

The task force appointed to review the Crescent City Connection's transition to a toll-free bridge seems intent on keeping tolls in place, and it's frustrating that the panel is disregarding its mandate.

The report that is due on Feb. 1 is likely to be a call for lawmakers to renew tolls that are set to expire at the end of 2012.

A vocal minority on the board insists that the panel isn't even supposed to consider that scenario -- and the lawmakers who drafted the resolution creating it agree. But the panel is leaning toward simply making note of the controversy in the report.

The task force is missing an opportunity to help lawmakers devise a future that doesn't put an unfair burden on Crescent City Connection users. Even worse, the report could end up serving as cover for lawmakers to renew the tolls, which otherwise expire at year's end.

Fortunately, the task force report isn't the only analysis that lawmakers have. Michael Teachworth, a vocal toll opponent on the task force, has a rival draft report that says basic bridge operations could be covered by State Highway Fund No. 2, which is funded by local vehicle registration fees.

Lawmakers also should consider the Bureau of Governmental Research report from last year, which pointed out the basic unfairness of the tolls that are now collected on east-bank-bound drivers. They are the only bridge-users in the state who pay to cross the river. Only 19 percent of the revenue is used to police and maintain the bridge. Most goes for what he BGR described as "far-flung" services, including three Mississippi River ferries.

Mr. Teachworth calls the tolls double-taxation for West Bank residents. He calls for the state to pay for ferries here the same way it does in other parts of the state, and the BGR also urged a statewide approach to funding ferries.

The task force as a whole should have been wrestling with these kinds of issues instead of simply falling back on renewing tolls. But that shouldn't be an excuse for the Legislature to do the same.