vouch for the safety of its tunnels.

Gov. Mitt Romney responded by asking the state's highest court Tuesday for an opinion on whether he can fire the chairman of the Turnpike Authority, which oversees the Big Dig.

"With the Big Dig there's been a pattern of cover-up and stonewalling that has left the public with little confidence that the project is being managed well or that the road and tunnel system are safe to travel," Romney said.

But he stopped short of calling the tunnels unsafe and said he will continue to drive through them.

The letter from engineering specialist Jack K. Lemley, who said he was "unable to express an opinion as to the safety of the I-93 portion of the Central Artery," was first reported Tuesday by The Boston Globe.

Reilly's investigation, which started three weeks ago, is being conducted under the state's false claims act. The measure makes it a crime for contractors to submit invoices or other demands for payment for work that was not done.

Reilly said the probe could become a criminal investigation.

"It can be a criminal matter," he told The Boston Globe. "Bechtel was hired to design and oversee the management, including the work of Modern Continental, and they didn't do their job. That's where our focus is."

Reilly issued a statement Tuesday evening saying the Turnpike "has agreed to turn over all documents relating to the safety of the I-93 tunnel."

The tunnels are the centerpiece of the massive highway project, which buried Interstate 93 under downtown Boston and connected the Massachusetts Turnpike to Logan International Airport.

The project has been plagued for years by cost overruns and management problems. In September, water broke through a faulty wall panel and flooded the I-93 northbound tunnel, backing up rush-hour traffic for miles. A subsequent investigation headed by Lemley found hundreds of smaller leaks.

Lemley told lawmakers in November that there was no public safety risk to people driving through the tunnels.

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