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Copley station project nears end; historic church plans repairs

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(George Rizer/Globe file photo)

Above, the exterior of Old South Church sustained cracks (at left), apparently caused by construction of an elevator. Below, the sanctuary also suffered structural fractures.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A four-year-old renovation project at the Copley Square subway station, delayed after below-ground work caused significant damage to the Old South Church, is nearing completion.

Administrators at the 135-year-old church are relieved that the major repairs to the subway station are complete and are looking forward to permanently repairing their national historic landmark in the spring.

The station, which like several other Green Line stops will include more accessible entrances and pathways for handicapped residents, is expected to become fully accessible by the end of October or early November. The MBTA has tentatively scheduled an event to mark the station becoming fully accessible on October 29.

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In December 2008, a large crack – visible from both inside and outside – appeared. It stretched from the church’s foundation to its roof along the Dartmouth Street wall, apparently from excavation work to install an elevator shaft at Copley station. The MBTA said the company it hired to do the renovations would be fully responsible for damage done to the church.

Church administrators are scheduled to begin repairs on the cracked building on April 25, the day after Easter. No work to permanently fix the church has been done in the meantime because there has not been enough room for construction crews to be doing work on the T station and at Old South simultaneously, said Senior Minister and CEO Rev. Nancy S. Taylor.

“We’re very excited that the station will be fully handicapped accessible,” she said. “We’re also happy that we’re past the deep digging and the kind of work that had endangered the church’s structural integrity.”

The excavation work was completed several months ago, said MBTA spokesman Joe Pesaturo, and the station will become fully accessible – including escalators and elevators – within less than 60 days.

“Some work on remaining ‘punch list’ items will continue into the early part of next year,” he said.

Mending the church will come with its own complications.

About 1,600 pipes of the church’s 6,500-pipe organ will need to be removed and stored elsewhere just so that crews can access the damaged area, Taylor said. Additionally, stained-glass windows on that side of the building will need to be removed because the frame they are currently in moved when the wall cracked and shifted two years ago, and there are also concerns about leaving the delicate glass in place while repair work is being done to the wall.

“The masonry work that needs to be done in and of itself is not complicated,” said Taylor. “But, what complicates it is it that there are irreplaceable and very old,” components on and nearby that section of wall, which is called the “fine arts wall.”

Because of the how careful workers will need to be when fixing the cracked wall, repairs are expected to take between six and eight months, she said. The repair costs have not yet been determined because contracts to complete the fix have not been finalized.

The completed work at Copley comes more than a year after similar upgrades were made to the Arlington station. The two Back Bay subway stations were contracted jointly and billed at a combined \$61 million, according to Pesaturo.

The Copley Square construction project was complicated not only by the presence of the two historic landmarks atop the subway station – the other is the Boston Public Library’s McKim Building – but also by the fact that the entire area is built on fill, meaning that the buildings are supported by wooden pilings and are particularly vulnerable to damage from excavation and drilling.

Old South is a congregation of the United Church of Christ, which is the largest Protestant denomination in Massachusetts. The congregation traces its history back more than three centuries, to 1669, when it was established as Third Church in Boston.

It was later renamed Old South Church and moved from downtown to its current location in the Back Bay in 1875.

The building, with its distinctive Roxbury puddingstone façade, is considered

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a fine example of Ruskinian Gothic architecture. It was designed by Charles Amos Cummings in the 1870s, was updated by the Tiffany firm in 1905, and was completely renovated in the mid-1980s by the firm of Shepley Bulfinch Richardson and Abbott.

This story was updated to include the tentative date for an MBTA event to celebrate Copley station becoming fully accessible.

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