

HOUSE EXTENDS N.O. BRIDGE TOLLS THROUGH 2012 - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - May 22, 1998 - page A6

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BATON ROUGE The House reversed itself Thursday, passing a bill extending the tolls on the Crescent City Connection and the Sunshine Bridge through 2012, 13 1/2 years beyond their current expiration date.

By a vote of 73-19, lawmakers approved House Bill 250 by Rep. Juba Diez, D-Gonzalez, sending it to the Senate where it will be competing with a different toll-extension bill.

The about-face came when Diez collared enough members of the Legislative Black Caucus and conservative lawmakers who usually vote against taxes to get the bill passed. "It was a strange coalition" of switchers, Diez said after the vote.

The measure needed a two thirds margin of 70 votes and fell four shy Wednesday, 66-32. The identical bill passed Thursday.

"Nothing has changed in 24 hours other than Mr. Diez thinks he has hustled the votes to pass it," said Rep. Sherman Copelin, D-New Orleans, who opposed the toll extension because the proceeds would not finance road projects on the east bank of Orleans Parish. "It is simply not fair to tell the people of New Orleans they have to pay the tolls and don't get anything out of it."

At one point Copelin asked Diez, "What makes this a better bill from the one you had here yesterday?"

Diez responded: "Some people can have a change of opinion in 24 hours. It was good yesterday and it's still good today."

The tolls on both river crossings are scheduled to expire June 30, 1999, unless lawmakers extend them before then. The Legislature cannot take up tolls in the 1999 regular session, which bans fiscal matters.

The CCC tolls raise about \$20 million a year and the Sunshine Bridge tolls generate about \$2 million. About \$15 million of the \$20 million in toll money goes to operate the CCC, maintain it, run its police agency and operate the three sets of ferries in the New Orleans area. The other \$5 million goes to finance bridge-related projects and road improvements, mainly on the west bank of Orleans, Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes.

Rep. Jackie Clarkson, D-Algiers, said the tolls should not be extended for 13 1/2 years but only through Dec. 31, 2004.

"We are giving them \$20 million a year for 13 1/2 years with no strings attached to maintain a bridge which they have not done very well with," Clarkson said.

Clarkson's amendment to end the tolls on Dec. 31, 2004, was shot down 38-60.

Diez argued that the tolls are needed to pay off the bonds, which will not expire until 2012.

Clarkson said with all the projects to be financed with the \$5 million annual windfall, "it is a little capital outlay bill" for lawmakers' pet projects. "Can you tell us who has been promised what to vote on this bill to pass it?" she asked Diez.

"No one has ben promised anything," Diez replied.

Debate was cut off before east bank Orleans lawmakers had a chance to offer amendments to cash in on some of the \$5 million surplus.

Rep. Ed Murray, D-New Orleans, and other New Orleans House members had pushed amendments to use some of the money to finance landscaping and lighting along Florida Avenue from North Broad to the Orleans-St. Bernard Parish line, and along Claiborne Avenue from Poydras Street to Franklin Avenue, miles from the span.

The original version of the bill had those projects in it but they were removed in a House committee and the full House refused to reinstate them Wednesday and Thursday.

The bill sets up a 10-member Crescent City Connection Oversight Authority to set priorities on how to spend the surplus. The projects to be supervised by the authority include:

Opening a transit lane for vehicles with two or more passengers.

Providing an additional toll tag lane for cars entering the bridge at Gen. de Gaulle Drive.

Installation of a photo or video monitoring system for toll and traffic scofflaws.

Repainting the bridge, which will cost about \$47 million.

Other projects that can be financed after those four include extending Peters Road to Louisiana 23 and widening Lapalco Boulevard to four lanes from Victory Drive in Westwego to U.S. 90.

In the Senate version of the bill, all projects not under way would be eliminated and CCC tolls would be reduced by an undetermined amount starting July 1, 1999. The tolls on the Sunshine Bridge would be cut in half July 1, 1999, and would expire in 2004.

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#ART:

ROLL CALL

How New Orleans area members of the House voted on extending

the **tolls** on the Crescent City Connection:

FOR: Alario, D-Westwego; Ansardi, D-Kenner; Bowler, R-River Ridge; Bruneau, R-New Orleans; Damico, D-Marrero; Donelon, R-Metairie; Downer, D-Houma; Dupre, D-Montegut; Fauchoux, D-LaPlace; Lancaster, R-Metairie; Odinet, D-Arabi; Powell, R-Ponchatoula; Quezaire, D-Donaldsonville; Rousselle, D-Belle Chasse; Scalise, R-Jefferson; Schneider, R-Slidell; Strain, D-Abita Springs; Thomas, D-Bogalusa; Toomy, R-Gretna; Warner, D-Chalmette; Winston, R-Covington.

AGAINST: Alexander, D-New Orleans; Clarkson, D-Algiers; Copelin, D-New Orleans; Farve, D-New Orleans; Green, D-Marrero; Heaton, D-New Orleans; Landrieu, D-New Orleans; Morrell, D-New Orleans; Murray, D-New Orleans; Pratt, D-New Orleans; Schwegmann, D-New Orleans; Vitter, R-Metairie; Willard, D-New Orleans; Windhorst, R-Terrytown.

ABSENT/NOT VOTING: Chaisson, D-Destrehan; Martiny, R-Kenner; Theriot, D-Raceland; Thornhill, R-Slidell; Triche, D-Thibodaux.

GRAPHIC

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