

CCC toll panel examines mission - State adviser - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - October 8, 2011 - page B 01

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A task force developing a transition plan for the scheduled expiration of **Crescent City Connection** tolls is seeking a second legal opinion on the scope of its mission after learning that a state legislative official who weighed in two weeks ago is not an attorney.

Clifford Williams, a division director with House Legislative Services, told the panel it was not overstepping its authority by making recommendations in case tolls are renewed before they expire at the end of 2012.

But Williams, who was introduced by state transportation officials as a "senior attorney," had forfeited his law license in 2007 after a Louisiana Attorney Disciplinary Board committee recommended he be disbarred for taking cases after his law license was suspended in 1996.

Task force member William Aaron, who served on Williams' disciplinary committee, called for seeking a second opinion Friday at the panel's biweekly meeting.

"I don't have a problem with the message; I have a problem with the source of the message," said Aaron, adding he did not immediately recognize Williams at the Sept. 23 meeting. "The fact that he is not a licensed attorney puts a cloud over the opinion he gave."

The panel agreed to seek a second legal opinion from a legislative attorney about whether it is authorized to analyze a scenario in which the tolls were renewed.

Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, has said such analysis would go beyond the intent of a legislative resolution directing the task force "to analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge."

Williams had said the phrase is part of the resolution's preamble or title and carries no legal weight. "You can do whatever you want to," he told the task force.

Connick, a frequent critic of the transportation department's management of the bridge, has said any toll-renewal analysis could provide political cover for legislators to cast unpopular votes to extend the tolls.

But task-force members have said they simply want to provide as much information as possible to legislators as they decide whether to let the tolls expire.

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.

The tolls account for about three-quarters of the bridge's \$27 million annual budget, meaning wholesale budget cuts would be needed if the tolls lapse.

State transportation officials presented the task force with a spreadsheet showing the level of services the bridge could expect to receive if the tolls expired and it had to rely solely on revenue from the state Transportation Trust Fund.

Total annual funding for the bridge and 14 miles of elevated expressway would plunge from \$19.3 million to \$1.73 million.

The biggest change would be the elimination of \$11 million spent on three Mississippi River ferry routes, which would have to be funded in another way or shut down, according to the spreadsheet.

Other budget lines that would be zeroed out include \$2.3 million for policing, \$800,000 for lighting and \$400,000 for landscaping. Grass cutting, street sweeping and pothole patching would occur on a less frequent basis.

Task-force members said some of the most critical services could be maintained by using \$5 million to \$6 million earmarked for the bridge each year from State Highway Fund No. 2.

Appointed by Gov. Bobby Jindal from a list of nominees submitted by civic and business groups, the 10-member panel plans to complete a draft report on its recommendations by early January. The legislature set a Feb. 1 deadline for the final report.

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