

If you've ever left Memphis for St. Louis, you know that you have two options to cross the Mississippi River. You can take Interstate 40 West, whose Hernando de Soto Bridge is grandly illuminated the way our Crescent City Connection was. Or if you want an old-school Huey P. Long Bridge-type experience, you can take Interstate 55 North and its Memphis & Arkansas Bridge.

If you're like me, you won't like the Memphis & Arkansas Bridge as much. It's dark and narrow and runs in a tight parallel with the Harahan Bridge, carrying trains 400 feet away. Something about it bespeaks bare-bones functionality. I always felt glad to be driving on the Hernando de Soto Bridge and just as glad to be driving off the other one.

The choice of lighted bridge or dark bridge presented itself to me while I was traveling to and from college, never on a daily commute. The rarity of the experience and my travel between two places I loved might explain my nostalgia for the brightly lit Hernando de Soto. Maybe I'd feel less romantic if I'd had to drive back and forth across the span every day. So I'll concede the point that, lights or no lights, most people driving the Crescent City Connection probably haven't experienced anything approaching gladness. Especially not those driving into New Orleans. Until this month, the trip was costing them \$1, or 40 cents if they had a toll tag.

The tolls are gone now. A Baton Rouge judge said that the November election that renewed them was unfair. But the decorative lights are gone, too, which, according to some toll supporters, is what the public deserves for demanding free transit across the Mississippi River. Earlier this month, when the Regional Planning Commission was considering using surplus funds to keep the lights on, New Orleans City Council President Jackie Clarkson objected. She said a darkened bridge would be the consequence of no tolls.

There's a do-over election that's been scheduled for May.

Apparently, voters need to see the darkness in order to be brought back into the light and vote to resume the tolls.

The Regional Planning Commission chose to spend the surplus on other bridge services and not the decorative lights, a move Clarkson reluctantly supported. A past president of the Young Leadership Council, which originally raised the money for the lights, has unearthed an agreement that says the state's Department of Transportation and Development is responsible for the decorative lighting. A spokeswoman for the department says that in 1989 the department committed to paying for lights that were eventually destroyed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Department officials say they can't by law pay for the lights that replaced them. The YLC has offered to send the Transportation Department the money to pay for the lights, but it's the department's position that it can't accept money from a private agency.

This is beginning to feel a lot like extortion. The public wouldn't be wrong to think that the lights are

being withheld to force them to part with their money. But linking the decorative lights to the **tolls**, as some New Orleans politicians are doing, is a real stretch mathematically.

Including the cost of electricity, the decorative lights cost \$60,000 a year. In that same amount of time, **tolls** bring in \$22 million. While some politicians insist that the **tolls** are necessary to light up the bridge, what they don't say is that the cost of the decorative lights would be covered in a good 24 hours of toll collection. What about the money collected on the remaining 364 days?

As a former Algiers Point resident, I'm sensitive to the argument that the **tolls** have kept the Canal Street ferry afloat. Without the ferry, I think it's fair to say that homes there will lose some value because a major selling point, easy access to downtown, will be gone. But it isn't fair to hold the whole West Bank hostage just to keep the Point happy.

I like a nicely illuminated bridge as much as anybody, but I don't want it so badly that I want to lose a dollar every time I cross the river. If New Orleans officials think that keeping the bridge dark is going to force voters' hands, they're making a horrible miscalculation, about as bad as the one that says we've got to pay \$22 million in **tolls** to cover a \$60,000 tab for lights.

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