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Opinion: It's time to tank CCC tolls

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City leaders in New Orleans showed they grasped an important principle when they chose to increase fees for garbage collection to what it actually costs the city to pay for the services.

With tolls on the Crescent City Connection set to expire at the end of 2012, it's time state lawmakers and transportation officials learn the same lesson.

The Legislature ultimately will decide whether the tolls will stay in place or be removed. In making the decision, they should take a good look at a study the Bureau of Governmental Research released this week that analyzes how money collected from tolls is spent.

What may surprise some lawmakers, and probably many motorists who pay the toll, is that less than 20 percent of each dollar goes toward actual bridge maintenance and policing. The largest portion, 32 cents, is devoted to operating the three area ferries that cross the Mississippi River near New Orleans.

The remainder of the dollar is allocated as follows: 19 cents for bridge repairs and the Crescent City Connection Police; 16 cents to the staff that collects and administers tolls; 15 cents to debt service and capital projects that often have nothing to do with the bridge; 13 cents to a capital reserve fund; and 5 cents to pay for streetscape projects to roads around the bridge.

At least when the city of New Orleans was subsidizing garbage collection, the money actually paid for trash pickup. When a motorist pays \$1 to cross from the West Bank to the East Bank, they're actually supporting services they may seldom, if ever, use.

Drivers who pay \$3 to cross the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway probably can see the wisdom in funding a police force to patrol and provide emergency services on the 24-mile

crossing. But what if nearly a third of the tolls were diverted to pay for a ferry to cross the lake? It hardly seems logical or fair.

The legislature will consider the impact of removing the CCC tolls on ferry operations, toll collectors and bridge police. On the surface, these seem like tough decisions. But if lawmakers stick to logic and remove emotion and politics from the process, the choice is fairly clear.

When it comes to ferry costs, the New Orleans garbage fee principle applies. A state audit in 2008 indicated the three ferries operating in the New Orleans area lose \$21,000 each day.

According to the BGR study, ferry fares provide less than 3 percent of the money spent on the service. The state pays for the rest from the Transportation Trust Fund. If the source is inadequate, it's time to consider raising fares or a reduction in service.

Bridge maintenance is also the state's responsibility on other river bridges. BGR has calculated that money devoted to Crescent City Connection upkeep last year, \$1.8 million, was less than 0.5 percent of the state highway maintenance budget.

BGR has suggested in the past that policing of the bridge fall to Louisiana State Police. If a special police force is deemed necessary, BGR suggests its money come from a special state highway fund, half of which is already dedicated to the CCC Division. A portion of vehicle license taxes collected in the New Orleans supports the fund, meaning there's existing money available to replace what the tolls pay for police.

Ending tolls would also mean ending the need for toll collectors and administrators, the latter having been scrutinized for a lack of accurate record keeping in the past. The audit performed three years ago showed the CCC could save \$3 million a year if it went to an automated toll system.

While the loss of jobs should never be taken lightly, our government should also never support a system simply for the purpose of keeping people employed. It's a vestige of our political history that we must move beyond.

As such, it's time to do away with tolls on the Crescent City Connection. At present, they do little to actually improve the bridge for those who use it, and their existence only allows the state to delay addressing the financial sinkhole the ferries have created.