

Bridge patrol force may get some help - State - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - September 9, 2009 - page 01

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State Police are in discussions with state transportation officials to help manage the **Crescent City Connection's** police department, taking over some administrative functions to save money for the cash-strapped toll bridge.

The idea surfaced when State Police commander Col. Michael Edmonson recently addressed the Commission on Streamlining Government, a new 10-member panel exploring ways to consolidate or outsource state operations.

"We're looking for areas across the state where law enforcement duplication exists and trying to combine resources to save money without compromising safety," Edmonson said.

He said State Police involvement with the bridge would likely entail providing administrative support for the 30-member police department, not replacing bridge officers with state troopers.

"There's been no suggestion of us going in there and people losing their jobs," Edmonson said. "My intention would be to work with the existing personnel and bring them under our umbrella, giving them the benefit of our greater resources and training opportunities."

A spokeswoman for the state Department of Transportation and Development said transportation officials are "open to discussing" the proposal.

"We're looking at it as something that could be a more efficient option while maintaining the same level of service," Sherry Dupre said.

With a \$3.5 million annual budget, **Crescent City Connection** police patrol a 14-mile stretch of elevated highway and ramps, including the bridge.

Edmonson emphasized that the talks are in the preliminary stages and that any changes would need approval from state lawmakers.

"The final say-so in all of this will come down to the Legislature," he said.

State Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, a vocal critic of bridge management in the past, said he supports the proposal.

"Hopefully the State Police can manage things more efficiently," he said.

Connick said he would like police to have a more visible presence on the bridge.

"At certain times, they're all over the place, but other times they're nowhere to be found," he said. "All of the cars are parked outside police headquarters under the bridge."

Connick has been shining a spotlight on the bridge's finances after more than \$100 million in planned West Bank road improvements were put on hold because surplus toll revenue to pay for the projects never materialized.

An audit released late last year showed the bridge has been balancing its books in recent years by tapping a dwindling reserve fund.

The biggest drain has been the three Mississippi River ferries, which consume about \$8 million of the bridge's \$27 million budget while generating just \$250,000 in passenger fees.

A separate study of the bridge's police department concluded it operates in an "outstanding and efficient manner."

The study, which included input from State Police, recommended maintaining the department, saying it would be more expensive for other law enforcement agencies to police the bridge. At the time, state transportation officials said they agreed with the recommendation to keep the department.

Edmonson said the study was premised on State Police or another law enforcement agency taking over bridge patrols using just their existing resources.

"That's a completely different scenario than what we're talking about now," he said.

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