

BRIDGE to ELSEWHERE - West Bankers tired of having - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - November 9, 2008 - page 07

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Not too long ago -- 2001 to be exact -- the **Crescent City Connection** was sitting on a \$30 million surplus. By law, that extra cash was supposed to be spent on area transportation projects approved by the Legislature.

Yet today, things aren't so rosy at the bridge agency. Although motorists have ponied up more than \$170 million to cross the bridge since the tolls were renewed in 1998, that money isn't enough to keep up with expenses. Last year, the fees brought in \$21 million, while it took \$22 million to maintain the bridge, run ferries in three locations and pay salaries and benefits for 200-plus employees.

And now, state Transportation Secretary William Ankner is putting the West Bank on notice: He'll seek to keep the tolls on the **Crescent City Connection** past their 2012 expiration date.

Because of the dedicated revenue stream, he said the span is in better shape than 90 percent of the bridges his agency oversees.

"I will tell you now that I will push to keep the tolls," he told an Oct. 28 meeting of Algiers residents and elected officials.

But Ankner could be in for a fight.

Keeping the tolls in place would require legislative approval, the same approval that elected officials handed over 10 years ago under a promise of numerous road projects that have yet to come to fruition.

Local leaders and residents have long looked forward to the expansion of Fourth Street in Gretna, exit ramps to Peters Road in Harvey and the widening of Gen. de Gaulle Drive in Algiers and Barataria Boulevard in Marrero.

But state officials testified at a March hearing that there was no intent to complete the projects, said state Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey.

"They just put them in the law to get the votes" to renew the tolls, Connick said. "The only thing that is getting done is studies and engineers are being paid instead of working on one project designed to completion."

Connick has sought a performance audit of the **Crescent City Connection** division, while state transportation officials have requested studies examining the agency's accounting, police department and bridge and ferry operations.

Meanwhile, the agency's top executives have left in recent months. Executive director Alan

LeVasseur retired in August, and his second-in-command, Randall Paisant, retired Nov. 1. Both cited personal reasons for leaving, not the scrutiny that the agency is currently undergoing.

"The whole thing is about accountability," Connick said of the bridge agency. "Let us see what they have (and whether) it can be run better."

The legislator has vetted the CCC's budget and found questionable items, including a \$3.2 million expansion of the agency's administrative building. That money also includes \$122,000 for an office for officials overseeing the Louisiana 1 highway project.

"This is a huge issue. I asked for money for the Barataria expansion and it was vetoed," he said. "Yet we can spend our toll money for a project in Lafourche? Those are the questions that need to be answered."

Connick said that by using the CCC's toll money to build office space for the Louisiana 1 project, officials are violating the law, which specifically requires toll funds to be used to support the span and related projects.

"The West Bank is not a savings and loan to loan money for other projects," he said. "If we're going to pay for something, it should remain on the West Bank in the jurisdiction of the **Crescent City Connection.**"

Local officials and residents are certain to agree.

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