

The state will reimburse the **Crescent City Connection** for nearly \$60,000 in toll revenue that was improperly spent on attorney's fees for the new Louisiana 1 toll bridge since 2004, and that money clearly needs to be repaid.

But payment of the fees isn't the only time that CCC toll revenues have been spent on something other than operation and maintenance of the bridge and six ferries.

State law spells out that toll revenue must be used for those purposes, and if there's any revenue left over, it must be used for bridge projects specified in the statute. With tolls set to expire in 2012, only one of those 11 projects has been completed.

State Rep. **Patrick Connick** of Harvey asked for a review of \$145-an-hour invoices used to pay the law firm of Kenneth Pickering, who does work for the **Crescent City Connection**. That review showed that the lawyer had been paid \$59,600 for work that was related to the Louisiana 1 toll bridge, including \$1,160 to take an eight-hour trip to Port Fourchon to scout sites for the new bridge's customer service center and toll kiosks.

Mr. Pickering said that he didn't know that his firm was improperly paid, although the Louisiana 1 invoices were listed on the same page as the CCC invoices. "I'm the attorney; I don't do the bookkeeping," he said.

But the bookkeeping has clearly been an issue, and West Bank officials are understandably frustrated. "Each time we dig, we find something more. The West Bank is being ripped off," Rep. Connick said.

The state legislative auditor released a report in September that identified other instances of CCC revenue being improperly used for the new toll bridge that is on the way to Grand Isle. The audit said that the **Crescent City Connection** was not immediately reimbursed for office space and personnel devoted to the Louisiana 1 bridge. Those expenses were incurred after the CCC took over responsibility for toll collections at the Louisiana 1 bridge.

After the legislative auditor's report was released last fall, state transportation Secretary Sherri LeBas said that the CCC had been fully reimbursed for all the expenses related to the new toll bridge. But apparently that wasn't accurate, since Rep. Connick's questions about attorney's fees revealed additional diversion of CCC revenue. It seems unlikely that the money would have been reimbursed if he had not raised questions.

That's troubling, and the Department of Transportation and Development needs to make sure that it is complying with state law.

The decision to make the **Crescent City Connection** responsible for toll collections for both bridges was made in the interest of efficiency, according to Ms. LeBas. But now DOTD plans to

hire a contractor to handle the Leeville bridge tolls, which won't expire for 35 years.

"We are going to outsource it so that it will be totally separate from the **Crescent City Connection**," she said last fall.

That seems like a necessary step.

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