

Residents cry foul over ferry problems - DOTD - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - May 3, 2008 - page 01

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With four audits now probing the finances of the **Crescent City Connection** division, residents of Algiers Point this week aired concerns about the steep costs for the agency's ferry operations despite unreliable service.

Several representatives from the state Department of Transportation and Development, the bridge authority's parent agency, were on hand at Thursday's Algiers Point Association meeting, but none from the **Crescent City Connection**.

Residents mentioned defunct escalators at the ferry terminals, breakdowns and delays at the three ferry lines operated by the CCC.

"It's a constant problem where once or twice a week I'd be walking to work and the ferry would be broken down," resident Paul Vance said. "It's not the best impression for tourists or residents because the ferries are very old, they're dirty, the terminals are dirty."

The \$21 million in tolls from the bridge last year go toward ferry and bridge operations, including salaries and benefits for more than 200 employees. Of that toll revenue, ferry operations last year cost more than \$7 million, and the agency is requesting \$9.3 million in this year's budget.

When bridge tolls were reauthorized in 1998, legislators anticipated that the surplus money would pay for several West Bank transportation projects. The high costs of operating the bridge and ferries over the years have eaten into most of the toll revenues, prompting legislators to call for a performance audit of the CCC.

Partial results of that audit are expected next month, according to Legislative Auditor Steve Theriot's office. DOTD Secretary William Ankner also is hiring three outside firms to examine the overall accounting, the police operations, and the bridge and ferry operations.

The results of those additional audits are expected by late June.

Several residents questioned how service could be improved at the ferries, but DOTD officials said they would wait until the audit results before responding.

"I came down here to hear your concerns, but as far as being able to answer the details of this stuff, I'm not going to be able to do that," said Gordon Nelson, DOTD assistant secretary for operations.

But DOTD spokesman Mark Lambert said the agency would address customer service problems regardless of the audits.

"We don't have to have an act of the Legislature to fix those things," Lambert said. "We can

manage it better, we can make sure we're running those ferries with a customer service attitude."

Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, has pushed for the ferries to be removed from the bridge authority and placed under DOTD's umbrella. He pointed to more than \$2 million spent on renovations to the **Crescent City Connection's** administration building and \$1.3 million on ferry insurance costs. The CCC operates three ferry lines, while Plaquemines Parish operates two ferry lines at a cost of \$300,000.

"What we have found out through looking into this is that a better job can be done," Connick said. "It can be more efficient, it can be a tourist attraction, it can be a benefit to all of us and not a hindrance."

During hearings in the Legislature, state transportation officials cautioned that such a move would strain financial resources elsewhere in the state.

State Rep. Jeff Arnold, D-Algiers, Sen. David Heitmeier, D-Algiers, and Gretna Mayor Ronnie Harris also attended the meeting.

Mentioning the frequent shutdowns of the Gretna-Jackson Avenue ferry, Harris chided **Crescent City Connection** officials for not attending the meeting.

"They need to be here; they need to have a better rapport with the community," he said.

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