

Athens gets sinking feeling

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Helena Smith in Athens

THE Greek capital is going down the tubes, literally. The much delayed new underground line — a yawning hole that has already swallowed £2 billion — is also consuming large chunks of the city's main avenue.

A judge lifted a ban on tunnelling work after receiving assurances that any damages it causes will be paid for. A halt in tunnelling had been ordered

after 12 store owners filed a complaint demanding proof that buildings lining Panepistimiou Street were safe from the construction.

Athenians quickly understood that work on their city's new subway system had gone off the rails when the earth opened and swallowed several parts of the street — which is adorned by some of the city's finest buildings.

Last night, workers assigned to Attiko Metro, the state-run consortium overseeing the project,

were desperately pumping hundreds of tons of cement into the cavities.

The latest setback is one of many to have hit works on the underground, one of the European Union's most expensive and ambitious public works projects.

After waiting nearly 40 years for drilling to begin, the Greeks had hoped that construction would be completed by 1996.

But in the five years since tunnelling began, the project has failed to meet every prediction.