

Gov. Bobby Jindal's proposed 2012-13 budget unveiled Thursday assumes that Crescent City Connection tolls will expire and also calls for privatizing three Mississippi River ferries that are heavily subsidized by the tolls.

If tolls are not renewed before they expire at the end of the year, the state Department of Transportation and Development would take over bridge maintenance under Jindal's spending plan. The bridge is now operated by the DOTD's Crescent City Connection division using a dedicated revenue stream made up primarily of toll revenue.

"Services will be realigned with the level provided to other bridges across the state, with DOTD partnering with local governments for bridge lighting, and with State Police and local law enforcement agencies for bridge policing," the governor's office said in a news release.

State Rep. Patrick Connick, R-Harvey, a vocal toll opponent, applauded the governor's post-toll plan.

"This is the first step in getting rid of a toll-funded empire that has never performed as promised," Connick said, referring to a series of bridge audits that documented poor planning and wasteful spending.

Tolls account for about \$22 million of the bridge's \$27 million annual budget. The remaining \$5 million comes from locally generated state vehicle license fees pooled in State Highway Fund No. 2.

Some toll opponents have said \$5 million would be enough to cover basic bridge services, excluding ferry operations. But the Highway Fund No. 2 money will "go back into the hopper at DOTD" because it was designated to pay off bridge debts that will be settled before the end of the year, Connick said.

Connick, who was briefed by Jindal's staff Thursday afternoon, said he is confident state transportation officials will ensure the bridge is properly maintained.

"Based on the history of how we have gotten the short end of the stick, the governor is taking the bull by the horns and saying, 'We're going to do it right and make it fair,'" Connick said. "There's nothing else we can ask for."

But Glenn Orgeron, a member of a task force that recommended keeping the tolls, said eliminating all dedicated bridge revenue and relying exclusively on the transportation department to pick up the slack is a "recipe for disaster."

"If you take away the tolls and you take away Highway Fund No. 2, I think it's a pie-in-the-sky hope to assume you will be able to operate the bridge without a significant decline in services," he said.

Michael Teachworth, who cast the dissenting vote in the task force's 7-1 decision to recommend renewing the tolls, had proposed using the \$5 million from Highway Fund No. 2 to pay for policing (\$2.5 million), landscaping (\$1.2 million) and lighting (\$800,000).

Teachworth said he's not concerned about that revenue going to the state instead of being dedicated to the bridge.

"I believe the state will do the right thing," he said. "It's also a question of fairness. We've been paying double with tolls and gas taxes, and I don't see that we've been getting much in return."

The governor's budget calls for privatizing the Gretna, Algiers and Chalmette ferries, which cost \$9 million a year to operate but generate just \$250,000 in fees, relying on bridge tolls to offset the massive shortfall.

The budget also calls for a total of 148 bridge jobs to be eliminated, 73 from bridge operations and 75 from the marine division once ferries were privatized, according to the news release.

The Crescent City Connection is the fifth-busiest toll bridge in the country, with an average of 190,000 vehicles a day. Collected from east bank-bound motorists, the toll is \$1 for motorists paying cash and 40 cents for drivers with electronic toll tags.

The toll was lifted in the mid-1960s and reinstated in 1989 to finance construction of the second span. When the tolls were last renewed in 1998, surplus toll revenue was to be used to pay for tens of millions of dollars in West Bank road projects. But few of the projects were completed as costs to operate the bridge spiraled out of control.

Jindal's proposed budget also calls for shutting down the Edgard-Reserve ferry and the White Castle ferry. The two ferries charge a \$1 toll but cost taxpayers an additional \$15 to \$17 per trip for every vehicle. Eliminating those two ferries would cut 17 jobs and save \$2.3 million a year, the news release said.

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INFOBOX:

PLAN FOR FERRIES

PRIVATIZE

Algiers, Chalmette and Gretna ferries

DISCONTINUE

Edgard-Reserve and White Castle ferries

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