

Roberts: Create Crescent City Connection regional - Times-Picayune, The: Web Edition Articles (New Orleans, LA) - November 14, 2012

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As the fallout continues from the affirmative vote to continue tolls on the Crescent City Connection for the next 20 years -- the referendum passed by a mere 16 votes out of more than 308,000 cast -- Jefferson Parish Councilman Chris Roberts is proposing the creation of a regional governing authority to oversee the bridge and its \$21 million in annual toll revenues. The state Department of Transportation and Development has said it will abolish the arm that runs the CCC and assume a number of its operations.

But Roberts argues that a regional authority would be more effective and keep the toll revenues in the area.

Roberts said he will ask the Jefferson Parish Council to direct administrators Jeremy Dwyer and Chereen Gegenheimer to study special transportation districts around the country, including the Causeway Commission, and draft a platform for such an authority.

"This newly created authority needs teeth and will not simply be advisory in nature," Roberts wrote. "...This will be a work in progress and a very important component of restoring public trust."

Elected officials, law enforcement chiefs and business leaders would weigh in.

Roberts said he hopes to have a road map in place by the end of the year. Officials would then present the measure to the area's legislative delegation in time for the 2013 session.

"They would look at best practices around the country, like the Causeway Commission," he said. "It has efficiently run a bridge and used revenue to make infrastructure improvements and a first class police agency that puts public safety at the forefront. It's a good model."

The outcome of the referendum, which wasn't certain until Tuesday when Orleans Parish tallied its military votes, continued Wednesday to rankle toll opponents.

West Bank residents have argued they will continue to bear most of the burden for the \$550 million structure that will be paid for by year's end. They say they were promised the tolls would end this year once the debt was satisfied. They contend the referendum, which included voters on both sides of the river in Plaquemines, Jefferson and Orleans parishes, was designed to ensure a favorable outcome. And they questioned the process Orleans Parish elections officials used for tallying votes, after an initial election night report indicated the issue had failed before finally swinging the other way.

"My main concern is the fact that people got to vote that didn't have a dog in the hunt," said **Mike Teachworth**, organizer of Stop the Tolls and a member of the legislative task force appointed to study the toll issue. "You've got people in New Orleans East that voted that don't pay the tax, yet they have an equal vote. There are others who didn't get to vote at all that pay the toll."

Acknowledging the public's anger over the toll referendum, Roberts said residents have that right, given the questionable use of toll money in the past and the Crescent City Connection Division operating virtually unchecked.

"I don't fault people for being upset. There were things I learned through this whole process that were mindboggling to me," he said, citing as an example \$10 million annually to run three ferry routes, money toll opponents say should have been poured into infrastructure and maintenance. "The opposition has some very good points. I don't think that you will see the lack of involvement and oversight that was experienced over the last 20 years."

The regional authority could help rebuild the public's trust in bridge operations, Roberts said, as well as keep toll revenues in the area. A solid transportation infrastructure will be crucial to bringing growth and new businesses to the West Bank, he Roberts said.

He cited a number of transportation needs, including new ramps at Manhattan and Barataria boulevards, an overhaul of the Harvey Tunnel and replacing the Fourth Street bridge, that could be among the capital priorities for the new governing entity. Manhattan and Barataria projects had been promised with the toll renewal passed in the Legislature in 1998.

The slim margin of the vote wasn't an overwhelming mandate for keeping the tolls, said Teachworth, who hasn't ruled out a challenge to the referendum's results. While the best remedy for keeping toll dollars in the region is to let the tolls expire in December, he said he's willing to look at the issue with an open mind.

"Anything that will help ensure the toll money is spent on the bridge is a good thing," he said.