A familiar traffic pattern was snarling rush hour traffic around 5pm last Friday. Cars were backed up the entire length of the Massachusetts Avenue bridge. After crawling across the bridge in a Harvard-bound T-bus, slower than I could probably have walked, I finally arrived at the intersection of Mass. Ave. and Memorial Drive. Spectators and plug-ins were everywhere, but there was no sign of the accident, and the traffic backed down.

Sure enough, there was it. A west-bound bus, ignoring all the warning signs on Memorial Drive, had tried to take the underpass tunnel beneath Mass. Ave. Since the bus exceeded the 9-foot clearance, it was jammed inside the tunnel.

The bus was a Lavoie charter from Canada. The first person I talked to was the unfortunate bus driver, who seemed to be in his late forties.

"Hey, the roof was too low, man. Like, I tried to slow down, eh, but it was too late." I suddenly thought of Second City's Bob Coats. "I wasn't going to let it all go down, half of it." I asked why he was stuck there.

"The trouble is, as the tires go down, the air bag inflates. The bus' air bag suspension was also deflated. "People always yell at us to 'deflate the tires.' Don't they think we would try that if it were possible?" Kerins explained. "The trouble is, as the tires go down, the air bag inflates, keeping the bus at a constant height.

I asked if the driver would be charged and how much it might cost. "We'll charge him with driving a commercial vehicle on Memorial Drive. It's hard to say how much it's gonna cost, but it's at least $300 per truck." Kerins said. "I've seen it go as high as $1000-$2000."

I mentioned that an MDC official had told me most of the victims were out-of-state drivers. "Yeah," Bobby said, "they're mostly out-of-state drivers, but not all. The worst times are around Labor Day and Memorial Day, when the college kids are testing tires to move their stuff."

To make sure Billy and Bobby were giving me an accurate estimate, I asked whether they were being charged for the bus. "Yeah, we have a contract with the MDC," said Billy. "I asked if a bus had ever gotten stuck before and how long it might take to get it out."

"The last time I saw a bus stack was about five years ago," Bobby replied. "Hell, if we were running the show, we'd have had it out by now. The MDC's running things. They're slow."

"But careful," added Billy. "Watch what you say, we don't want to lose the contract."

I asked what they would do if the MDC wouldn't help. "I was letting the air out of the tires when the MDC got here and stopped me," one of them replied. "I wasn't going to let it all out, just half of it." I asked why he was stopped. "I don't know, you'll have to ask Trench Coat over there. He's running the show."

I decided to interview Trench Coat. His real name was Brian Kerins, and he said he was deputy director of MDC central services. I visited him at the MDC while he was being used to crush the top of the bus, lowering its "10 to 11 foot" height below the bridge's 9 foot clearance. The bus' air bag suspension was also deflated.

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"Is this the underpass you have the most problems with?" "It's our lowest," Kerins replied. "It does happen other places, though. About three years ago, a peanut truck from Jimmy Carter's warehouse in Plains Georgia got stuck underneath the [Longfellow Bridge]."

This bus was filled with 13-14 year old bantam hockey players from New Brunswick. Now they were eating in Lobdell. They were bound for a tournament in Concord, according to their manager, who found the information after some difficulty. His briefcase had been stored in the overhead luggage rack, and was slightly bent out of shape.