

# Bumpy Ride

Funding pinch crimps bridge repair progress

By Jaime Guillet

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HIGHWAY PROJECTS dependent on funding from Crescent City Connection tolls are stalled indefinitely as higher operational costs are gouging potholes in needed financing.

Operational costs were rising for the state Department of Transportation's Crescent City Connection Division even before Hurricane Katrina, compounded by a 5 percent post-Katrina drop in traffic.

Bridge traffic dropped 5 percent from approximately 95,000 vehicles per day to 90,000, said CCCD Executive Director Alan Levasseur. Three of five projects prioritized for completion by the CCC Oversight Authority — Barataria Boulevard off ramps, Gen. De Gaulle Drive widening improvements and on- and off-ramps at Peters Road — are stalled by funding shortages.

"In the immediate future we won't be doing any of those projects," said Levasseur. "It's really too bad because these ... weren't pie-in-the-sky projects. The parish engineers felt (these projects had) the greatest improvement needed and weren't getting funds from the state."

The pre-Katrina cost of the five projects ranged between \$80 million and \$100 million, said Levasseur. Post-Katrina construction and labor costs will inflate the project costs, he said.

## Going it alone

Two of the five projects will move forward

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Higher operational costs for the Crescent City Connection are forcing bridge officials to lobby lawmakers for a toll increase.



New Orleanians tell CityBusiness why they're not giving up on the city.



## John Giorlando

FOR THE PAST 35 years, the Giorlando family has maintained Giorlando's Restaurant, an intimate eatery on Bonnabel Boulevard in Metairie. Regulars fill the seats every afternoon, awaiting the arrival of their daily specials.

Black and white pictures of St. Joseph's Altar feasts from the 1950s hang on the wall above the kitchen. It's a place where you are likely to run into people you know or are related to, and most everyone inside knows the Giorlando family.

Owner John Giorlando, 43, who took over the business from his father in 2005, said business is steady most afternoons but Hurricane Katrina scattered his work force and forced him to shorten business hours drastically.

"I'm only open 26 hours a week now whereas before the storm I was open 52 hours a week," he said. "We've been hit with the worker shortage just like everyone else."

Giorlando owns two other businesses, Sunny Side Up Tanning and Big G's Bobcats, but he never considered closing any of them.

"This is all I know," he said. "This is a family tradition. I'm just trying to keep it going. The community would be devastated if I closed. I've got too many ties here. Where can I go?"

"I was raised here, I work here, I live here and I like it here. I know it's rough and it's going to be trying but I look at the bigger picture, I guess." •

— Stephen Maloney

## Center helps small biz recovery

By Jaime Guillet

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WHEN SMALL BUSINESS owner Tina Emenes watched Hurricane Katrina's aftermath unfold on a Houston hotel television, she had a distinct feeling of dread.

"Almost immediately I knew we were going to be in trouble," said Emenes, who owns Tina's Cajun Creations. The 20-year-old Kenner business manufactures packaged gourmet spices, rice and bean mixes, soups and beignet and King Cake mixes.

For the past six years Emenes focused the bulk of her business on private labeling. Retailers buy her products and sell them under their own labels.

"I got back (from the storm) in a month and I didn't have any private label cus-

tomers," said Emenes. "There were no conventions and no tourists and I was relying on them selling for me."

In October 2005, Emenes was standing in line at the Small Business Administration Disaster Center on Airline Drive when she heard about the Small Business Development Center.

Loyola University's SBDC, established through its College of Business Administration, was one of several across greater New Orleans using a combination of SBA and Louisiana Economic Development grants to provide a variety of entrepreneurial

Rick Pequeno, owner of Slidell-based Mid-South Plumbing, said the Loyola Small Business Development Center helped his company go from about 35 customers annually to nearly 2,000 since Katrina.



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# Officials consider toll increase

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without CCC funding — the extension of Fourth Street in Gretna and the widening of Barataria Boulevard. The city of Gretna will use federal funding, some of its own money and CCC money it dedicated years ago to complete the extension.

The Regional Planning Commission, which authorizes projects benefiting the New Orleans metropolitan area, directed funds to Jefferson Parish to widen Barataria Boulevard.

Of the remaining CCC-funded projects, the ramps at Peters Road on the Westbank Expressway are furthest along and in the design phase, said Levasseur.

The CCC collected an average of \$20 million annually from the bridge and

three ferries at Algiers-Canal Street, Gretna-Jackson Avenue and Lower Algiers-Chalmette. By state law, tolls collected from the CCC and ferries fund the operation and maintenance of the bridge and ferries and pay bridge police and toll collectors.

For the 2006-2007 fiscal year, CCC revenue was \$16.9 million, said Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development spokesman Brendan Rush. The 15.5 percent drop was mostly from tolls being waived immediately after Katrina — between Aug. 28, 2005 to Oct. 10, 2005 — to expedite storm recovery.

Higher operational expenses include a 200 percent increase in fuel costs pre-Katrina and a 50 percent post-Katrina insurance increase from \$4 million to \$6 million.

Also, the ferries are running at a deficit. In 2005, it cost the CCC \$7.2 million to operate the ferries and it collected less than \$400,000 in revenue. This year, ferry revenue is “way, way off,” said Levasseur.

“We’ve been faced with all kinds of operational increases over the last few years,” he said. “We’re run pretty much like a private business.



PHOTOS BY FRANK NYAMWAI

Drivers pay tolls on the Crescent City Connection bridge. Operational costs for the bridge were rising even before Hurricane Katrina, bridge officials say.

We receive no state general fund money.”

### Taking a toll

The higher operational costs have led Levasseur to lobby lawmakers for a toll increase.

“People think the bridge has been paid for. There are still \$20 million in outstanding bonds,” Levasseur said. “There’s no such thing as a free road or bridge. People have recognized if they want good roads, they have to pay for them.”

A move to raise CCC tolls must come from local legislators, said state Sen. Noble Ellington, D-Winnsboro, chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee.

“I don’t think that you’re going to find us trying to raise tolls on the CCC until the

legislators and the people in that area determine that’s something they feel like we need,” said Ellington.

Jefferson Parish Councilman Chris Roberts said the state — not residents — should help the CCC with operational costs. Highway projects do not create a need for raising tolls, Roberts said.

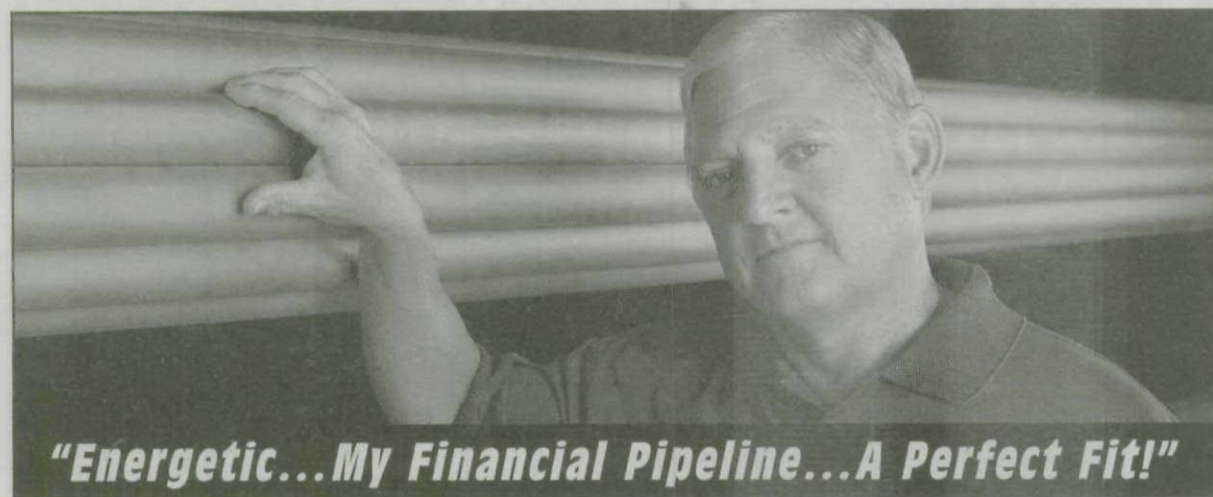
“The highway projects are important but they shouldn’t come at the expense of bridge police and operations and it should be up to the state to assist the CCCD,” Roberts said. “The DOTD should step up and fund the bridge like they do everywhere else in the state. I don’t think a toll increase should be put on the backs of residents trying to recover from Katrina.”

### Putting on the brakes

The Crescent City Connection Division reports a decrease in bridge traffic and revenues since Hurricane Katrina. West Bank highway projects near the bridge were stalled two years prior to Katrina because of too few tollway dollars. Post-Katrina, three underfunded projects have been halted indefinitely. The list of halted projects:

Project	Cost
New on- and off-ramps at U.S. 90 and Peters Road	\$31 million
Barataria Boulevard off-ramps on U.S. Highway 90	\$10 million
Gen. De Gaulle Drive widening improvements	\$4.3 million

Source: Crescent City Connection Division



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