



Panel looks at life without CCC tolls - Bridge - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - August 14, 2011 - page B 01
August 14, 2011 | Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) | Paul Rioux West Bank bureau | Page B 01

A state Legislature-created **task force** studying the pending expiration of the Crescent City Connection tolls is focusing on a key question: What bridge services would disappear if the tolls do?

The tolls account for three-quarters of the bridge's \$27 million budget, meaning wholesale budget cuts would be necessary if the tolls lapse.

"I want to know what goes away if the tolls go away and who picks up the slack. It's unlikely to be the local governments," **task force** member Richard Legendre said Friday during the group's second meeting.

Member Pamela Lormand-Bialous questioned whether bridge safety would be compromised without the toll revenue. State transportation officials assured her it would not be.

But Rhett Desselle, an assistant transportation secretary serving as the **task force's** co-chairman, said that without the tolls, the bridge would have to compete with other transportation projects for its share of the department's \$1.7 billion budget.

Desselle said he will calculate the level of services the Crescent City Connection could expect to receive if it relied solely on state funding.

He said the bridge's landscaping and lighting, which cost \$2 million a year, would be among the first services to go.

Desselle also said \$2.3 million for the bridge's police department would likely be on the chopping block, leaving other law enforcement agencies to patrol the bridge and 13 miles of mostly elevated expressway from Avondale to the Broad Street overpass on Interstate 10 in New Orleans.

"This bridge is getting premium services," Desselle said. "We're doing a lot of things a lot sooner than we're doing on other bridges."

However, budget figures he presented to the **task force** show that just a quarter of the Crescent City Connection's revenue, or \$6.7 million, is spent on bridge maintenance. That's less than the \$9 million in toll revenue used to subsidize three Mississippi River ferry routes, which lose more than

\$20,000 a day.

The Bureau of Governmental Research released a study in April saying that the tolls should be allowed to lapse because too much toll revenue is being spent on "far-flung services," such as the ferries.

The tolls will expire at the end of 2012 unless they are renewed by the Legislature, which formed the 10-member **task force** to "analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge" and issue a report on its findings and recommendations by Feb. 1.

On Friday, the **task force** got a crash course on the bridge's finances and operations.

Some members got a case of sticker shock when they learned just how heavily bridge tolls subsidize the ferries.

The ferries cost \$9 million to operate but generate just \$250,000 in fees, with bridge tolls covering the sizable shortfall, Desselle said, prompting a double-take from **task force** member William Aaron.

"So the ferries bring in \$250,000 a year?" he said. "It looks like their payroll is 10 times that amount."

The toll, which is collected from east bank-bound motorists, is \$1 per two-axle vehicle for those paying cash and 40 cents for those with electronic toll tags.

Despite the steep discount for toll tags, the tags generate more net revenue per transaction because of the high cost of processing cash transactions, Desselle said.

He said each toll-tag transaction costs 8 cents to 12 cents while the national average for processing a cash transaction is 75 cents to \$1.25.

"That's the cost to get a dollar out of someone's hand and get it to the bank," Desselle said, noting that about half of all bridge users pay the toll in cash.

Transportation officials have said that if the tolls were renewed, they would seek to expand toll-tag use. The options include eliminating the fee to get a toll tag and reducing the number of cash lanes at the toll plaza.

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