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Viaduct disaster flick released; political motive?

By Jim Brunner
Seattle Times staff reporter

Two years ago, the state paid \$80,000 for a dramatic video depicting devastation to Seattle's waterfront if the Alaskan Way Viaduct collapses in a powerful earthquake.

The state kept that video secret until Sunday night, when it granted an exclusive airing to KING-TV — just nine days before the end of a Seattle mayoral election dominated by a fight over whether to replace the viaduct with a waterfront tunnel.

State officials say they released the video in response to a public-disclosure request last month from an anti-tunnel activist. But they acknowledged they decided to give KING-TV first crack at it. As of Monday, the activist who'd actually requested the video had not received a copy.

Mayoral candidate Mike McGinn, who opposes the tunnel project, questioned the timing — and noted the video was produced by a tunnel contractor linked to his opponent, Joe Mallahan.

A Mallahan campaign spokeswoman called such October Surprise suspicions laughable. She noted the video emerged after a public-records request from an activist who, like McGinn, opposes the tunnel.

Officials with the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) said the timing was unrelated to the election.

But Magnolia resident Elizabeth Campbell, who had requested the video, along with many other viaduct-related documents, said she was surprised at the agency's actions because WSDOT had told her it could take up to eight months for her to receive all the records.

The video was completed in 2007, but the state did not release it at the time because it was deemed "too sensational," said Ron Paananen, a WSDOT manager in charge of the viaduct-replacement project.



WSDOT

A screen grab from an animated video showing the after effects of a Viaduct earthquake simulation.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

The deteriorating condition of Alaskan Way Viaduct is well known, but a video depicting its collapse in an earthquake had been considered "too sensational" to make public.

It shows large segments of the double-deck viaduct collapsing, crushing cars caught under the structure. Alaskan Way cracks and sinks as liquefied soil slides into Elliott Bay. Buildings catch fire and power to half the city goes out.

"As we finished it, it was a very good work product but it was somewhat disturbing in its content," Paananen said.

The video was produced by Parsons Brinckerhoff, a major engineering firm that has been performing tunnel design work. One of the company's local executives, Jared Smith, is a member of Mallahan's campaign advisory committee.

Paananen said while the video's images are striking, the underlying information about what a possible earthquake could do to the Seattle waterfront has been public for years. "The technical data that supports it was all released," he said.

WSDOT officials say the road to the video's release started last month, when Campbell filed a massive public-disclosure request for documents related to the viaduct. Her request included a demand for a copy of an early draft version of the video, which she'd seen referred to in other documents.

Paananen said WSDOT had been preparing to give the video to Campbell on Sunday. But on Friday, a KING reporter "acting on a tip about the video" called asking for a copy.

After consulting with Gov. Chris Gregoire's office, WSDOT decided to give a final, polished version of the video to KING and make staff available to explain it. The state also mailed a copy to Campbell, he said.

House Transportation Committee Chairwoman Judy Clibborn, D-Mercer Island, said she met with Gregoire last week on unrelated issues and the governor talked about the video.

"She brought this up. That there had been a public-disclosure request and rather than have the message be defined by someone who wanted to create a public uproar, that they would just go ahead and release it and everybody would have it at the same time," said Clibborn, who is on Mallahan's campaign-advisory committee.

Gregoire also has endorsed Mallahan, largely for his pro-tunnel stance.

Campbell, who ran for mayor in the primary, is co-founder of the group Seattle Citizens Against the Tunnel, which has filed two lawsuits trying to block the project. She now backs McGinn in the mayor's race.

Campbell said she's suspicious of WSDOT's motives, accusing the agency of timing such videos and reports to shape public opinion.

"WSDOT doesn't release things unless they serve it publicly from a PR standpoint," she said, calling the video "just one more little example of your tax dollars at work."

While she was told it could take eight months to receive all the records she'd asked for, Campbell said WSDOT had been turning over documents in installments even before the video release.

Both the Mallahan and McGinn campaigns said they were informed of the video on Sunday night, shortly before the KING-TV report.

It's not entirely clear which campaign benefits from the video's release.

McGinn could be hurt if voters see him as an obstructionist who'd delay or block the tunnel — an image the Mallahan campaign has promoted.

But McGinn has argued that his own proposal would actually bring the viaduct down sooner.

He wants to tear down the viaduct by 2012 and replace its capacity with improvements to Interstate 5, downtown streets and transit. Under the tunnel plan, the viaduct would remain standing until 2015.

McGinn characterized the state's behavior in the video's release as odd.

"I am not aware of a government agency responding to a public-disclosure request by giving an exclusive to a TV station," he said.

McGinn said the video should have been shown to the 29-person stakeholder panel that looked at viaduct options last year.

That group and key state lawmakers also were alerted about the video's release over the weekend before KING's report. An e-mail from Paananen to the group said the video had not been released earlier because "we believe it sensationalizes a serious safety issue."

On Monday, five members of the stakeholder committee issued a statement saying they were "disturbed" that the video had not been shown to them. The five, most of whom have endorsed McGinn, criticized the tunnel plan for delaying the removal of the viaduct.

"After watching the video, we are even more convinced that taking down the viaduct by 2012 should be a nonnegotiable public-safety priority of all parties involved," said Mary McCumber, one of the panel members.

Charla Neuman, a spokeswoman for the Mallahan campaign, said it's "ridiculous" to think the video was aimed at the mayor's race.

She said the Mallahan campaign was not promoting or calling attention to the video.

"It didn't share anything new — this is what the eight years of debate has been about — it's how to fix the problem of the viaduct being in trouble if there is a major earthquake," Neuman said.

Staff reporter Andrew Garber contributed to this report. Jim Brunner: 206-515-5628 or jbrunner@seattletimes.com

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