

The **Crescent City Connection** kept woefully inadequate records and provided scant oversight of contracts, the state's legislative auditor found, and that helps explain the bridge's financial morass.

The CCC spent more than it took in every year from 2004 to 2008, mounting up a \$25 million deficit over five years. Its reserve fund, which once had \$61 million, has shrunk to \$36 million, and the bridge faces a \$10 million shortfall this year.

State Rep. **Patrick Connick**, who asked for the audit, says its findings support his argument that millions of dollars have been wasted. His concern is valid.

Commuters who pay to cross the bridge were supposed to get more for their money than a trip across the Mississippi River. Surplus toll revenue was supposed to be spent on road improvements on the west bank. Only one of 11 projects has been completed. That's why Rep. Connick is threatening to oppose renewal of the tolls, which expire in 2012.

Department of Transportation and Development Secretary **William Ankner** has blamed the bridge's financial problems on the steep discounts given to motorists with electronic toll tags. Officials also point out that the three Mississippi River ferry routes run by the bridge authority cost \$8 million a year to operate but only generate \$250,000 in fees.

But mismanagement is costly, too. The audit found that most contracts lacked dollar amounts and due dates and that bridge administrators did not monitor contracts to make sure that services were provided. Given the dearth of information, it's impossible to say how much money was wasted. But such sloppiness is inexcusable.

The two top-ranking administrators of the bridge authority have retired. But the CCC's 13-member board clearly wasn't created to exercise oversight. The panel's main job was to choose which projects to build with surplus revenue. It failed to hold nearly half of its meetings over the past 10 years.

Mr. Ankner says that many of the audit's recommendations are already being addressed, and Rep. Connick says he welcomes the DOTD's greater involvement. Problems like poor tracking of contracts will be solved when CCC records are uploaded into a new state computer system, Mr. Ankner said.

The DOTD also is trying to cancel an insurance policy for the bridge that costs \$4 million a year and that the agency deems is not necessary.

But better record keeping alone doesn't guarantee that money will be spent more carefully. The bridge authority is building a \$3.8 million addition to its Algiers offices, an expenditure that's tough to justify when the CCC is running deficits and hasn't spent money on road projects as promised.

Rep. Connick says the audit shows that "no one cared what this organization did or where the money went. The government failed us."

That's a failure that cannot be allowed to continue.

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