

Four days after the Crescent City Connection disappeared from the New Orleans nighttime skyline, an angry crowd of West Bank residents unloaded on Transportation Department officials about the bridge, lambasting administrators over toll money, traffic, the span's appearance and broken promises.

It was standing room only for more than 150 people at the West Jefferson Medical Center Auditorium in Marrero on Tuesday night, with many residents brandishing signs that said "Vote No to Tolls" and donning stickers that said "Stop the Tolls" and the word "Tolls" with a red slash through it.

The resounding message was that it was time for the tolls, suspended after a judge threw out last fall's referendum, to permanently end.

Residents complained openly about a lack of infrastructure projects that were pledged in the late 1990s to address traffic congestion to secure legislative support for their renewal until Dec. 31, 2012.

With the tolls scheduled to expire at the end of last year, legislators asked residents in Orleans, Jefferson and Plaquemines parishes to renew the tolls for 20 years in November. More than 308,000 cast ballots in a controversial election that approved the measure before it was thrown out.

The tolls generated \$22 million annually for operations, maintenance and three ferry lines.

"This is really about broken promises. People are fed up with politicians and politricks," said Curtis Bordenave, who lives in New Orleans.

The decorative lights were disconnected on the bridge Friday after the Regional Planning Commission chose to spend millions in a transition fund on roadway lighting, litter pickup, grass cutting and other services. The Young Leadership Council, which erected the ornamental lamps on the bridge in 1989, is trying to reconnect the lights.

State officials have said the cost is about \$60,000 annually, including \$15,000 for maintenance.

Since then, state Rep. Pat Connick, R-Harvey, an opponent of the tolls, said he has seen roadway lights on in the middle of the day. Transportation officials said repair work to fix the glitch occurred Monday.

One man complained about police response to accidents on the span, saying that since the Department of Public Safety took over patrols, the response is slower and traffic often backs up on the elevated West Bank Expressway past the Stumpf Boulevard exit. He questioned why New Orleans police were handling accidents on the Pontchartrain Expressway.

Maj. Carl Saizan of the State Police said it's a jurisdictional issue. State Police are handling patrols from U.S. 90 B to Terry Parkway, while Public Safety officers handle the bridge to Tchoupitoulas Street offramp. New Orleans police are responsible for Tchoupitoulas to the Broad Street overpass.

"We wanted to do was collapse the area of responsibility to effectively manage the traffic on the bridge," he said, asking the crowd for patience as the entities continue to work on traffic issues.

But those answers were not satisfactory for the crowd who groaned and booed.

Another man questioned whether the newest span of the bridge was safe, pointing to peeling paint and rust. He asked why wasn't money poured into the upkeep with motorists paying millions of dollars in tolls.

"The bridge should be in pristine condition," he said. "I would not like to fall in the Mississippi River."

But transportation engineer Mike Stack, who handles maintenance, tried to reassure the crowd the bridge is

safe. "The condition of the bridge is safe," he said. "My family crosses that bridge every day. I cross that bridge every day."

Assistant Transportation Secretary Rhett Desselle said the CCC undergoes rigorous inspection.

The town-hall meeting was hosted by state Sen. J.P. Morrell, D-New Orleans, along with state Reps. Girod Jackson, D-Marrero; Chris Leopold, R-Belle Chasse; and Connick. Morrell called the meeting, seeking resident input on issues before the legislative session convenes April 8.

Jim McKenna of Marrero said the discussion over the bridge would be moot had officials kept their promises. What West Bank residents, who have paid the lion's share of **tolls**, are most upset about now is being treated fairly.

"This whole thing is a fiasco. There never should have been anything, no vote, nothing," he said, adding that the **tolls** should have been allowed to lapse as promised. "We're not against paying **tolls**, we want what was due."

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