

A proposal to extend the toll on the CCC causes debate.

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SUPPORT FROM West Bank lawmakers and business leaders for the state Department of Transportation and Development's proposed 13-year extension of Crescent City Connection tolls seems highly unlikely.

The plan to extend the tolls is fiddled with flaws, several West Bank officials say.

But DOTD officials who oversee the bridge commission say it would be difficult to start long-range infrastructure projects planned for the area and the bridge unless the Legislature extends the tolls through the 2011-12 fiscal year during the upcoming regular session.

The commission can do a better job mainmaining the bridge and ferry system, managing its 258 workers and completing proposed projects if funding is stabilized, they say.

"You're talking about a business that never shuts down," says Ken Pickering, general counsel for the bridge commission. "Unlike most businesses, it operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. And there is no other source of funding."

Toward paying for \$124 million in West Bank projects, the commission has accumulated \$32 million in toll revenue that couldn't be spent on administrative, operating and maintenance costs for the bridge and five Mississippi River ferries also under the commission's control.

State law stipulates the commission can spend no more than \$14 million annually for bridge and ferry expenses. The tolls -- which are set to expire June 30, 1999 -- generated about \$20 million during fiscal year 1996-97, giving the commission a \$6 million surplus to place into a capital projects account.

The bridge commission estimates 51 million vehicles used the Crescent City Connection toll year. The number of users has been climbing steadily since a second span opened to traffic in September 1988.

In comparison, the two spans carried about 39 million vehicles during the 1989-90 fiscal year, the newer span's first full year of operation. Though the number of users is growing,



commission officials estimate they will collect \$6 million annually in surplus toll revenue from now until 2012.

State Rep. Steve Windhorst (R-Terrytown) says he opposed extending the tolls in 1994 -the last time the Legislature renewed the fees -and doubts he'll support this year's legislation.

He says his main concern is the bridge commission's plan to spend \$47 million of toll revenue to paint the older span. The estimated cost of painting the 40-year-old span has risen drastically in recent years because of new federal environmental mandates requiring special techniques to remove and dispose of lead-based paint.

"I find it horrible that we have to spend almost \$50 million to paint a bridge to keep a few chips of paint from falling into a river that is, as we know, pristine," Windhorst says. "The DOTD doesn't want to pay it either -they want to wait for the tolls to get renewed. I don't think the paint job should come out of the tolls."

The old span is rusting and has been in dire need of fresh paint for several years, Windhorst says, but it doesn't make sense for its users to bear those costs when motorists in other areas of the state are using bridges maintained by the DOTD without having to pay a toll.

"Most lawmakers don't want to support spending \$50 million just to paint the bridge" he says. "Some of them are still smarting over the fact that they paid to build it, even though there was federal money involved."

State Rep. Jacquelyn Clarkson (D-Algiers) says she won't even consider voting for a toll extension until the bridge's mass-transit lane is opened to most traffic, alleviating the daily jams that occur during rush hour.

In July 1996, the mass-transit lane was limited to buses and vehicles carrying seven or more passengers. Those limitations have since been lifted by the Legislature and the federal government, Clarkson says, but the bridge commission has been slow to follow.

"There's a lane that's clear, with nothing moving on it for 15 or 20 minutes, while we all sit in lines on the bridge for 45 minutes or an hour," Clarkson says. "This has been a nightmare for taxpayers and toll-payers of the three West Bank parishes that use the bridge."

She says the bridge commission has been unresponsive to the requests of area community and business leaders. Last year, The Chamber [New Orleans and the River Region] lobbied for revisions to legislation to extend the tolls that would have provided more accountability and oversight of the bridge commission and its upcoming projects. The revisions weren't made, but the bill never cleared the House Ways and Means committee setting the stage for this year's battle.

"Our problem is not that we don't want to work with the Crescent City Connection. Everybody's tired of working with the Crescent City Connection and not getting results" Clarkson says.

Paul Richard, chairman of the chamber's West Bank Council, says he's asking area lawmakers to revise the bill to extend the tolls in a way that would address the business community's concerns.

"No one likes to pay tolls, but what's important here is that the tolls are the only real source of funding for transportation improvements on the West Bank," Richard says.

Specifically, the chamber's proposed revisions would:

- Require the commission to wrap all projects, except the bridge's paint job, under a bond issue, and establish a time line for completing them.
- Create a new board of business and community leaders to oversee the bridge commission's operations. The board would be given more authority than an advisory panel currently being formed.
- Ensure that all toll-funded projects conform with the Regional Planning Commission's West Bank Major Thoroughfare Plan.
- Require an annual audit of bridge commission operations.

Richard says the West Bank Council won't support efforts to extend the tolls unless those stipulations are met.

Randall Paisant, assistant executive director of the bridge commission, says bonding the projects is unnecessary. Paying interest on the bonds would create higher costs, and the commission already has worked out a pay-asyou-go plan for its capital projects, he says.

And, Paisant says, those projects already have been chosen with assistance from business and community leaders and are listed in the legislation to extend the tolls.

Picketing says there is no organized opposition to extending the tolls.

"We have spoken to numerous public groups, civic associations, the chamber of commerce," he says. "Everybody believes the tolls are a necessity. In order for the bridge's high level of services to be maintained -- to keep it clean, to keep traffic moving, to maintain its police force -- we must have the tolls extended.

State Rep. John Alario (D-Westwego) says he wants to try to bring together bridge officials, lawmakers and business leaders -- to hammer out a compromise all parties can support.

"There has to be some give and take on all sides," Alario says. "I'm sure that through the legislative process we'll get to that point."

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): The toll on the Crescent City Connection isn't popular with some West Bank lawmakers.

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