

BATON ROUGE Two West Bank lawmakers have filed legislation to abolish the tolls on the Crescent City Connection next year or cut the amount commuters will have to pay until then.

Rep. Jackie Clarkson, D-Algiers, who played a key role in killing a toll-extension bill at the special legislative session three weeks ago, has filed House Bill 314 to let the tolls expire June 30, 1999. That bill is also sponsored by Rep. Steve Windhorst, R-Territory.

Windhorst has sponsored HB 280 to reduce the tolls through June 30, 1999. The bill, co-sponsored by Clarkson, would cut the standard \$1 toll to 50 cents and the discounted tolls for toll tag users from 50 cents to 30 cents per trip.

"I want to be severe. We have tried everything," Clarkson said. "We collect \$20 million a year in tolls, and \$14 million of that goes to fund a bureaucracy (at the Department of Transportation and Development) and \$6 million goes to finance roads that should be financed by DOTD's own money.

"Why take \$20 million from chronic bridge users from Algiers and Gretna and Territory for road projects for DOTD's feeding frenzy?"

Several bills have been filed to extend the tolls through 2006 or 2012.

The House Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works has set a Tuesday hearing on House Bill 250 by its chairman, Rep. Juba Diez, D-Gonzalez. It would keep tolls in place through 2012, a 13 1/2 -year extension for the existing expiration date.

Diez said he might also schedule the Clarkson and Windhorst bills at the same time.

A bill extending tolls to 2006 died in the special session that ended April 17.

Meanwhile, Sen. Ron Landry, D-LaPlace, has filed two bills extending the bridge tolls, one through 2006 and the other through 2012, while Sen. Francis Heitmeier, D-Algiers, has filed a separate bill granting tax credits to people who pay the tolls.

Heitmeier has also filed Senate Bill 95 to keep the tolls in place through 2012 but also stripping away construction of several road projects that are now financed by the tolls. Heitmeier said the bill would restrict toll revenue to paying off the bonds that financed the bridge's construction, to paying for its operation and operating the river ferries that run in the New Orleans area, and to paying for maintaining and painting the bridge. The bill also would adjust the tolls annually to ensure that they raise money just for these purposes and not for other road projects now financed by the tolls.

The tolls generate about \$20 million a year. About \$15 million goes to finance the operation and

maintenance of the ferries and the bridges and \$5 million to the West Bank road projects near the bridge.

These road projects "have been the fleecing of the West Bank," Heitmeier said.

He said his bill has been stalled in the Senate because extending the tolls is a tax matter and must start in the House. He said his bill could become an amendment to a House toll bill if one reaches the Senate floor.

Lawmakers have filed 435 bills for the session: 118 in the Senate, 317 in the House.

On another transportation matter, Sen. Phil Short, R-Covington, has filed SB 118 extending indefinitely a special state road construction program and the 4-cent special gasoline tax that finances it.

The program's 13 unfinished road and bridge projects are running \$1.3 billion over original estimates but is due to expire in 2004. Short's bill would extend the program until all of the projects are finished.

His bill would take one cent of the tax and channel it to parish road needs, keeping the other three cents in place for construction of the special projects.

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