

Bridge reform measures in question: La. highway secretary says Crescent City Connection will not lose money this year

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The Crescent City Connection will not lose money in 2009, said state Transportation Secretary William Ankner. If he's right, it will be the first time in at least five years. A state audit released in March showed the twin bridges over the Mississippi River had annual deficits totaling \$25.2 million from 2003-08. "We can't run a deficit operation," Ankner said Wednesday. Earlier this year, Ankner canceled a bondholder insurance policy that cost \$4 million annually. He believes that action alone will pay off the CCC's remaining debt by 2012, when the Legislature will decide whether to eliminate the CCC's one-way toll from the West Bank to New Orleans. But state Rep. Pat Connick doubts the CCC will reverse the deficit trend. "They need radical change there and I haven't seen it yet," said Connick, R-Marrero. Connick's actions in the House led to the audit, which found a breakdown in supervision of the DOTD division that operates the bridges. Auditors discovered there was no complete list of contracts issued by the CCC, and the contracts they did find often lacked basic provisions such as due dates, signatures and contract amounts. The audit included 17 recommendations, many of which focused on contract practices. Ankner said he had started implementing some of those recommendations before the audit was published. Asked about one of those recommendations — a CCC contract database — Ankner replied that "we have modified all procedures to reflect the audit report." "Contracts now have to go through our office. That wasn't the case for all contracts before," he said. But Ankner says the state's lack of electronic reporting system hinders compliance with all the audit recommendations, which is occurring "by patchwork and by communications and by directives." Additionally, auditors discovered the Crescent City Oversight Authority rarely met and did not keep minutes when it did meet. State law mandates the authority to meet quarterly and to prioritize construction projects on the West Bank side. Money from bridge and ferry toll surpluses, which has never come, was intended to pay for the projects, which include entrance-exit ramps at Peters Road, widening Barataria Boulevard and upgrades for General DeGaulle Boulevard. The audit also raised questions about the authority's role, given that no money exists to complete the construction.



projects. Saving money by eliminating CCC personnel is possible by moving to automated tollbooths, Ankner said. But the transition would require a \$10 million investment, which Ankner said is unwise with the possibility of tolls disappearing altogether in 2012. Fiscal uncertainty over the next three years makes significant investments impossible, so Ankner is focusing on improving integrity and customer service. The authority, for example, is meeting regularly once again, despite uncertainty over its duties. Ankner also is prioritizing community outreach, which he illustrated by describing all the meetings that preceded the route change for the Gretna ferry, which now takes passengers to downtown New Orleans. But Ankner's anecdote exemplifies the challenge of reforming a mismanaged agency. A car-carrying ferry that was supposed to run from the Gretna side had stripped gears and was not in service when the route changed. "They are running these boats that break down and spending \$40,000 every time," Connick said. Purchasing new equipment presents the same problem as automated tolls, Ankner said. "I would probably be looking at a different set of decisions regarding equipment," Ankner said. "Basically we are in a holding pattern until 2012." Connick acknowledges that Ankner is improving the culture at CCC but said there is "a long way to go." He sent an e-mail to Ankner Sept. 22 with an itemized request of various maintenance, operations and construction costs. Connick said he has not received a reply. "I asked about a month ago, and I don't have it. How is that improvement?" Connick said. "They aren't very open down there."

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