

DOTD describes options for bridge after tolls - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - April 30, 2010 - page A 03

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BATON ROUGE -- The state Department of Transportation and Development outlined five options Thursday for running the **Crescent City Connection** after tolls expire Dec. 31, 2012, including farming out the span to private industry, renewing tolls or dipping into the state's transportation fund to keep it operating.

Interim Transportation Secretary Sherri LeBas told members of the Senate Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works that the agency is looking at how to run the bridge and six New Orleans-area ferries when tolls expire, which will happen unless the Legislature votes to extend them.

LeBas said the department is not at a point of recommending a specific option or two at this time.

LeBas said she hopes to get some indication from legislators on which options are viable and which ones are not. LeBas is scheduled to present the study of the bridge options to the House Appropriations Committee on Monday and the House Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works on Tuesday.

The study is in response to requests from legislators.

LeBas said the first option is for the tolls to expire. In that case, she said, some or all of the 200 employees of the department's **Crescent City Connection** Division would be laid off or absorbed by other DOTD agencies.

Not renewing the tolls, she said, could mean that ferry services would be eliminated or reduced, or other revenues would have to be found to run them. The CCC police could be disbanded and state and local police would assume bridge patrols and traffic duties.

Operational and maintenance costs of the span would be borne by the state transportation trust fund, which could take money from road or bridge projects in other areas of the state.

The second option, LeBas said, would extend the tolls with service continuing and State Police taking over the operations of the bridge police. "Operational and maintenance costs of the bridges will rely solely on tolls," the report said.

The third option would be to turn the CCC's operations over to a private management firm chosen by the state "to meet standards and provide total project management."

The study said that the bridge employees would work for the private company, and some could be laid off, LeBas said.

The last two options Lebas outlined include re-creation of a Mississippi River Bridge Authority, the

same agency that ran the bridge two decades ago.

In one scenario, the report said, the proposed authority would approve a director recommended by the department and remain under the DOTD. The level of ferry services, police and project development "would be determined by the authority" as well as the level of tolls.

The proposed authority would be able to increase, decrease or remove tolls, but DOTD would continue operations.

The fifth option, she said, would have the authority created as an independent agency outside of the transportation department.

The proposed authority would have "all management authority with regard to current and future employees," LeBas said. The level of police, ferry services, tolls and project development would also be approved by the authority.

Lebas told the panel that the bridge is the fifth-busiest in the nation, accommodating 55 million vehicle crossings a year. The ferry services, also run by the bridge operations, accommodate 685,000 vehicles a year and just under 1 million pedestrians annually, she said.

Rep. Patrick Connick, R-Harvey, a longtime critic of DOTD's handling of the bridge's operation and its police force, said there are other options that can be pursued beyond the ones LeBas outlined.

He said he wants the department to "clean up its act" in operating the bridges and ferries before he will vote on a toll extension. He cited audits that have been conducted pointing out management missteps in handling contracts, but department officials said they have taken steps to remedy those problems.

Sen. David Heitmeier, D-Algiers, a member of the panel, said he wants to digest the report before endorsing an option.

"Why do the people of the West Bank have to pay an additional fee?" Heitmeier asked. "Why should we continue to extend the tolls?"

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