

Nearly \$60,000 in attorney fees for the Louisiana 1 toll bridge in Leeville were improperly paid with toll revenue from the **Crescent City Connection**, according to state Transportation Secretary Sherri LeBas, who said the CCC will be reimbursed.

LeBas disclosed the improper payments in a Dec. 29 letter to state legislative auditor Daryl Purpera, whose office released an audit in September that identified other instances in which **Crescent City Connection** revenue was used for the Leeville bridge in "apparent violation of state law."

State Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, called the payments "yet another example of the mismanagement of the **Crescent City Connection**."

"Each time we dig, we find something more. The West Bank is being ripped off," said Connick, referring to planned West Bank street improvement projects that have languished because surplus CCC toll revenue has been consumed by other expenses.

Since 2004, Kenneth Pickering's law firm, which represents the **Crescent City Connection**, has been paid \$59,600 in CCC funds for work on the Leeville bridge, according to a review ordered by LeBas.

In her letter to Purpera, LeBas, who took office nearly a year ago, said the **Crescent City Connection** will be reimbursed with money from the state transportation trust fund.

The transportation department responded to questions by releasing a one-paragraph statement that simply summarizes the findings discussed in LeBas' letter.

Connick said he requested the review after obtaining \$145-an-hour invoices that suggested CCC money was used to pay Pickering's firm for work on the Louisiana 1 bridge, which opened in 2009. The state law authorizing the CCC tolls prohibits the revenue from being used to finance other projects.

The invoices include \$1,160 for an eight-hour trip to Port Fourchon that Pickering took with **Crescent City Connection** administrators in 2008 to scout potential sites for the Louisiana 1 customer service center and toll kiosks.

Although his New Orleans law firm's Louisiana 1-related invoices were listed on the same pages as its CCC invoices, Pickering said he did not know his firm was improperly paid for the Louisiana 1 work with CCC money.

"I'm the attorney; I don't do the bookkeeping," he said.

The improper payments are the latest irregularity to be uncovered by increased scrutiny of the bridge's finances in recent years.

The legislative audit said the **Crescent City Connection** was not immediately reimbursed for office space and personnel devoted to collecting tolls on the Leeville bridge.

Other reviews faulted the **Crescent City Connection** for poor financial record keeping and paying a \$4 million annual premium for an insurance policy that state officials determined was unnecessary.

To help ensure CCC money is not used for the Leeville bridge in the future, LeBas has said the transportation department plans to hire a contractor to handle Leeville bridge tolls.

Connick began shining a spotlight on the CCC's finances two years ago to find out why surplus toll revenue was not being used for road improvements as specified by a state law renewing the tolls in 1998.

Just one of 11 projects has been completed, as costs to run the bridge and three Mississippi River ferry routes have skyrocketed.

With the CCC tolls set to expire at the end of 2012, Connick said West Bank commuters need to start getting more for their money before he will support renewing the tolls.

"The CCC's mission is supposed to be to maintain the bridge and improve the infrastructure along the West Bank Expressway," he said. "But to me, the true mission has been self-preservation by expanding their operations to include the Louisiana 1 bridge."

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