

## Amid asbestos concerns, AoC pulls workers from tunnels

Contributed by Kelly McCormack  
April 10, 2007

In the wake of congressional pressure and revelations of intensifying asbestos-related health problems, the Architect of the Capitol (AoC) announced yesterday that some Capitol Power Plant tunnel workers who have been exposed to asbestos are being reassigned to other duties.

Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.) recently called on AoC to shield members of the 10-man crew from further exposure after they showed signs of pulmonary and respiratory disease. The crew maintains five miles of tunnels that supply Capitol Hill buildings with steam and chilled water.

The AoC notified Murray's office late Monday afternoon that, effective the following morning, the workers would no longer be working in the tunnels, Murray spokesman Pete Weissman said.

Murray, who chairs the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Employment and Workplace Safety, lauded the decision to remove the workers from the tunnels, but was still highly critical of the agency.

"The Architect's decision to take action is a welcome one, but does little to excuse the many years of negligence that have cost these workers their health," Murray said in a press release yesterday. "For far too long these workers were exposed to deadly concentrations of asbestos while the Architect's Office turned its back on their complaints." Specifically, Murray said that the AoC should remove the tunnel workers until an abatement plan is outlined and medical clearance is received, provide workers with full medical evaluations to determine if they are medically able to wear respirators, ensure work for the crew in areas that will not affect their health, pay, vacation time or other benefits, and teach tunnel workers and contractors proper asbestos handling measures.

Despite Murray's criticism, the AoC said that workers had been medically cleared for years to work in the tunnels. "Through participation in an [Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA)]-mandated medical surveillance program over the past several years, the tunnel workers had received medical clearance to work in the tunnels," AoC spokeswoman Eva Malecki said. "Upon receiving new medical information on the workers Monday evening, the Office of the Architect of the Capitol restricted the workers' access to the tunnels. We will re-evaluate each employee's medical qualifications and/or work restrictions."

Senate Rules and Administration Committee Chairwoman Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) also lambasted the AoC yesterday: "There is increasing evidence that those employees who have been working in the tunnels may be suffering from asbestosis and other diseases. Worker health and safety must be of the utmost concern to the Architect's Office. Further delays cannot be tolerated."

Members of the crew, many of whom have worked in the tunnels for more than two decades, have been exposed to asbestos for years. In 2000, the AoC was notified that asbestos was prevalent in the tunnels, but the agency did not take steps to provide protective gear for the workers until 2006.

Last February, the Office of Compliance (OoC) filed a landmark complaint against the AoC, saying that the AoC failed to address dangers within the tunnels.

John Thayer, head of the tunnel crew, said yesterday that he and his colleagues were locked out of their office, could not retrieve their personal items and were told that if they were seen near the tunnels the Capitol Police would be called because it would be regarded as a security breach.

Thayer was told that the crew would be reassigned to work in the Capitol Power Plant, which he said has asbestos issues of its own.

"They pulled us out of the tunnels and they are going to stick us in the [power] plant with its own asbestos problem," Thayer said. "The OoC has a whole bunch of issues with the plant," he added, citing an asbestos abatement plan that will be implemented in the plant from now until the end of 2007.

"They're putting us back into a place with another asbestos problem," but taking workers' respirators away, Thayer said. "The plan is to divvy us up in other shops. The guys are going to lose \$600 a month in hazardous-duty pay." Thayer added that compensation for their injuries has yet to be addressed by the AoC or Congress.

"We're not ping-pong balls to play around with our health. We need to be talking about compensation," Thayer said.