

Bill would revamp N.O. bridge - It creates new - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - April 23, 2009 - page 02

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BATON ROUGE -- A West Bank lawmaker wants an eight-member panel to advise the state Department of Transportation and Development on operating the **Crescent City Connection**, including exploring the possibility of having bridge police placed under State Police authority.

Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, said Wednesday he has filed House Bill 828 to give "fresh eyes" with more professional experience a chance to advise the department on how the bridge and ferries in the New Orleans area should be run.

Connick last session pushed a resolution that required Legislative Auditor Steve Theriot to audit the **Crescent City Connection Division**, which is inside the transportation department.

The audit criticized the state agency for a lack of oversight of the New Orleans bridge and ferry unit.

Connick's bill would repeal the existing **Crescent City Connection Oversight Authority**, a 13-member agency named by the governor from lists of nominees submitted by House and Senate members whose districts include or are near the span. The audit discovered that the group has met infrequently since its creation.

"What this does is get some fresh eyes in the process to make sure it (the **Crescent City Connection**) is run right," Connick said. "This is a group that will advise the secretary (of transportation and development) on what needs to be done.

Connick's bill would authorize the state House and Senate to nominate individuals to serve on the commission. Each chamber would elect three members from the nominees; the governor would appoint one member; and the transportation secretary would serve as chairman.

All members of the proposed commission would have to have an undergraduate or graduate degree from an accredited university, "with preference given to those with a degree in business, finance, law or management."

The bill would give the proposed commission the authority to provide input on several issues, including:

- Toll collections on the span and ferries.
- "Alternative sources of funding" for bridge and ferry operations.
- Appointment of key division personnel.
- Developing a plan to end or continue the tolls when the bonds on the bridge expire in 2012.

- Financing of repairs to the span and construction projects in the area of the bridge.
- The feasibility of merging the division into the Louisiana Transportation Authority, which is overseeing the construction and toll collections along Louisiana 1 near Port Fourchon.
- "A cost-reduction plan" to consolidate the division's staff and resources with the parent agency in Baton Rouge.
- Implementation of a plan and financing method to place the bridge police under State Police by Jan. 1.

The bill would authorize the commission members, except the transportation secretary, to be paid \$150 to attend commission meetings as well as expenses incurred. Except for the secretary, members of the proposed panel "shall not hold any public office nor serve on any other state board, commission or authority," Connick said.

Connick's bill sets the commission's life span as Oct. 1 this year to Dec. 31, 2012. The panel must meet at least monthly at the CCC offices in Algiers.

So far, 1,173 bills have been filed for the session that opens Monday. Each legislator can file up to five more bills provided they cover fiscal or local issues.

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