

A task force appointed to study the pending expiration of **Crescent City Connection** tolls was given a clear directive by the Legislature: Analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge.

Figuring out the bridge's future without the \$21 million generated each year by the \$1 toll on east-bank-bound motorists seems like a big enough job. What's more, it's the one that lawmakers asked the 10-member task force to undertake, in anticipation of Dec. 31, 2012, when the tolls will end.

But the panel has decided that it also will make recommendation in the event that the Legislature extends bridge tolls. Task force members say that the Legislature's intentions are ambiguous. The opening sentence of the legislation says that the panel is "to analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge," but another sentence says that it is to study "potential sources and uses of all revenues." Members say that could be interpreted to include toll revenue.

They need to consider the context. The task force was created because of the looming expiration date and was told to analyze "the transition." If tolls are simply renewed, there's no transition involved.

If panel members are really unsure of what they're supposed to do, they could try asking the lawmaker who sponsored the legislation, Rep. **Patrick Connick** of Harvey, a strong proponent of ending tolls.

"The intent in creating the task force was to answer one question: How do we fund the bridge services we need without the tolls," he said.

Rep. Ricky Templet said he added the language about analyzing the transition because he wanted to narrow the focus to a scenario in which tolls expire.

That's pretty plain, but the task force decided not to seek clarification from lawmakers. "They had an opportunity to clearly state what they wanted, but they didn't," said member William Aaron. "I think it was by design."

That's a wrongheaded attitude. Fortunately, state transportation department officials say they want to set up a meeting between the task force and key legislators to resolve the question.

That clearly needs to happen. The panel has a Feb. 1 deadline for its report; it needs to stick to the job at hand.