

West Bank Business Report

Bridging the gap

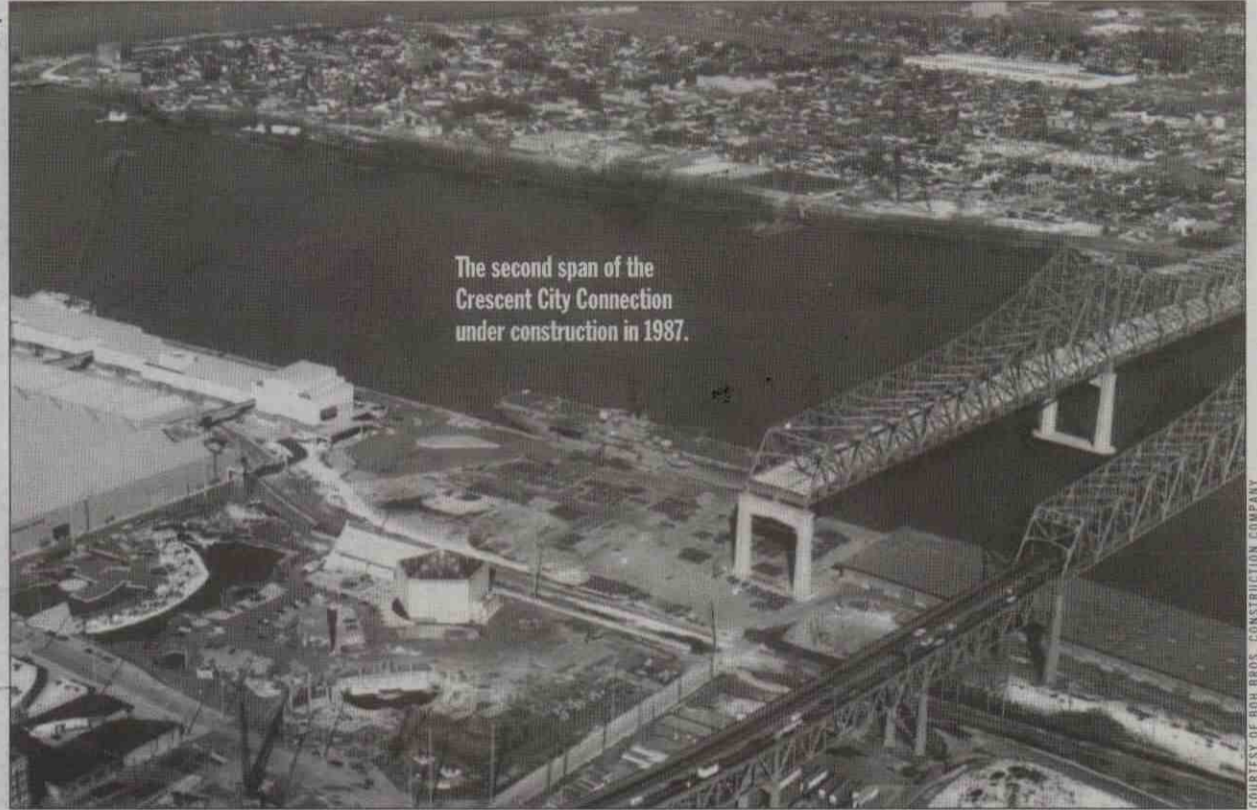
West Bank boomed when second span opened on Crescent City Connection

By Richard Slawsky
Staff Writer

A NEW WORLD opened up for West Bank residents on Sept. 30, 1988.

The second span of what is now known as the Crescent City Connection opened that day, marking the turning point in a project that had been ongoing for more than 10 years and wouldn't be completed for another six. Once the second span opened, it eliminated most traffic problems that had choked off West Bank growth, say Jefferson Parish officials.

"In the 12 months preceding the second bridge opening, we had 39 million vehicles cross the bridge in both directions," said Randall Paisant, assistant executive director of the Crescent City Connection Division, the section of the Louisiana Department of Transportation



The second span of the Crescent City Connection under construction in 1987.

COURTESY OF BOH-BROS. CONSTRUCTION COMPANY

and Development, which patrols and maintains the bridge. "Today, the 12-month figure is about 63 million vehicles and is rising steadily."

No formal study has been done on the economic impact of the second span, but the West Bank city of Gretna has seen a turnaround in population since the bridge opened.

From 1980 to 1990, Gretna's population fell 16.5 percent from 20,615 to 17,208, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Between 1990 and 2000, Gretna's population increased 1.3 percent to 17,423 from 17,208. Jefferson Parish as a whole grew 1.9 percent from 446,812 to

455,466 during that time period.

Plaquemines Parish experienced a similar growth pattern. From 1980 to 1990, Plaquemines Parish fell 1.8 percent to 25,575 from 26,049. From 1990 to 2000, population grew 4.6 percent to 26,757.

"Most people on the East Bank thought that the West Bank was either all farmland or all bayous," said Jack Stumpf, owner of Jack Stumpf & Associates, a real estate agency dealing primarily on the West Bank. "Once it became easy to cross that bridge people began to realize that this is a good place to live."

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Huey P. bridge expansion readies for construction

By Richard A. Webster
Contributing Writer

THE HUEY P. Long Bridge expansion will be one step closer to reality by the end of the year.

The environmental assessment study is scheduled to be completed by then, said Ray Mumphy, expansion project manager with the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development.

If the project is found to have no significant impact on the environment, which looks likely, said Shelby LaSalle, co-chairman of the nonprofit task force "Hurry the Huey," construction will begin next summer.

The expansion of the bridge from four sub-standard lanes to six interstate-sized lanes with safety shoulders should

be finished by December 2012. The \$290 million project is being funded by the Transportation Infrastructure Model for Economic Development, a \$3.5 billion DOTD improvement program.

The reason the expansion is close to beginning is because funds were secured through TIMED, said Jack Capella, chairman of the Jefferson Chamber of Commerce. In 1989, Louisiana voted to create TIMED and an additional 4-cent fuel tax to fund the program. TIMED includes 16 transportation projects, including the Huey P. Long expansion, worth more than \$1 billion.

"There's no immediate return when you do a capital project like this but the return on the investment will be a hundred-fold when you open the West Bank for development," Capella said. "It's the



PHOTO BY CHERYL GENDER

The expansion of the Huey P. Long Bridge is the most important economic development project for this region, said Jack Cappella, chairman of the Jefferson Chamber of Commerce.

biggest land area for development in Jefferson Parish and the key to tapping that resource is making it available to the East Bank. Without the Huey, we can't tap that resource."

The 4.35-mile Huey P. Long Bridge, which came to be known for its four narrow lanes of vehicular terror, was built in

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Since the bridge opened, retail growth has surged along the West Bank Expressway and Manhattan Boulevard corridors. The areas near the end of Gen. DeGaulle, Wall Boulevard, and Manhattan Boulevard have become magnets for upscale home developments.

Overall, the entire West Bank benefited from the bridge opening, Stumpf said. Areas as far away as Marrero and farther saw dramatic growth as a result of the easier commute, he said.

The East Bank benefited from the bridge opening as well. The Coliseum Square neighborhood, plagued by the daily afternoon traffic jams, experienced a rebirth after the Camp Street onramp to the bridge was removed in the mid-1990s.

The older span, known simply as the Mississippi River Bridge at the time, opened in 1958. The East Bank ramp was located at Camp Street then and the West Bank ramp was located at Victory Park Drive, now General DeGaulle.

"Before the first bridge was opened, Gretna and Algiers were all separate communities," Paisant said. "They weren't tied together as they are today."

Construction of the Pontchartrain Expressway and the West Bank Expressway progressed in conjunction with the construction of the bridge although neither was complete before the bridge opened. The bridge quickly reached capacity and by the

mid-1960s controls were instituted to help ease traffic flow.

Recent West Bank arrivals may complain about a 20-car line to pass through the Crescent City Connection toll plaza each weekday morning, but veteran residents still recall the unique "traffic controls" of pre-1988 West Bank life. The controls, put in place each weekday morning on the West Bank side and each afternoon on the East Bank side, enabled police to squeeze the maximum amount of traffic across the single span of the Mississippi River Bridge.

"At the time ... there were several arteries that fed into the bridge at either end," Paisant said. "Because there were only two lanes of traffic in each direction allowed on the bridge, the best way we could funnel traffic through was by manually controlling those ramps, giving each one-time intervals manually."

Unfortunately, the controls meant delays of an hour or more to cross the bridge each morning and each afternoon. An accident on the bridge could stretch that time to several hours.

With wireless phones still unknown, West Bank residents kept a supply of books or magazines in the car to pass the time. Some people even worked on their cars while waiting in line, Paisant said.

By the 1970s it became apparent a second bridge was a necessity. Various bridge locations were proposed, including one at Napoleon Avenue Uptown. Eventually, the present location was chosen.

Permits authorizing construction of the bridge were issued in 1978, and construc-



In the 12 months before the second span opened, 39 million vehicles crossed the bridge. Today, 63 million vehicles cross the bridge every month.

tion began in 1981 on the river pilings. Following the oil bust of the mid-1980s, the state adopted a "pay-as-you-go" stance, which slowed construction dramatically. By September 1988, the second span was ready to open.

"One of the biggest problems with the projects was building the bridge while maintaining traffic," Paisant said. "On the East Bank side, we had to build the entire expressway from Earhart Boulevard to the bridge yet still maintain traffic."

The Mississippi River Bridge was rechristened the Crescent City Connection shortly after the second span opened. Tolls were instituted on the West Bank side in 1989 to little public objection.

The second span made it easier for commuters to travel across the river but the traditional rivalry between the East and West

Banks isn't completely erased. East Bankers have generally looked askance at West Bankers, considering them less sophisticated, to put it delicately.

"That will always be there," said state Sen. Francis Heitmeier, D-Algiers

Prior to the first bridge opening, Heitmeier said, the ferry was the only mode of transportation to cross the river. East Bank residents considered the West Bank a foreign country, he said.

Traffic continued to be a problem until the second span opened, which reinforced the rivalry, Heitmeier said. However, opening the second span sparked a development boom that has completely changed the area, he said.

"The second span has helped development, helped businesses grow, helped the neighborhoods," Heitmeier said. "It's done wonders for the West Bank."•

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1935. It connects the East Bank of Jefferson Parish with the West Bank, but its skinny lanes have long impeded West Bank commercial growth, LaSalle said.

"It is the most important economic development project for this region," Capella said. "All of a sudden, the 12,000 to 15,000 acres of undeveloped land on the West Bank become accessible in minutes. You can have an Elmwood west overnight."

Jack Stumpf, president of Jack Stumpf & Associates, a commercial real estate brokerage firm in Harvey, said expanding the bridge would lead to higher West Bank property values. Just as the Crescent City Connection changed the complexion of Gretna, Westwego and Marrero, he said, the new Huey P. Long Bridge will change the West Bank.

"People on the East Bank are just as excited as people on the West Bank," Stumpf said. "The East Bank realizes they have only 600 acres of land left to develop so, if Jefferson Parish is going to grow, this is the only place to do it. Before the two banks were divided but now we're walking jointly in support of the Huey P. Long Bridge."

The bridge traffic lanes are cantilevered

to project outward from the main railroad bridge. The expansion plan, designed by the New Orleans engineering firm Modjeski & Masters, calls for two additional lanes to be attached to current lanes and supported by a reinforced substructure.

The first phase of construction will expand the bridge supports. Two lanes of traffic in either direction will be main-

tained during the majority of construction, Mumfrey said. When modification of the main bridge superstructure begins, a one-lane closure in either direction is expected for eight weeks along with intermittent closures during the erection of the steel overhead on the main bridge.

According to the DOTD, 50,000 motorists cross the Huey P. Long Bridge daily.

"The key to completing this project is keeping everybody focused on its importance,"

Capella said. "We have to make sure funding isn't cut, its priority isn't rolled back or that it's not turned into some other project. Our mandate is to make sure the politicians and leaders continue to understand how important this is to the region. It's a challenge keeping everybody on the same page but so far everyone seems to be very concerned about this happening."•

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JACK CAPELLA

Chairman of the
Jefferson Chamber of Commerce

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