

Backed by a legislative official's opinion that it's not overstepping its authority, the task force studying the pending expiration of the **Crescent City Connection** tolls reaffirmed its decision to also make recommendations in case the tolls are renewed.

Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, has said the panel is going beyond the intent of a legislative resolution directing it "to analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge."

But Clifford Williams, a division director with House Legislative Services, said that phrase is part of the resolution's preamble or title and carries no legal weight.

"It's just the title of the resolution; it doesn't mean anything," he said Friday afternoon at the task force's biweekly meeting. "It doesn't tie your hands. You can do whatever you want to."

Williams added that the resolution directs the panel to analyze "potential sources and uses of all revenues."

"We all know that the tolls are scheduled to go away, so a potential source of revenue is to renew the tolls," he said.

After hearing Williams' opinion, the task force took no action to reverse its Aug. 26 vote to study the potential renewal of the tolls, which expire at the end of 2012.

But Connick said the resolution's intent was made clear when the House amended it to replace the original directive "to analyze reauthorization of the tolls" with the opposite mandate "to analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge."

"I think Williams is totally wrong," Connick said. "The crystal clear intent of the resolution was to narrow the focus to what should happen when the tolls expire."

An attorney with the state Department of Transportation and Development, which oversees the **Crescent City Connection**, introduced Williams as a "senior attorney," but he's not a licensed attorney.

Williams permanently resigned from practicing law in 2007 after a Louisiana Attorney Disciplinary Board committee recommended he be disbarred for continuing to take cases after his law license was suspended for not paying his bar dues in 1996, according to state Supreme Court documents.

Williams was selected by House attorneys to give his opinion to the task force, said Jodi Conachen, a transportation department spokeswoman.

Conachen said transportation officials were told they would be getting a "senior attorney," which

she said led to the erroneous introduction.

Mary Quaid, executive director of House Legislative Services, said she was unaware that Williams would be rendering an opinion on the task force's mandate. Quaid said she will review the matter to determine if her office needs to issue a statement in response to Williams' opinion.

"If the task force has made a decision based at least in part on what he said, it's something we should look at," she said.

Connick, a frequent critic of the transportation department's management of the bridge, said the selection of a non-attorney to render a legal opinion "doesn't smell right."

"They're trying to save their own skins," he said. "This just gives one more reason to get rid of them if they're going to keep playing these games."

Transportation department attorneys said they considered seeking an Attorney General's opinion but scrapped the idea when told that the state's top attorney wouldn't weigh in on the intent of a legislative resolution, which doesn't have the force of law.

State Rep. Ricky Templet, R-Gretna, has said he sponsored the amendment that added the "transition to a toll-free bridge" language to narrow the task force's focus to a scenario in which the tolls expire. But unlike Connick, Templet stopped short of saying the panel shouldn't provide recommendations in case the tolls are renewed.

Connick has said he doesn't want the task force's recommendations to provide political cover for legislators to cast unpopular votes to extend the tolls.

But task force members said they simply want to provide as much information as possible to legislators as they decide whether to let the tolls expire.

"We have no agenda other than to find a way to provide needed services in a best-practices approach," task force member William Aaron said.

The toll, which is collected from east bank-bound motorists, is \$1 per two-axle vehicle for those paying cash and 40 cents for those with electronic toll tags.

The tolls account for about three-quarters of the bridge's \$27 million annual budget, meaning wholesale budget cuts would be needed if the tolls lapse.

The 10-member task force has received a crash course in bridge operations and finances since it convened July 29.

Appointed by Gov. Bobby Jindal from a list of nominees submitted by civic and business groups, the panel plans to complete a draft report on its recommendations by early January. The legislature set a Feb. 1 deadline for the final report.

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