

Rising costs cause problems for Crescent City Connection highway projects

Published in: New Orleans CityBusiness (LA), Dec 11, 2006, Regional Business News

Story Type: News

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 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. 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."

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Source: New Orleans CityBusiness (LA), Dec 11, 2006 Item: L54195864NOCB

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