

SENATE PANEL OKS REDUCING BRIDGE CCC TOLLS - - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - May 14, 1998 - page A3

May 14, 1998 | Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) | ED ANDERSON Capital bureau | Page A3

BATON ROUGE Tolls on the Crescent City Connection would drop on July 1, 1999, but remain in place through 2012 under a heavily rewritten bill that a Senate committee approved 4-0 late Wednesday.

Sen. Francis Heitmeier and Rep. **Jackie Clarkson**, both D-Algiers, won a battle to get the **tolls** reduced to a yet-to-be-determined level, and to eliminate some of the road projects in the New Orleans area that are financed by toll revenue.

The Senate Committee on Transportation, Highways and Public Works added their amendments to Senate Bill 77 by Sen. Ron Landry, D-LaPlace. His bill started out extending **tolls** from 1999 through 2012 and keeping a long list of road projects in Plaquemines, Orleans and Jefferson parishes.

The amended bill heads to the Senate floor for debate, possibly next week.

Landry said he will have a list of the toll-financed projects that have been started or contracted by the Department of Transportation and Development next week, so senators will know which projects are in, which are being eliminated, and how much money will be needed to finish the ones under way. Transportation Secretary Frank Denton said the projects may be dropped if contracts have not been signed for them or work is not under way.

Also next week, Landry said he might have an idea how much the **tolls** on the CCC can be lowered.

CCC bridge **tolls** are now \$1, or 50 cents for frequent users with discounted toll tags. They will expire on June 30, 1999, if not extended.

About \$15 million from the **tolls** goes to operate and maintain the CCC and three ferries in the New Orleans area. Another \$5 million pays for spinoff road projects.

Under the amended bill, the **tolls** would remain in place until June 30, 2012, because that is when the bonds that raised money to build it are due to expire, Heitmeier said.

Heitmeier's amendments would eliminate projects such as construction of a CCC down ramp at Mardi Gras Boulevard in Algiers; beautification of the West Bank Expressway; and lighting and landscaping of Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans from Poydras Street to Franklin Avenue, and of Florida Avenue from North Broad Street to the Orleans-St. Bernard Parish line. Some of these projects are miles away from the bridge.

"I'd love to have the **tolls** disappear and go away, but I have to be realistic," Heitmeier said. "I just want to stop the fleecing of the West Bank. . . . I want to stop all of these projects from Boothville-Venice to Shreveport that are paid for with the **tolls**."

Clarkson said the projects that should be continued are those that are bridge-related, not those miles away. She supported opening the transit lane on the span to vehicles carrying two or more passengers, opening an additional toll-tag lane at General de Gaulle Drive, repainting the span, and installing a video or photo system to monitor traffic flow and spot drivers who break in line or do not pay the toll.

Denton said those projects are in the works.

Landry deleted from the bill the creation of a Mississippi River Bridge Authority to run the span, but he accepted an amendment to set up a CCC Oversight Authority. It would set priorities on how toll money is spent.

He said that might be taken off the bill on the Senate floor since Heitmeier stripped most of the ancillary projects from the bill. "They have nothing to oversee and prioritize now," Landry said.

Landry and Heitmeier said they also might amend the bill on the Senate floor to give toll-tag users a price reduction annually and give other motorists a rollback every four years.

Also Wednesday, Sen. Louis Lambert, D-Prairieville, won approval of lower **tolls** on the Sunshine Bridge near Donaldsonville. Those **tolls** also are set to expire on June 30, 1999, if not extended.

Lambert's amendment said the **tolls** would remain at \$1 and 50 cents until July 1, 1999, then be cut in half and extended to June 30, 2004.

The revenue would go to operate and maintain the bridge. Any income beyond that and what's needed to pay off its construction bonds would be used to start widening Louisiana 1 between Donaldsonville and White Castle.

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