State details river bridge plans once tolls go - - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - February 25, 2012 - page B 03

Briefed Friday on the state's plan for maintaining the Crescent City Connection after **tolls** expire at the end of the year, about two dozen local officials generally responded favorably, though several said an annual $800,000 lighting bill to be paid by local governmental entities is an "unfunded state mandate."

The plan includes privatizing three Mississippi River ferries and using state gas-tax revenue and vehicle registration fees to cover most bridge services, state transportation secretary Sherri LeBas told the officials from New Orleans and Jefferson, St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes.

LeBas said the state is drafting a request for proposals to operate the Algiers, Chalmette and Gretna ferries at a cost of $4 million a year, with a one-time payment of nearly $20 million to upgrade the ferries and terminals. The ferries, which are heavily subsidized by bridge **tolls**, operate at an annual loss of more than $8 million.

LeBas said the state will paint each of the bridge's two spans every 20 years at an estimated cost of $30 million per span. Bridge inspections will be conducted every two years at a cost of $800,000 to the state, LeBas said.

She said the frequency of mowing and trash pickup would be less than what it is now and that local governmental entities would have to pay for landscaping and bridge lighting, two costs the state doesn't cover for any other bridges or roadways.

"We believe this is a responsible plan for taking care of the Crescent City Connection bridge in a way that is typical of what we provide throughout the state," LeBas said.

Local officials who spoke at the meeting generally said it appears to be a sensible plan, though some said they don't have room in their budgets to cover the $800,000 lighting bill for the bridge and 14 miles of elevated expressway currently paid using toll revenue.

Several of those in attendance, including Gretna Mayor Ronnie Harris and New Orleans City Councilwomen **Jackie Clarkson** and Kristin Gisleson Palmer, said the planned post-toll reduction in bridge services is an argument for renewing the **tolls**.

Saying the expiration of the **tolls** "is going to be a disaster," Clarkson vowed to form a coalition to advocate for renewing them.

"That bridge and the ferries are the heartbeat of the West Bank," Clarkson said. "You cannot arbitrarily run them the way you would anywhere else in the state."

Harris said the toll issue has become a "political football" that has needlessly divided West Bank residents.

"Opportunists have divided the West Bank from the silent people who don't mind paying 40 cents," Harris said. "If you don't want to pay tolls, fine. But tell me where the money is going to come from."

Collected from east bank-bound motorists, the toll is $1 for those paying cash and 40 cents for those with electronic toll tags.

The tolls will expire Dec. 31 unless the state Legislature extends them.

Tolls account for about $22 million of the bridge's $27 million annual budget. Most of the remaining $5 million comes from the bridge's share of locally generated state vehicle license fees, which will return to the state once bonds that financed the bridge's second span are paid off this year.

Walter Brooks, executive director of the Regional Planning Commission, said it's critical to properly maintain the bridge, which he said has become an iconic symbol for the New Orleans area.

"When you watch the Super Bowl or the Final Four or whenever New Orleans is on TV, what do you see? You see the bridge lit up at night. You see the ferries crossing the river," he said. "These are important symbols of our city and the metropolitan area."

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