

A **task force** studying the scheduled expiration of the Crescent City Connection tolls appears poised to issue a **divided** recommendation next month that the tolls should be renewed.

During sometimes heated discussions in the past two months, a majority of the 10 members on the Legislature-created **task force** has expressed support for a draft report that calls for renewing the tolls before they expire at the end of the year.

But a vocal minority said the group isn't even authorized to study a scenario in which the tolls were renewed, noting that a legislative resolution called for the group to review "the transition to a toll-free bridge."

Toll proponents have countered that the resolution also directs the **task force** to release "findings and recommendations" on a wide variety of bridge topics, including revenue sources, which they said would logically include tolls.

Disagreement over its mission has dogged the **task force** since it began meeting in July.

At one point, a legislative official told the panel it had wide latitude to study what it wanted. But that opinion was dismissed after it was learned the official was a disbarred attorney.

Three attorneys who serve on the panel agreed that the group can analyze renewing the tolls. But member Michael Teachworth, the most vocal toll opponent, called for an independent legal opinion Wednesday, noting that all three attorneys are in the pro-toll camp.

Yet with a Feb. 1 deadline looming for a final report, the panel decided to simply note the controversy in its report.

The **task force** spent several hours Wednesday tweaking the language of what is expected to be a 50-page report. The group isn't scheduled to vote on the document until Jan. 20, but a clear majority has expressed support for a draft report that calls for renewing the tolls, which account for three-quarters of the bridge's \$27 million annual budget.

Written by member Pamela Lormand-Bialous, the draft report said eliminating the tolls would leave insufficient funding to operate the bridge and three Mississippi River ferry routes.

The report said the bridge and 13 miles of elevated expressway would have to vie with thousands of other bridges for limited state funding.

In a rival draft report that calls for letting the tolls expire, Teachworth said basic bridge operations, including policing, can be covered by about \$5.4 million the bridge receives from State Highway Fund No. 2, supplied by local vehicle registration fees.

Teachworth's report said the state Department of Transportation and Development should run the ferries as it does in other parts of the state.

The Legislature would have to act to extend the tolls beyond Dec. 31.