

Crescent City bridge audit calls for dumping toll- - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - December 4, 2008 - page 01

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The cash-strapped **Crescent City Connection** should streamline three ferry routes that bleed more than \$20,000 a day and consider requiring all bridge travelers to have electronic toll tags, according to an audit of the bridge's operations.

The bridge could save an estimated \$3 million a year by switching to a fully automated toll system and eliminating toll collectors, according to the 44-page audit released late Tuesday.

But those savings wouldn't necessarily balance the bridge authority's books, thanks to huge losses on the ferry routes across the Mississippi River.

The ferries consume more than \$8 million of the bridge's \$26 million annual operating budget while generating a paltry \$250,000 in passenger fees, the audit said.

That amounts to a loss of at least \$21,000 a day for the ferries, which are heavily subsidized by bridge tolls, with one of every three toll dollars going to keep the boats afloat.

In a written response to the audit, the state Department of Transportation and Development, which oversees the bridge authority, said it is considering shutting down the Canal Street-Algiers Ferry at 9 p.m., except on Fridays and Saturdays when it would continue running until midnight.

The department also said it is weighing cuts to the Gretna-Jackson Avenue Ferry, but it said those savings could be at least partially offset by a need for increased service on the Chalmette-Algiers Ferry during peak hours.

Transportation Department Secretary William Ankner called for the performance audit in response to questions from state Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, about why the bridge authority has not used toll money to finance several West Bank road projects outlined in the state law that reauthorized tolls in 1998.

The audit, conducted by Infrastructure Management Group of Bethesda, Md., concluded that the anticipated surplus for the transportation projects never materialized as toll collections have remained flat while the cost to maintain the bridge and run the aging fleet of ferries has surged.

The audit found that the bridge authority spends 28 cents for each motorist crossing the bridge, compared with \$4.50 for each ferry passenger.

Connick, a vocal critic of the bridge authority, sponsored a bill in the past legislative session that would have turned the ferries over to the Transportation Department, but the legislation died in committee.

Noting that the **Crescent City Connection** was the first bridge in the country to use electronic

toll tags, the audit suggests going to a fully automated toll system to save money. Under the fully automated system, Ankner said one manual toll lane would likely be left open for motorists unaware of the toll-tag requirement.

Currently, 52 percent of motorists crossing the bridge use toll tags, receiving a sizable discount.

The toll is 50 cents per axle for motorists paying cash but just 20 cents per axle for those with electronic toll tags, a 60 percent savings that the audit said is unprecedented among the nation's toll bridges and highways. The tolls generate about \$22 million a year.

Ankner linked the bridge's financial woes to the steep toll-tag discount Tuesday night when he attended a West Jefferson Civic Coalition meeting to discuss the tolls and various transportation projects.

The performance audit and two other audits on the bridge's police department and accounting practices were made public at the meeting.

Connick called the audits a "positive first step," but he said there's a long way to go before he could support extending the tolls, which are set to expire at the end of 2012.

"There is no way we can continue to pay for something that does not benefit us," he said, noting the audit's finding that more than \$100 million in planned West Bank road improvements have been postponed indefinitely.

Ankner said Wednesday that without the tolls, the **Crescent City Connection** would have to compete for money with projects throughout the state, which has a \$14 billion transportation backlog.

"If you add the bridge to a transportation system that's already overloaded, you will not see the same kind of attention and service as in the past," he said.

The police audit concluded bridge officers carry out their duties in an "outstanding and efficient manner." It recommended maintaining the 30-plus-member department, saying it would be more expensive for other law enforcement agencies to police the bridge.

Ankner said he was "pleasantly surprised" by the recommendation. But Connick criticized the audit's methodology, saying it was based largely on interviews with people who have a stake in the matter: bridge administrators who want to keep the police force and leaders from surrounding law enforcement agencies who don't want responsibility for the bridge.

Legislative Auditor Steve Theriot is conducting a separate performance audit requested by a group of legislators led by Connick, who said that report is expected to be completed next month.

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