

If you work or live on the West Bank, chances are you pay to cross the **Crescent City Connection**. State officials say the tolls bring in about \$22 million a year, three-quarters of the bridge's \$25 million operating budget.

But many days, when motorists pass through the toll plaza or roll along the elevated West Bank or the Pontchartrain expressways, we question whether we're getting our money's worth.

In the spring of 2000, CCC officials finished a \$16 million beautification project on both sides of the Mississippi River that produced some nice iron benches, trash cans, split leaf philodendra, brick work and a paved pedestrian-bike path underneath the elevated West Bank Expressway.

After that, the older span of the bridge got a fresh coat of paint, a job that took more than four years and cost nearly \$20 million. (Now, the newer span is peeling paint and could use a few new light bulbs.)

And in the face of a \$10 million shortfall in the bridge's operating budget, the agency paid \$3.8 million to renovate most of the CCC offices and build a nice 6,000-square-foot addition to the toll plaza that houses the new Louisiana 1 toll road folks.

Yet, traffic is a nightmare, even for toll tag users. Algiers traffic trying to merge from Gen. De Gaulle Drive onto the bridge during rush hour is often clogged by impatient drivers trying to cut in. **Crescent City Connection** police officers used to monitor the situation, but now they are rarely seen there. And on any given day, drivers are more apt to see police cruisers from the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office, the Gretna Police Department and lately, Louisiana State Police, parked along the shoulder, presumably to deter speeding, than bridge police.

"At certain times, they're all over the place, but other times, they're nowhere to be found," state Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, said of the CCC police. "All of the cars are parked outside police headquarters under the bridge."

It doesn't help that nearly \$23 million left over from bond debts for the bridge nearly ended up in Lake Charles for a rice and grain elevator this year. House Speaker Jim Tucker, R-Algiers, and the West Bank legislative delegation took on Lake Charles area legislators and the Jindal administration this summer to make sure that the money returned to its rightful place.

Still, with the tolls set to expire in 2012, it's going to be a tough sell for any politician to convince tollpayers -- and voters -- that they need to continue opening their wallets.

It's a matter of trust.

Connick, who has scrutinized the CCC's finances, has made it clear that he will not support an extension of the tolls unless West Bank commuters get something tangible in return.

Transportation Secretary William Ankner also has pledged closer monitoring of the agency, which is a division in the state transportation department.

Meanwhile, State Police officials are discussing the possibility of taking over some of the functions of the bridge police in an effort to save money for the CCC.

State Police commander Col. Michael Edmonson recently told the Commission on Streamlining Government, charged with finding ways to consolidate or outsource state operations, that his office could help with administrative functions, for example.

"We're looking for areas across the state where law enforcement duplication exists and trying to combine resources to save money without compromising safety," Edmonson said.

The **Crescent City Connection**, which has long operated as an island unto itself, would be a good place to start the search.

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