

The executive director of the **Crescent City Connection** division has retired, as the state legislative auditor's office and several outside firms continue work on four separate audits into the bridge authority's finances.

Officials with the state Department of Transportation, which oversees the bridge authority, said Alan LeVasseur's retirement after 19 years as executive director had nothing to do with the recent scrutiny of the agency.

"His reasons for retiring have absolutely nothing to do with what has happened recently," DOTD spokesman Mark Lambert said. "We'll respect his wishes that his reasons remain his reasons. I can tell you that it has been completely voluntary."

Lambert said LeVasseur's retirement officially begins Aug. 1. He stopped reporting to work last week and is using accumulated leave time through the end of the month.

Randall Paisant, the bridge authority's assistant executive director, will handle LeVasseur's duties until a replacement is found. LeVasseur has been eligible for retirement for several years, and had made plans to retire this year before hearings in the Legislature this spring concerning the bridge authority's spending.

Several West Bank legislators, led by Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, called for a performance audit of the bridge authority earlier this year. Connick raised questions about why the bridge authority has not used drivers' toll money to finance several West Bank road projects outlined in the state law that reauthorized tolls in 1998.

Bridge officials have said mounting maintenance costs, especially for the three Mississippi River ferry routes operated by the agency, have eaten into the anticipated surplus for such transportation projects.

In addition to the probe by Legislative Auditor Steve Theriot, the DOTD commissioned three separate studies on the agency's accounting, police department and bridge and ferry operations. Lambert said he does not know when the audits will be complete.

DOTD Secretary William Ankner, responding to concerns from legislators this past session, said repeatedly that he would not make any changes to staffing or operations at the **Crescent City Connection** until after the results of the audits.

Residents of Algiers Point have cried foul over the bridge authority's maintenance of the ferry lines, pointing to unreliable service and poor response to customer complaints.

"We'd really like to see some reform out of this group and some responsiveness; it's just not

working right now," said Skip Gallagher, president of the Algiers Point Association.

According to last year's **Crescent City Connection** budget, the bridge took in \$21 million in tolls, but had an operating budget of \$22 million, including salaries and benefits for more than 200 employees who run the ferry and bridge operations, among them a 30-plus-member police department. The agency is sitting on more than \$30 million in reserves for capital projects, which are gradually drawn down each year when overall operating and capital costs exceed annual revenue.

Ferry operations last year cost more than \$7 million, and the agency is expected to receive more than \$9.3 million in this year's budget.

Based on the current debt payment schedule, the bonds used to pay for the second span of the bridge would be paid off by 2013. Current legislation authorizes tolls through 2012.

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