

While welcoming the scheduled expiration of **Crescent City Connection** tolls at the end of the year, Jefferson Parish officials are concerned the parish and local municipalities could be asked to pay for bridge services they believe should be covered by the state.

"I know it's a big political win to say we're getting rid of the tolls. That's what we all want," Parish Councilman Chris Roberts said. "However, that doesn't mean you pass the bill on to the parish, which is not the owner of the bridge."

The council unanimously passed a resolution last week calling on the state Department of Transportation and Development to explain how it will pay for bridge services, such as maintenance, policing, landscaping and lighting, after tolls expire Dec. 31.

Roberts said local officials have been told grass-cutting and trash pickups under the West Bank Expressway will be scaled back, while local governmental entities will be responsible for lighting costs.

He also said local law enforcement agencies could be required to help State Police patrol the bridge and 14 miles of elevated expressway currently patrolled by the bridge's police department.

A DOTD spokeswoman said the agency will cover bridge maintenance and inspections while seeking to privatize three Mississippi River ferries that are heavily subsidized by bridge tolls.

Gov. Bobby Jindal's proposed 2012-13 budget assumes the tolls won't be renewed by the state Legislature. The governor's office has said bridge services "will be realigned with the level provided to other bridges across the state." But details about the level of service have not been released.

Collected from east bank-bound motorists, the toll is \$1 for motorists paying cash and 40 cents for drivers with electronic toll tags.

Tolls account for about \$22 million of the bridge's \$27 million annual budget. Most of the remaining \$5 million comes from the bridge's share of locally generated state vehicle license fees, which will return to the state once bonds that financed the bridge's second span are paid off this year.

That means the bridge will have no dedicated revenue stream and will have to rely on the state or local governmental entities to pick up the slack.

"This is going to be a very heated and debated issue in Baton Rouge this session, and it needs to be at the top of our list," Roberts said. "Any quality-of-life issues that we're taking on can be derailed if the expressway goes to hell and starts looking like a third world country."

Parish President John Young said parish attorneys have researched the matter and concluded the state is legally required to maintain the bridge.

"Our legislators need to make sure that when those tolls expire, the state lives up to its obligations under the law," Young said. "The law is clear that this is a state roadway that they have to maintain."

Young noted that all three of the state's toll bridges -- the **Crescent City Connection**, the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway and the new Leeville bridge on Louisiana 1 en route to Grand Isle -- either connect to Jefferson Parish or are heavily used by parish residents.

"No other bridges in the state have tolls," Young said. "Jefferson Parish is not getting a fair deal here."

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