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I-84 PROJECT TO BE AUDITED

STUNNING' FAILURES LEAD RELL TO ORDER REVIEW

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Gov. M. Jodi Rell ordered Monday that an independent auditor be hired to investigate what transportation officials are calling "stunning" failures in a \$52 million construction project on I-84 in Waterbury.

"Connecticut citizens deserve every assurance that their tax dollars are being spent and invested wisely," Rell said. "They also deserve to know that multimillion-dollar road projects are being performed in a complete and competent fashion."

The governor ordered the independent review a day after The Courant reported that the widening project along a 3 1/2-mile stretch of highway in Waterbury and Cheshire is lined with hundreds of defective drains, some of which will require excavation of newly built road to repair.

The project was built by L.G. DeFelice of New Haven, which ceased operations for financial reasons last winter. State transportation officials said the private consulting firm The Maguire Group of New Britain "ostensibly" inspected the drains and other work under a \$6 million state contract.

Rell said the auditor, which had not been hired at the time of Rell's announcement late Monday, also will review the internal oversight capabilities of the state Department of Transportation, which bid the project and is ultimately responsible for it.

The governor said she would instruct the auditor to review all contracts the DOT has awarded to DeFelice and Maguire for compliance and quality of the work performed. In addition, she said, the auditor "will conduct a top-to-bottom review of the DOT's internal oversight processes."

"I will not permit a highway contractor and an oversight contractor to, in effect, defraud the DOT and our taxpayers. Those who seek to cheat the state will be held accountable," Rell said. "Where change is required, no matter how large or small, we will make changes."

The independent auditor will be selected by the state Office of Policy and Management.

Rell said the transportation department fired Maguire last month at her direction. In addition, she said the state authorized the hiring of 75 new state transportation engineers over the past six months to keep more oversight "in house" and limit the hiring of additional temporary consultants to oversee hundreds of state highway projects.

"I am confident that this new audit will help prevent abuses from occurring in the first place," Rell said.

Rell said the state should not incur additional costs to repair the drains, work that will be done at night and during off-peak hours to minimize traffic disruption.

The governor's statement that the state could avoid additional costs when carrying out the repairs differs from a transportation department memo drafted in mid-September, which speculated that "the department is facing the potential for additional costs that the state may not be able to recover from the contractor or the project sureties."

A reinspection of the drainage problem during the spring and summer this year revealed that some highway drains lead nowhere and others are filled with debris. Other sources said preliminary reinspections indicate some drains may have been connected with substandard piping.

About 300 drains, or catch basins, were designed into the road- widening project. About 280 had been reinspected as of last week. Of those, about 270 need further work. Preliminary indications are that perhaps as many as 100 will need significant reconstruction.