

DOTD puts downtown bridge tolls on fast track.

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A PROPOSAL TO extend toll collections on the Crescent City Connection until 2012 was, expected to surface this summer during the state Legislature's fiscal-only regular session.

But at the behest of the state Department of Transportation and Development and its division that operates the bridge linking downtown New Orleans and the West Bank, the proposal has been included in Gov. Mike Foster's special session agenda.

State Rep. Jackie Clarkson (D-Algiers) says she wasn't expecting the toll to be an issue during the special session, but regardless, she'll be ready for the debate.

Clarkson and other West Bank lawmakers say they oppose extending the tolls unless specific concerns regarding toll-funded bridge operations and future West Bank infrastructure projects are listed in the legislation that will require motorists to pay the fees for 13 years past their June 1999 expiration.

"They are trying to railroad it through," Clarkson says of the DOTD. "They know they haven't lived up to their commitments to ask for a toll extension so they are going to try to get it any way they can."

The session begins this week and must adjourn by April 17.

Ken Pickering, attorney for the Crescent City Connection division of the DOTD, says bringing the toll-extension bill up in the special session gives the department leeway to visit the issue twice if necessary.

One project that's important to several area lawmakers is being tackled, Pickering says. The bridge's mass-transit lane, which for a year has been limited to buses and vehicles carrying seven or more passengers, is scheduled to open to more types of vehicles in June, he says.

Clarkson says she won't even consider voting to extend the tolls until the rarely used lane is opened. Federal and state authorities reduced usage limitations on the lane last year. But the bridge commission has said it can't open the lane until a detailing project, including new striping and signage, is finished.



State Rep. Steve Windhorst (Terrytown) says he also wants the transit lane opened but is more concerned about DOTD's plan to use toll revenue to cover the \$47 million paint job for one of the bridge's spans.

The Chamber/New Orleans and the River Region has lobbied for revisions that would provide more oversight of the bridge commission and numerous toll-funded infrastructure projects on the West Bank.

Paul Richard, chairman of the chamber's West Bank Council, says the bridge authority should wrap all projects, except the bridge's paint job, under a bond issue, and establish a time line for completing them.

The chamber also won't support a toll extension unless a board of business and community leaders is created to oversee the bridge commission's operations.

Pickering says bonding the projects would be too costly because toll revenue would have to be set aside to pay off interest on the bonds. The bridge division collects about \$6 million annually in surplus revenue not needed for bridge operations and maintenance and places it in a special account to cover \$124 million, in future projects.

Alan LeVasseur, executive director of the bridge division, says though the eight-member advisory panel being formed won't have oversight of the Crescent City Connection's operations and upcoming projects, it will assist the bridge's managers.

"Part of our weakness has been not being a very effective communicator, because that's not the business that we're in," LeVasseur says. "But we recognize its very important that we be able to communicate to the public what we're doing and what's happening."

Clarkson says the West Bank delegation will organize its efforts to revise the toll legislation in time for the debate.

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