



Washington State
Department of Transportation

SR 99 Tunnel Project

August 2012

Tunneling toward a new SR 99 corridor

It's not rocket science, but it might be just as impressive: a custom-built, tube-shaped machine that bores its way through the earth, building a tunnel behind it as it goes. Industry folks call it a tunnel boring machine. We call it our ride to a new SR 99 corridor.

Tunneling beneath Seattle allows us to replace the SR 99 Alaskan Way Viaduct while minimizing closures of the highway during construction. When the tunnel opens in late 2015, a two-mile stretch of SR 99 will move underground, allowing us to remove the viaduct and open up nine acres of new public space along Seattle's downtown waterfront.

At 57.5 feet in diameter – roughly as tall as a five-story building – our tunnel boring machine will be the world's largest. Crews are currently assembling the machine in Japan. It will be tested, taken apart and barged to Seattle in more than 40 pieces that will be reassembled in an 80-foot-deep pit to the west of Seattle's stadiums. The first pieces of the machine will begin arriving early next year, and tunneling is scheduled to start next summer.



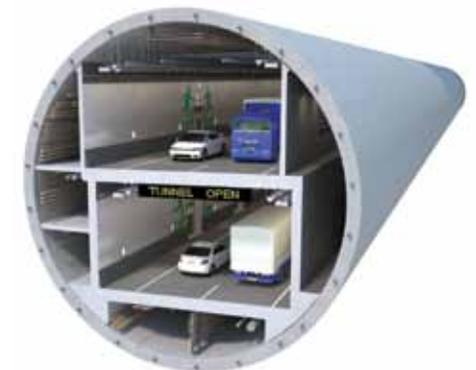
The SR 99 tunnel boring machine will be as tall as the viaduct it's helping to replace.



A tunnel boring machine similar to the one that will dig the SR 99 tunnel.



Crews are assembling the machine now in Japan.

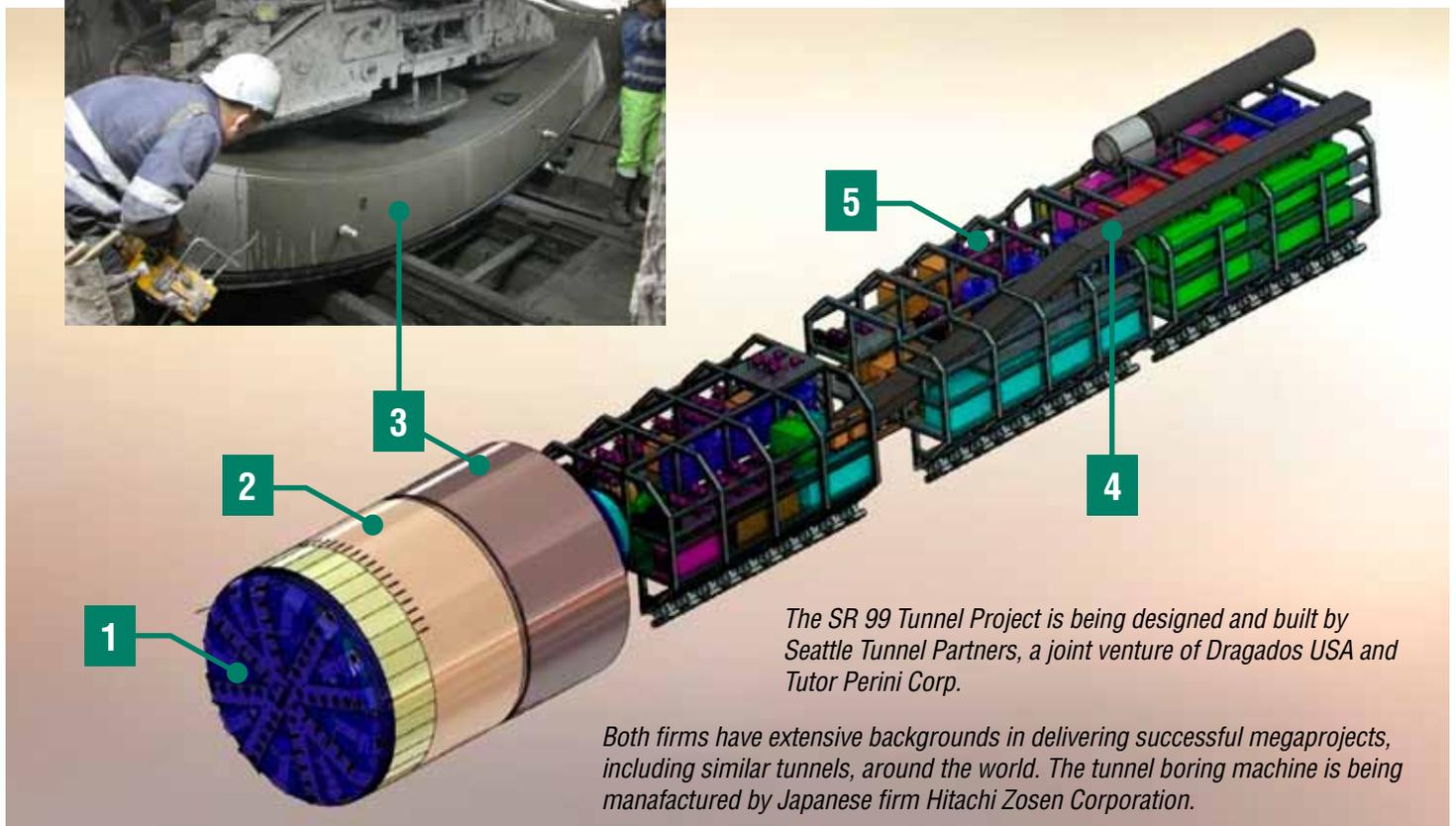


A rendering of the SR 99 tunnel, which will open to traffic in late 2015.

Better than a shovel

How does a tunnel boring machine work? The answer, as you might expect, is complicated. Our custom-built machine was built specifically for the ground conditions beneath Seattle. The graphic below illustrates a few of its more notable parts.

- 1. Cutterhead:** The machine's front end is known as the cutterhead for good reason – it has dozens of teeth that chip away the ground as it rotates. The machine will dig an average of 35 feet per day. At the end of its journey, the cutterhead will have rotated the equivalent of 2,300 miles – enough to spin from Seattle to New York.
- 2. Tunnel shield:** As the name implies, the shield is the protective barrier between the ground and the workers and equipment inside the machine.
- 3. Concrete panels:** Curved concrete panels are installed behind the shield to form “rings” that serve as the tunnel's exterior walls. Ring by ring, the machine pushes forward while the tunnel takes shape in its wake.
- 4. Conveyor belt:** A massive conveyer belt will move excavated soil from the front of the machine out of the tunnel to barges waiting at nearby Terminal 46. The belt will get longer as the machine progresses, eventually reaching 9,000 feet in length.
- 5. Trailing gear:** More than 300 feet of support gear will trail behind the machine. It includes everything the machine and its crew needs, from supplies like grout and grease to amenities like restrooms and a kitchen. About 25 crew members will be working in the machine at any given time.



The SR 99 Tunnel Project is being designed and built by Seattle Tunnel Partners, a joint venture of Dragados USA and Tutor Perini Corp.

Both firms have extensive backgrounds in delivering successful megaprojects, including similar tunnels, around the world. The tunnel boring machine is being manufactured by Japanese firm Hitachi Zosen Corporation.

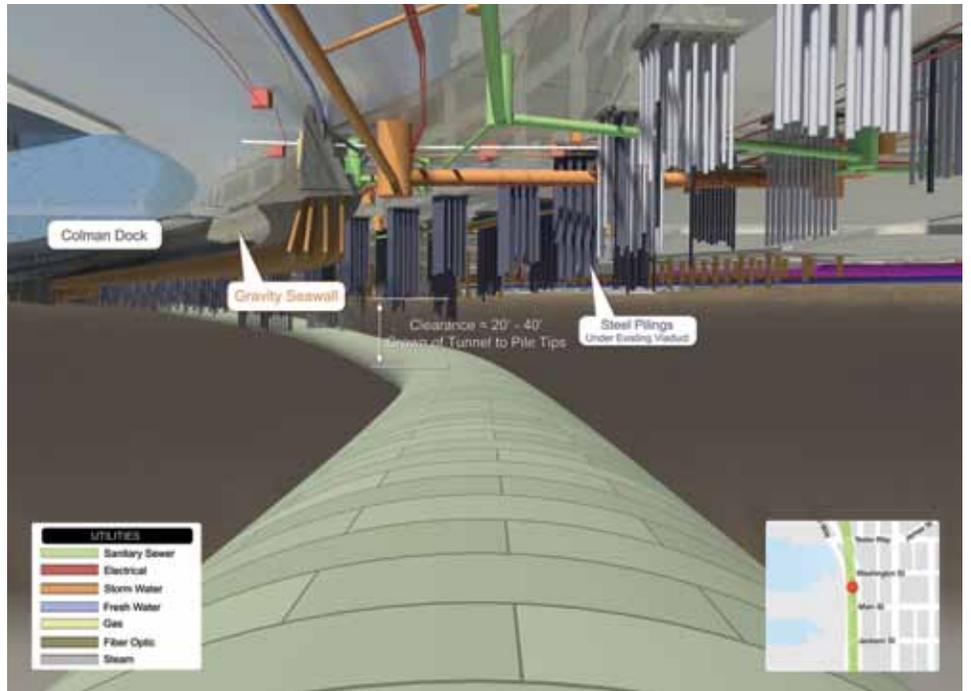
Action on eight screens

There's a lot to keep track of when you're tunneling beneath a bustling city. Steering, for instance. And of course the soil in front of the machine. The important thing to know about soil is that not all of it is the same. In fact, there are eight different types of soils along our tunnel route. In general, the looser the soil, the more likely it is to move as you tunnel through it. Sand, for example, is harder to control than clay. Other things workers might encounter underground: boulders, gravel, logs and various man-made objects.

Our machine can handle almost anything, but that doesn't mean our crews won't use extreme caution. They will constantly monitor ground conditions as they drive the machine forward. Safety measures begin before tunneling even starts, when some 160 buildings above the tunnel alignment are examined and fitted with monitoring equipment that allows crews to detect even the slightest movement. Buildings and other structures that are thought to be sensitive are stabilized prior to tunneling. There are a number of ways to do this, including ground improvements and construction of angled walls below the ground that hold the earth in place above the tunnel.



Inside the control room of a tunnel boring machine.



A simulated view of the underground conditions near South Washington Street, along the SR 99 tunnel route.

Project Area



Learn more at Milepost 31

Our tunnel boring machine won't arrive in Seattle until early 2013, but you don't have to wait until then to check it out. A 10-foot-long, motorized model of the machine is on display now at Milepost 31, our public information center in Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood.

In addition to interactive displays and other cool exhibits that tell the story behind our efforts to replace the Alaskan Way Viaduct, Milepost 31 highlights the people and projects that shaped Pioneer Square. You'll find history, artifacts and interactive exhibits designed to broaden your understanding of the land beneath you. You'll explore the neighborhood's changing landscape, from earth-moving efforts of the past to the massive tunnel project that will soon move State Route 99 underground and reconnect Pioneer Square to the waterfront.



A scale model of the SR 99 tunnel boring machine is on display now at Milepost 31, located at 211 First Ave. S., Seattle.

Fun facts

- The 57.5-foot-diameter, 326-foot-long machine is roughly the size of Washington State Ferries' largest vessel. It weighs 7,000 tons.
- The machine will be delivered to Seattle in 41 pieces. The largest piece will weigh 900 tons.
- The engine of your average sedan runs at about 200 horsepower. Our tunnel boring machine has about 25,000 horses behind its cutterhead.
- Over the course of the project, crews will remove 850,000 cubic yards of soil. If you were to pile all of it on the turf at nearby CenturyLink Field, you'd end up with a mountain of dirt more than 400 feet tall. That's 100 feet taller than the stadium's roof.

For More Information:

Visit: www.AlaskanWayViaduct.org

Email: viaduct@wsdot.wa.gov

Call: 1-888-AWV-LINE

Send a letter to:

Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Program
Washington State Department of Transportation
999 Third Avenue, Suite 2424
Seattle, WA 98104



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