

Toll task force to add report - It will look at - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - September 14, 2011 - page B 01

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A task force created by the state Legislature to "analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge," since **Crescent City Connection** tolls are set to expire next year, has decided to also make recommendations in the event that tolls are renewed.

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 at the end of 2012.

But state Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, a strong proponent of letting the tolls lapse, said the panel is going beyond the intent of the legislative resolution that created it.

He said any analysis about the possible renewal of tolls could provide political cover for lawmakers to cast unpopular votes to continue the tolls.

"The intent in creating the task force was to answer one question: 'How do we fund the bridge services we need without the tolls?' " Connick said.

"I don't want them to come out with a report that puts the fear of God in people about what will happen if the tolls expire and insulates legislators from making bad decisions to renew the tolls."

But task force members said the resolution is ambiguous about the scope of the panel's work.

For instance, they said, the opening sentence stating that the panel is "to analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge" appears to be at odds with a directive to study "potential sources and uses of all revenues," which they said could be read to include toll revenue.

In voting Aug. 26 to study the potential renewal of the tolls, the group decided against seeking clarification from legislators about their intent.

"They had an opportunity to clearly state what they wanted, but they didn't," task force member William Aaron said at the time.

"I think it was by design."

But in response to the questions raised by Connick, officials with the state transportation department, which oversees bridge operations, are working to set up a meeting between the task force and key legislators to discuss the resolution's intent, said Jodi Conachen, a department spokeswoman. She said the goal is to have that meeting before the panel's next regular meeting Sept. 23.

State Rep. Ricky T emplet, R-Gretna, said he sponsored an 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.

"As of right now, the tolls will expire in 2012," he said. "This study, in my mind, was to look at what to do when that happens."

Templet said the broader focus adopted by the task force is "off the beaten path of the toll-free aspect of the resolution." But he also said panel members "have to have the independence to make whatever recommendations they want to make."

Sen. David Heitmeier, D-Algiers, who co-sponsored the resolution, said he envisioned the task force examining bridge expenses and looking for a way to pay for bridge maintenance and policing without toll revenue.

"The idea was to let the data tell us where to go when the tolls expire," said Heitmeier.

But Heitmeier, who said he supports letting the tolls expire, said he has no problem with the task force "studying both sides of the issue."

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

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.

With the state facing a multibillion-dollar backlog of transportation projects, renewal proponents say the tolls provide a steady source of revenue for bridge maintenance while subsidizing three Mississippi River ferries that might otherwise have to be scaled back or eliminated.

But with bonds financing the bridge's second span set to be paid off before the tolls expire, some bridge users have questioned why the tolls should be renewed, especially after many planned West Bank road-improvement projects were never completed because anticipated toll surpluses failed to materialize.

The 10-member task force has received a crash course in bridge operations and finances during four biweekly meetings 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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