

TOLLS DIVIDE WEST BANK - MONEY MAY GO TO OTHER - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - June 27, 1998 - page B1

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Depending on which West Bank residents are talking, the prospect of shelling out toll money on every trip toward downtown New Orleans for 13 1/2 more years is either aggravating or a godsend.

The \$20 million collected each year from motorists heading to the east bank will pay not only for improvements on the Crescent City Connection, but also for West Bank projects not connected to the bridge, such as widening Lapalco Boulevard and extending Peters Road.

Those non-bridge projects are the point of contention in toll legislation that has split West Bank legislators and pitted residents against businesses. Toll proponents, including leaders of two business groups, say the money will help the whole economy by rushing road improvements that would take years through regular channels. But opponents say the daily pocket pinch for commuters should help finance only what they're driving on - the bridge.

"I feel we were really snubbed by the whole thing," said state Rep. **Jackie Clarkson**, D-Algiers, who led opposition to extending the tolls through 2012, saying residents in her district pay most. "Toll money should stay on the structure."

And, she argued, the money would be better spent trying to alleviate long lines waiting to cross in the morning. Traffic should be running smoothly on the bridge before money is diverted elsewhere, she said. She is asking the state attorney general for an opinion on whether attaching the road projects to the bill is legal in the first place, she said.

"I want the other road projects, too, but do it out of (state) highway money."

But with a scarce amount of highway money and a host of projects statewide, giving up extra toll money was not a likely scenario to most legislators outside the West Bank.

"The rest of the state thought if we didn't use the tolls, we would use their road money," Clarkson said.

"I was against it and didn't want it to pass, but the more strenuous you make your opposition, the more likely it is to pass in worse shape," said Rep. Steve Windhorst, R-Territory. "It's a tough proposition."

Indeed, tolls have been a popular source of financing for decades. Tolls were collected on the old span of the bridge for several years, then revoked until an additional span was planned. Collection began again in 1989 and was supposed to end in 1994. Later, they were extended to June 30, 1999. This month, they were extended until December 31, 2012, but at a lower fee - 40 cents instead of 50 cents - for toll tag users.

That money comes in handy when lawmakers seek financing for projects in their districts. Projects that may be financed by surplus toll money include extending Peters Road to Louisiana 23, widening of Lapalco Boulevard, upgrading of Peters Road and building a downramp at Mardi Gras Boulevard and additional ramps near Destrehan Avenue.

Algiers residents are unhappy about financing projects not connected to the bridge, said John Harmon, president of the Aurora Civic Association.

"That's the biggest reaction," Harmon said. "All the projects that are being supported by bridge money, especially those not connected to the bridge, people were upset about that."

But completion of those projects can only be good for economic development on the West Bank, toll proponents argue. They hail the toll extension as the saving grace for keeping the area booming.

"Peters Road is the economic backbone of the West Bank. . . . Without the tolls, these projects would not have another source of funding," said Paul Richard, chairman of the West Bank Council of the Chamber of Commerce.

He said he doesn't mind his toll money going to other projects. "I don't think anyone likes paying tolls," he said. "But if it will create jobs, yes."

Harvey Canal Industrial Association President Jay Dufrene agreed the toll bill was key for West Bank industry.

"Upgrading Peters Road, we've been trying to do that for 15 to 20 years now," he said. "We're pleased overall, but we're always cautious to make sure things get spent in the right place."

The bill creates a Crescent City Connection Oversight Authority, a 13-member committee made up of governor-appointed citizens nominated by legislators. The group will be responsible for deciding which non-bridge projects get done first.

But before it starts approving those projects, the bridge will have to be in tip-top shape, legislators said.

"If we have some oversight, perhaps we can get the projects done," said Rep. Benny Rousselle, D-Belle Chasse.

"We agreed to the things on the main structure of the bridge being top priority," said Rousselle, who supported the bill since it would lessen traffic in Belle Chasse.

It's an agreement in which some lawmakers take solace.

Projects such as repainting the old bridge span, opening the transit lanes to two-person carpools, adding a toll-tag lane and installing video toll equipment will have to be finished before anything else.

"I consider that quite a victory," Clarkson said. "Until those things are done, no other project can start."

That's a bright point for many West Bank residents who pass through the toll lanes daily. But many others see a long tunnel of toll-paying days ahead.

Paying **tolls** "is a disease that we have for the foreseeable future," said Glenn Orgeron, president of the Park Timbers Homeowners Association and a member of the bridge's citizen advisory committee. "It seems to be difficult to kill such a cash cow."

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