

audit panel will dig deeper into river bridge's - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - March 11, 2010 - page A 02

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BATON ROUGE -- The legislative panel that oversees audits and compliance with them Wednesday approved a request from a West Bank lawmaker to look deeper into the spending and contracting practices of the Crescent City Connection.

At the urging of Rep. Patrick Connick, R-Harvey, the Legislative Audit Advisory Council asked auditors to take a second look at the costs of insurance and why an expansion of the bridge authority's offices has cost \$3.9 million and has not been finished after four years of work.

"We are asking the legislative auditor to do a little more digging," Connick said. "I have asked them to refocus and dig a little deeper."

The lawmaker got the House to approve a resolution last year directing auditors to examine bids, contracts, change orders and payments to contractors, subcontractors and vendors in connection with the 6,000-square-foot expansion of the agency's headquarters.

He also wanted the auditors to look at why the span needs a \$14 million insurance policy.

Temporary legislative auditor Daryl Purpera said his office looked into those areas, but some new information may have surfaced. Auditors will do more work on the bridge's operations, he said.

Connick complained that the addition to the authority offices near the bridge toll plaza is running "about \$600 a foot. ... All I want to know is where did the money go ... Who got the money?"

"I don't see how you can spend \$600 a square foot," said a shocked Rep. Noble Ellington, D-Winnsboro.

Connick said that with the bridge tolls set to expire in 2012, the Legislature must approve or reject their extension.

Connick said the span's spending practices so far have not generated much support for extending the tolls.

The state Department of Transportation and Development, the agency that runs the span, said it has been lax in monitoring bridge contracts for years but has taken a more aggressive approach on the bridge's operations in the past several months.

"Give us a reason to pay the tolls," Connick said. "Why should we (bridge users) continue to pay money when the money we have given them has not been used properly."

Connick said the department has tapped about \$877,000 in bridge money to operate the Louisiana 1 toll tag operations but that has been repaid.

Connick has complained that the surplus built up over the years from tolls has not been spent on road and bridge projects as state law requires.

Sen. Edwin Murray, D-New Orleans, chairman of the audit council, told Purpera if his auditors encounter any obstacles from bridge officials or the transportation agency, "we will invite them to come before us" and explain themselves.

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