

bridge tolls on collision course? - Governor - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - April 24, 2011 - page A 01

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The **Crescent City Connection's** finances and management have been poked and prodded by at least a half-dozen audits and studies in the past few years, yielding plenty of suggestions for improving operations of the chronically cash-strapped toll bridge.

But none of the reports explicitly addressed what has become the most pressing question: Should bridge tolls be renewed before they expire at the end of 2012?

It's a political hot potato that will ultimately land in the laps of state legislators, who must either pass an extension or allow the tolls to expire.

State Sen. David Heitmeier, D-Algiers, hopes to take some of the politics out of the decision by forming a task force of experts and citizens to sort through the various reports.

"We need a small group of people to digest all of the information that's out there and make a recommendation on how to move forward," he said.

Heitmeier said he plans to propose a legislative resolution to create a review panel with about eight members, including citizens, engineers, maritime officials and a law-enforcement representative.

With bonds financing the second **Crescent City Connection** span set to be paid off two months before tolls expire Dec. 31, 2012, some bridge users have questioned why tolls should be renewed, especially after many planned West Bank road-improvement projects were never completed because anticipated toll surpluses failed to materialize.

Noting that the state has a multibillion-dollar backlog of transportation projects, renewal proponents say the tolls provide a reliable source of revenue for bridge maintenance while subsidizing three Mississippi River ferry routes that could face sweeping cutbacks if the tolls disappear.

Heitmeier said West Bank residents seem to be fairly evenly divided on the issue.

"I think that in order to be willing to pay a toll, people have to perceive that they are getting a premium service," he said. "Right now, I don't think that's the case."

Not 'driving this process'

Gov. Bobby Jindal said his administration doesn't plan to take a position either for or against renewing the tolls.

"We're not going to be driving this process. Instead, we'll be listening to people in the local community," Jindal said. "In the meantime, we'll be working to make bridge operations as lean as

possible and as efficient as possible in case the tolls aren't renewed."

The state has hired a consultant to help develop a contingency plan if the tolls expire. Transportation Secretary Sherri LeBas has said the "sunset plan" likely will entail laying off about 200 employees and scaling back or eliminating many bridge services, including policing, lighting, landscaping and the ferries.

Bridge budget slashed

State transportation officials said they have slashed the bridge's 2011 budget by about 25 percent, representing a savings of \$6 million to \$8 million.

"We buckled down on spending by eliminating unnecessary insurance coverage, reducing administrative costs and efficiently reorganizing staff," bridge spokeswoman Bambi Hall said.

But state Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, a vocal critic of bridge management, said the recent reforms might be too little too late.

"They're moving in the right direction, but that's only happening because the tolls are about to expire," he said. "Why wasn't this being done 10 years ago?"

Connick has been shining a spotlight on the bridge's finances to find out why toll revenue was not used for more than \$100 million in planned West Bank road improvements as specified by a state law renewing the tolls in 1998.

In a letter to Jindal this week, Connick called for letting the tolls expire and using a \$23 million reserve fund to supplement about \$5.5 million in annual state funding to maintain the bridge.

He proposed streamlining the ferries, which lose more than \$7 million a year. He said that the Algiers-to-Canal-Street ferry should be replaced with a smaller, pedestrian-only ferry and that the underutilized Gretna-to-Canal-Street ferry should run only during special events.

Connick also said the bridge's 25-member Police Department should be disbanded, with other law-enforcement agencies picking up the slack.

But Heitmeier said this could lead to major traffic jams after crashes, saying that every extra minute of response time by police translates to a four-minute backup.

Jefferson Parish Council Chairman Chris Roberts, a lifelong West Bank resident, said the decision on whether to renew the tolls should be based on a careful analysis of the costs to operate, maintain and police the bridge.

"If the state is able to pick up those costs, then it obviously makes sense to let the tolls expire," he said. "But if the state can't do that, we don't want to be in a situation where the bridge starts to fall apart because of a lack of funds."

The toll, collected from east-bank-bound motorists, is \$1 per two-axle vehicle for those paying

cash and 40 cents for those with electronic toll tags.

5th-busiest toll bridge in U.S.

The **Crescent City Connection** is the nation's fifth-busiest toll bridge, with an average of about 180,000 vehicles per day, generating about \$20 million in annual toll revenue.

A December 2008 bridge audit found that anticipated toll surpluses for the road upgrades failed to materialize as costs to run the bridge and aging ferries spiraled out of control.

The biggest drain has been the three ferry routes, which consume about \$8 million of the bridge's \$27 million budget while generating just \$250,000 in passenger fees. That amounts to losses of more than \$21,000 a day, the audit found.

Ferry proponents, including the Algiers Economic Development Foundation, have said the ferry is a vital economic lifeline for Algiers that also provides transportation to the French Quarter and New Orleans Central Business District for many service industry workers who don't own cars.

Other studies faulted the **Crescent City Connection** for poor financial record keeping and paying a \$4 million annual premium for an insurance policy that state officials determined was unnecessary.

A 2010 audit found that **Crescent City Connection** toll revenue was improperly used to cover expenses for the new Louisiana 1 toll bridge in Leesville, including \$60,000 in legal fees. State transportation officials have said the money has been repaid.

In some cases, the reports' findings seem contradictory. A 2008 study prepared by a consultant concluded that the bridge's Police Department operates in an "outstanding and efficient manner." But a State Police review released in January said the department was top-heavy and had inadequate hiring guidelines and training requirements.

'Take the politics out of this'

Heitmeier said the idea of establishing a task force to review the studies gained momentum last week during a meeting with West Bank civic and business groups.

"The key is to have professionals on the task force and not just political appointees," he said. "We need to take the politics out of this."

Connick, who has proposed a bill to create a similar panel, said he will support Heitmeier's proposal as long as the experts aren't tied to what he views as a runaway bridge bureaucracy focused more on perpetuating itself than providing services to toll payers.

"The experts need to be truly independent," he said.

Heitmeier and Connick, who have butted heads over the tolls in recent years, agreed that any proposal to renew them during the current legislative session would be premature.

"If there is an attempt to renew the tolls, I will fight it tooth and nail," Connick said. "This whole issue needs more vetting."

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