

Just days before the Crescent City Connection corridor would go dark due to a lack of funding after tolls were suspended, the Regional Planning Commission approved tapping into a surplus fund to pay for services, including lighting.

The commission's action came one week after a Baton Rouge judge nullified the November election extending tolls for 20 years and set a new vote May 4 on the issue.

The commission agreed to use part of \$5 million in undesignated money, a portion of a \$31 million balance left after the bridge was paid off last year, to pay for lighting, except for decorative lights on the bridge. The transportation department also would hire Jefferson Parish government to provide mowing, landscaping and litter pickup for 15 months.

The commission, comprised of elected officials and residents, has oversight of the toll money and advises transportation officials on priorities.

Jefferson Parish President John Young pushed the plan during Tuesday's RPC meeting, offering a spirited argument that any surplus money was paid by local drivers and "is the people's money."

Young, who opposed the November referendum to extend the tolls another 20 years, said that elected officials throughout the region should lobby the Legislature to ensure the Department of Transportation and Development fulfills a legal obligation to maintain the span as it does other bridges around the state.

"This money belongs to the people of this community. DOTD is obligated to provide these services," except lighting, Young said. He said officials have to lobby the Legislature to make "sure the state steps up to plate and comply with their legal obligations under the law."

But New Orleans City Council President Jackie Clarkson said using the surplus amounted to painting a false picture of the reality of bridge finances.

Clarkson, who supported the November referendum, suggested allowing services to revert to diminished levels immediately so residents can "see what it's like to have no money from now till May."

"You are telling the people all is well, this will continue to function and it's not true," Clarkson said.

Young countered that it is "irresponsible" of officials to allow the lights to go dark when legislation designates a transition fund to pay for such services.

Regional Planning Commission Executive Director Walter Brooks said there is enough money in the transition fund to pay for services for up to three years, without taking on major capital projects. He said larger projects in the \$20 million range "would be more difficult to achieve."

Assistant Transportation Secretary Rhett Desselle told the commission that bridge operations were functioning at a reduced level and that lights could be disconnected before week's end. He cited the layoffs of 29 temporary employees and ran down a list of threatened services. Bridge sweeping would be reduced from twice weekly to twice monthly, bridge inspections would occur every two years and ferry service would continue on the Algiers-Chalmette line. Desselle said there is no funding for the Algiers-Canal Street and Gretna-Canal Street ferries.

The \$31 million is what remains after the bridge's debt was satisfied in November. Of that amount, \$11.2 million already was obligated to ongoing capital projects and \$12.7 million was dedicated to bridge operations for the rest of the current fiscal year. Another \$7.2 million is undesignated.

The **tolls**, which collected nearly \$22 million annually from east-bank-bound drivers, were suspended March 5 after Judge William Morvant threw out the November election. He ruled that some legally registered voters had been kept from voting on the issue when they were given provisional ballots, limiting their participation to federal elections.

Mike Teachworth of Harvey sued over the election's outcome, arguing those disenfranchised voters could have made the difference in an election decided by a 36-vote margin.

Meanwhile, Jefferson Parish Council Chairman Chris Roberts, who supported the **tolls** last fall, has asked transportation officials to attend Wednesday's Jefferson Parish Council meeting to detail for residents what to expect going forward. In addition, Roberts and Councilman Elton Lagasse are sponsoring a resolution they'll present to the full council asking the Legislature to cancel the May 4 election.

Teachworth questioned the timing of the resolution.

"Why are two of the most outspoken supporters of the CCC backing away from their support of the **tolls** now," Teachworth asked. "They suddenly want to concede the entire election? It's crazy."

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