

With tolls on the **Crescent City Connection** set to expire in four years, state transportation officials are trying to placate unhappy commuters in the wake of an audit that faulted poor customer service at the bridge.

"The audit makes it very clear that we weren't very customer oriented," said William Ankner, secretary of the state Department of Transportation and Development. "In fact, customers didn't have a role in anything we did, and that's unacceptable to me."

Speaking at Tuesday night's meeting of the West Jefferson Civic Coalition, Ankner said he will form a citizen committee to give feedback to bridge administrators. He also said the bridge's Web site will soon allow bridge users to obtain toll tags and add money to toll accounts.

State Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, welcomed the focus on accountability and accessibility.

But Connick and many others in the crowd of more than 100 said that before the tolls are renewed, commuters need to start getting more bang for their bucks.

They questioned why the bridge authority has not used toll money to finance several West Bank road projects outlined in the state law that reauthorized tolls in 1998.

"We will support you Mr. Secretary, but give us a return for our money," Connick said. "We need to make sure the money we are paying in taxes and tolls is being used effectively and efficiently."

Ankner 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.

The ferries cost more than \$7 million to operate each year but generate less than \$250,000 in fees.

According to last year's 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.

Ankner said part of the problem is that tolls for motorists with electronic toll tags -- 52 percent of bridge users -- have been reduced from \$1 to 40 cents since 1989. The cash toll remains at \$1.

"I can't undo the decisions of the past, but I can show you that revenue from tolls has not kept up with costs," he said.

Several audience members peppered Ankner with questions about why they should have to pay tolls when passage is free on other Mississippi River bridges in the state.

"Perhaps we ought to have tolls on every single bridge throughout the state to turn this toll business into a real money maker," said Dave Doskey, of Marrero.

Ankner said that if the DOTD took over the **Crescent City Connection** and lifted the tolls, the bridge would have to compete with transportation projects across the state.

"We could do that, but you have to decide what level of service you want to have," he said, noting that the department has a backlog of projects totaling \$14 billion.

The audit that faulted customer service was one of three that the transportation department released in advance of the meeting.

An audit of the bridge's 30-plus-member police department recommended that it be maintained, concluding it would be more expensive for other law-enforcement agencies to police a 14-mile stretch of elevated highway that includes the bridge.

Legislative Auditor Steve Theriot is conducting a separate performance audit requested by a group of state legislators led by Connick.

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