

Squirrel Hill Tunnel workers cope with speeders, exhaust fumes



Stephanie Strasburg | Trib Total Media

Sean Sciulli, 41, of Monroeville, loads boxes of tiles onto workers' carts as they work through the early morning hours repairing the tile lining the Squirrel Hill Tunnels along Interstate 376 on Wednesday, June 23, 2014. The existing tile, which has been lining the walls since the original tunnel construction, has battled the moisture, expansion, and contraction of over 60 years on the tunnel walls.



By [Nafari Vanaski](#)

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No one escapes the tentacles of Squirrel Hill Tunnel traffic. Not even PennDOT employees.

"It's not our objective, but we're very good at it," Bill Lester, an assistant construction manager for the tunnel's \$50 million rehabilitation, joked after getting stuck in the traffic on a recent evening.

Lester coordinates the work of plumbers, carpenters and the electricians who are installing a lighting system.

It's been about 18 months since the project started. The work initially was scheduled to end last week. Some detail-oriented work, done by hand under uncomfortable circumstances, remains.

Weather and added jobs extended the work, and PennDOT hasn't projected a completion date.

Crews removed a false ceiling, at first intending to replace it. But after reviewing repair costs, "We asked, 'Why do we need it at all?'" Lester said.



Though machines govern most of the tunnel's maintenance and rehab, the replacement of tiles that are 60 years old is done by hand.

The porcelain-glazed tiles are frost-proof to withstand any weather condition, said Bruce Rieffle of Massaro Industries in Oakmont, a subcontractor. Only one place in the world — in Germany — makes tiles to match the originals.

Workers inspected the concrete walls to prepare for the tiling. The process involves tapping on the walls to listen for “punk concrete,” or old concrete weakened by water and weather conditions, Lester said. It has to be extracted and replaced, and then the fresh concrete must cure for 18 days.

These workers will lay enough tile during the project to finish 3,400 average-sized kitchens. This night, that means placing 350 to 450 square feet of tile.

The crew of 22 works overnight shifts and sometimes must wait out traffic from events such as Pirates games to begin working.

But that's not the worst of the conditions in which they labor: Inside the tunnel, it's hot and muggy and smells like exhaust fumes.

Even if a car passes by at 40 mph, the wind and noise produces sensory overload. And most cars are traveling higher speeds.

That means remaining cautious at all times, watching for a car that might cross the zone marked by orange construction cones.

Rieffle has done this type of work for 33 years. He wanted to be a teacher originally.

Now, inside the Squirrel Hill Tunnel at 1 a.m., he shakes his head with a half-smile as a car that sounds like it could use a new muffler speeds past.

“Welcome to my world,” he said.

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