

If Crescent City Connection tolls are not renewed, bridge users will pay the price in increased congestion when three ferry routes heavily subsidized by the tolls are eliminated, ferry advocates said at a town hall meeting Tuesday night in Algiers.

The ferries cost \$9 million a year to operate but generate just \$250,000 in passenger fees, meaning they probably would be scaled back or dry-docked if the tolls are allowed to expire at the end of 2012.

Preaching primarily to a choir of ferry proponents, Fay Faron, president of Friends of the Ferry, said bridge users have a stake in keeping the boats afloat.

She said eliminating the ferries would force the 2.9 million annual ferry passengers to use the Crescent City Connection, adding up to 8,000 vehicles per day to a bridge that is already near its capacity at 180,000 vehicles a day.

"If the ferries are shut down, that's going to increase traffic on the bridge," she said. "The ferries are really important to bridge people, too."

But one man said any congestion caused by former ferry passengers would be more than offset by eliminating the toll booths, which he said cause traffic jams during rush hour.

"It's like putting a stop sign on the interstate," he said.

Faron, who serves on a state task force studying the tolls, said state transportation officials have said the booths actually help motorists merge from a dozen approach lanes to four lanes on the bridge. "Without the toll booths, it would be like a demolition derby going through there," she said.

Michael Teachworth, who also serves on the 10-member toll task force, said Faron's estimate of the increased traffic on the CCC appeared high and that the actual figure would be closer to 1,250 additional vehicles if the Algiers-to-Canal Street ferry were eliminated.

He added that the state pays for other Mississippi River ferries and should pick up the tab for the three routes subsidized by the CCC: Algiers Point to Canal Street, Gretna to Canal Street, and Lower Algiers to Chalmette.

"I've been against the tolls, but I've never been against the ferries," he said. "The ferries should not be predicated on us paying bridge tolls. It's not done anywhere else and it shouldn't be done here."

Teachworth also said it's unfair that the Crescent City Connection is the only Mississippi River bridge in the state that motorists must pay to cross.

"Nobody can address why we have to pay and no one else has to pay," he said. "It's wrong."

Faron said this overlooks CCC services that no other Mississippi bridge receives, including its own police force to minimize response times to wrecks.

"They're trying to say it's a question of fairness. We're trying to say it's a question of quality of life," she said.

Without the tolls, Faron said, the Crescent City Connection would have to compete with other bridges and highways across the state for scarce transportation dollars.

Faron showed a picture of the rusting Old Mississippi River Bridge in Baton Rouge, which hasn't been repainted since the 1960s.

"When our bridge looks as bad as this, it will get painted, too," she said.

This prompted a man to blurt out that he thought Faron's presentation was "pretty biased."

"Why not show a picture of the Luling Bridge? It looks pretty good," he said, referring to the state-maintained Mississippi River span on Interstate 310 in St. Charles Parish.

He said the Crescent City Connection would be a much higher priority for the state than the Old Mississippi River Bridge, which is used by about 17,000 vehicles a day, less than 10 percent of the CCC's volume.

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