

TIMES EXCLUSIVE

Reflecting Pool Repairs Appear Uneven and Behind Schedule, Officials Say

Work on the iconic National Mall basin appears behind schedule. President Trump initially said he had picked the contractor, then said he did not know it.



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Interior Department staff members have raised concerns about the quality and speed of the repair work that a contractor is performing on the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool in Washington, according to government documents seen by The New York Times.

The staff members said that bubbles and small holes had appeared in one of the layers meant to waterproof the iconic pool. And uneven application of the tinted waterproofing left the pool mottled in varying shades of blue, the documents indicate.

The documents say both issues were being addressed, but they raise the possibility that the work may not be finished by the government's deadline of May 22. That would be an ironic turn of events, given that federal bidding laws were skirted because the government had argued there was an urgent need — to have it ready for the country's 250th anniversary celebrations.

The Reflecting Pool has been plagued for decades by problems with leaks and algae blooms.

Last month, the Interior Department hired a Virginia firm, Atlantic Industrial Coatings, to repair, resurface and paint the pool. President Trump said publicly that he had

recommended the firm because of good work it did on the swimming pools at one of his golf clubs.

However, Mr. Trump did an about-face early Tuesday, distancing himself from the company. “I didn’t give out the contract, ‘Interior’ did, to a contractor I did not know, and have never used before,” Mr. Trump wrote in a post on his Truth Social platform.

Asked to explain Mr. Trump’s reversal, a White House official said that the president did not have a personal relationship with this contractor, but that as a private citizen and builder, he was familiar with the company’s previous work. The official asked not to be named to describe the president’s relationship with the company.

The Times has been unable to independently confirm that the company previously did work for any of Mr. Trump’s clubs.

Atlantic Industrial Coatings did not respond to requests for comment this week. Last week, one of the company’s owners, Curtis E. Wood, who goes by Eddie, said he was not at liberty to discuss the contract.

A spokeswoman for the Interior Department, Katie Martin, defended the contractor’s work on the Reflecting Pool project in a statement. She said that some sections of the pool might temporarily look different, but only because they were in different stages of repair.

“The final product will be uniform, as the plan depicts,” Ms. Martin said. “As with any project, there will be revisions to the process to ensure the most efficient tools are used to get to the end goal.”

Atlantic Industrial Coatings had never previously held a federal contract, according to a public database of federal awards. The firm was given a no-bid contract to waterproof and paint the pool last month. The government closed off all other competition for that work by invoking a power that can only be used in urgent situations, when delay would bring “serious injury” to the government.

The Trump administration has not said what that injury would have been, instead saying that Mr. Trump wanted to move fast so the work would be complete before the country’s 250th festivities this summer. The repair work is supposed to be done by May 22.

The documents seen by The Times — which have not been reported previously — cast doubt on that timeline.

Although the refurbishing contract was awarded April 3, as of Sunday only about 35 percent of the pool’s surface had been fully coated, according to a government document.

Another key task that the vendor must complete — replacing leak-prone joints between the pool's slabs — was listed as 0 percent complete, with 12 days left before the deadline.

Already, the contract with Atlantic Industrial Coatings has cost much more than Mr. Trump promised. The president said last week that the work would be done for \$1.8 million. In his social-media post early Tuesday, he increased that estimate to \$5 million or \$6 million.

But public records updated as of Friday show the contract will cost at least \$13.1 million.

The Times reported on Friday that the Reflecting Pool, originally built in 1922 to reflect the beauty of the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument on the National Mall, has caused consternation for several administrations.

The Obama administration spent more than \$35 million over several years trying to solve problems with algae buildup and leakage, but they persisted. The pool leaks 16 million gallons of water a year, according to an Interior Department estimate.

During the Biden administration, the National Park Service, which is part of the Interior Department, took bids for a more comprehensive rehaul to fix the problems. But the director of the Park Service at the time, Charles F. Sams III, said they postponed the plan when the estimates came in above \$100 million.

“Now, along comes ‘TRUMP,’ who is asked by many patriots if I can fix it,” Mr. Trump wrote in his post. “The answer is a resounding, YES, and for a ‘tiny’ fraction of the cost!”

In recent weeks, Mr. Trump has given a series of estimates as to how much the work would have cost, if he had not intervened to find a cheaper way. In early April, he told a private gathering of donors that the work might have cost \$190 million or \$200 million, according to audio of that gathering obtained by The Times.

A few weeks later, he told reporters in the Oval Office that it would have cost \$301 million. Then, earlier this month, he said in a press event at the pool itself that the cost would have been \$355 million.

In his post on Tuesday, Mr. Trump gave an estimate that was higher still.

“Instead of taking 4 years to build, at a cost, granite pavers and all, of 400 Million Dollars, we could construct a far superior Reflecting Pool for 5 or 6 Million Dollars, and could complete the project in 2 weeks rather than 4 years,” Mr. Trump said he had told the Interior Department.

Mr. Trump did not address the concerns delineated in the department's documents about

Atlantic Industrial Coatings' work, and it is not clear whether he had been made aware of them.

The contractor is spraying on layers of waterproofing materials. But Interior Department staff members said they had observed bubbles and small holes in one of the layers, indicating that the material might not be adhering as it should.

They said those defects must be fixed before new layers could be added. The documents say that the contractor was considering switching from one manufacturer's waterproofing product to another but that the job was so huge, it was unclear if there would be enough stock available. The pool extends over 2,000 feet.

Interior Department officials also raised concerns about inconsistent paint colors.

The contractor is supposed to be painting the pool's floor "American flag blue," a shade that Mr. Trump said he had chosen.

The original plan was to use a robot to ensure the color would be applied consistently, but the contractor is now entrusting the job to individual workers instead, the documents indicate. That, the documents say, left different shades in different parts of the pool — and questions about what an uneven paint job might mean for the pool's final appearance.

The Trump administration has not sought permission to repaint the Reflecting Pool from the Commission of Fine Arts, an independent federal agency that reviews plans for federal buildings, memorials and monuments.

On Monday, a nonprofit called the Cultural Landscape Foundation filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Washington seeking to stop the Reflecting Pool project. The nonprofit accused the Trump administration of ignoring laws meant to safeguard historic landmarks.

Ms. Martin, the Interior Department spokeswoman, said the department rejected those claims.

"The lawsuit has no merit and is riddled with incorrect statements," she said in a statement.

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