

Kill the CCC tolls once and for all: James Varney - Times-Picayune, The: Web Edition Articles (New Orleans, LA) - April 20, 2013

April 20, 2013 | Times-Picayune, The: Web Edition Articles (New Orleans, LA) | James Varney, NOLA.com

In two weeks - May 4, to be exact - voters will get a delicious second chance to pluck a rotten acorn off the live oak of government. The **Crescent City Connection** toll renewal will be on the ballot again.

Here's hoping they vanish forever.

The nuts and bolts of the case against the tolls would seem sufficient. The bridge is paid for and thus the tolls' chief purpose is exhausted. The toll amounts to an unfair tax on one slice of the populace - the West Bankers who use the bridge the most. And, if the tolls were used exclusively for maintenance and operation of the bridge, they would be a lot lower.

Indeed, it was those clear arguments against the tolls that led the Bureau of Governmental Research - not some wild-eyed anti-tax outfit - to conclude the toll continuation should have gone down to defeat last November. As the BGR report highlighted, only 19 cents of every toll dollar goes to keeping the **Crescent City Connection** running.

Not even a quarter. Less than half the money the bridge takes from those with a toll tag - and not even 20 percent of the dollar it takes from those without a tag - goes for bridge operations. There simply isn't a way to spin that math into an argument in favor of the tolls.

But consider also the way in which those who run the bridge have treated people who sought to find out how this unquestionably public business was being conducted. When public bodies withhold information, when public officials act as if they are the aggrieved party when requests for documents or facts are made, rampant suspicion is in order.

It is always up to government and its officers to prove they are performing their task on the up-and-up. Government has no "right" whatsoever to some permanent source of revenue when it can't prove its using said revenue for its stated purpose.

In this respect, the experience of state Rep. Patrick Connick, R-Marrero, is illustrative. Though a government insider, so to speak, Connick had to summon bulldog tenacity to get answers to his perfectly reasonable questions about what was going on with the CCC.

While local attorney **Patrick Hand** wound up crafting the lawsuit that got voters a second chance to toss out these deeply suspect tolls, he is the first to note that Connick in Baton Rouge did much of the spadework on the case.

Here is another lesson for politicians and the metastasizing bureaucracy they seem to beget: Connick insists that when he started poking around his intention wasn't to get rid of the tolls, it was simply to make sure the money was being spent properly and the toll amount fixed accordingly.

"My goal was to try and fix things and make it right," Connick said of his initial work on the CCC. "I don't mind paying, but give me something for it and don't lie to me. And it was just being wasted."

Whether he asked about audits ordered up by the Department of Transportation and Development, e-mail messages about CCC funds, contract histories or multimillion dollar insurance premiums on policies the bridge probably never needed, Connick said he was met with repeated recalcitrance.

The more rocks he turned over, Connick said, the more worrisome material came to light. It became clear something was rotten in Harvey.

"It came to a point where I said, 'the hell with these guys, they don't want to change, they want to keep making things as bad as possible so I'm not paying for them anymore,' " Connick recalled.

Despite all this, some people still maintain the tolls should be imposed. There are still elected officials in Jefferson and Orleans parish (quieter right now than they were last year) who want to shake a few more bits out of every motorist they can. Hand's team has calculated the gas tax paid by bridge crossers each year generates more money than is needed for annual expenses, so no one can argue motorists are trying to get something for nothing.

It's obvious the toll money isn't exclusively spent on the CCC and hasn't been for years. With the bridge paid for, the lion's share of the money is spent feathering other nests. Those whose job it should be to guard zealously a stream of money with clearly defined uses have instead treated it like government always winds up treating magical fountains of other people's money.

What we have with the **Crescent City Connection** tolls is a honeypot, not a public necessity. Voters should not be bamboozled by any scare campaign. On May 4, they should drag these tolls out into the sunlight and drive a stake through their heart.

James Varney can be reached at jvarney@nola.com.

Copyright, 2013, Times-Picayune. All Rights Reserved.