

The fate of CCC tolls: A political hot potato -- Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - July 11, 2010 - page A 01

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With tolls on the **Crescent City Connection** set to expire in 2012 -- and pressure mounting on the state Legislature to prevent that from happening -- the bridge's Oversight Authority is poised to start discussions on the politically charged issue and begin assessing the five options for the future laid out in April by the state Department of Transportation and Development.

Members of the oversight group have no authority to determine the fate of the tolls, which finance operations and upkeep for the bridge and six local ferries; if the Legislature takes no action, the tolls will automatically expire.

Still, some authority members say it's important to raise the issue and initiate discussion at their meeting Thursday, even if they are merely acting in an advisory capacity.

"It's one of these things no one wants to address right now, in a political year," said oversight authority member Chris Lytle. "But it will have to be addressed. It needs to be addressed. The **Crescent City Connection** is a large, vital part of New Orleans."

Oversight authority member Jack Stumpf acknowledged that the board's main purpose has been to determine how to spend surplus funds collected by the tolls. Even so, he called the possibility of a toll suspension a "disastrous" proposition.

"I think that would be the worst thing that could happen," he said. "I think the majority of people are used to tolls and realize that by having them, they have better traffic controls."

Five options

In April, the state transportation department presented five options to Senate and House committees on Transportation, Highways and Public Works that would potentially address the tolling quandary.

The first calls for allowing the tolls to expire by phasing them out over a six-month to one-year time frame.

David Miller, executive director of the **Crescent City Connection** division, said his department has already begun developing a phase-out plan, should the tolls cease because of a lack of legislative action. The potential plan could include layoffs for 200 employees, the transfer of the bridge's police and traffic management to local law enforcement agencies and the elimination of ferry service.

Widely considered drains on the **Crescent City Connection's** budget, the ferries are largely subsidized by tolls. They use up about \$8 million of the annual \$27 million operating budget, while bringing in only about \$250,000 in revenue.

Given the level of uncertainty involved in the legislative process, Miller said he hopes to have a completed plan ready by the end of the year.

"It's a difficult thing to deal with," Miller said. "I really don't know how it's going to go."

The second option would extend toll service, with the DOTD continuing to operate the bridge and State Police taking over patrols and other traffic duties. While ferry service could continue under this option, major projects would require alternate funding sources, and toll collections would continue without technological improvements.

The third option calls for privatizing the bridge by hiring a firm to oversee its operations, in accordance with standards set by the Legislature.

The remaining options depend on the formation of a Mississippi River Bridge Authority, or MRBA, which ran the bridge two decades ago. The authority would have 10 appointees, as well as the state transportation secretary, the mayors of New Orleans, Gretna and Westwego and the president of Plaquemines Parish.

The fourth option calls for shifting tolling responsibility to the bridge authority, with the DOTD overseeing its operations. The fifth option would give the MRBA full oversight as an independent entity outside the transportation department.

Lawmakers frustrated

Meanwhile, some West Bank lawmakers seem nonplussed when it comes to options listed in the DOTD's report.

State Rep. **Patrick Connick**, R-Harvey, who has been critical of the bridge's management and finances, said he could not endorse any of the "short-sighted" options and would prefer to allow the tolls to expire.

"Right now, we're spending a dollar to collect 75 cents," he said. "Why should we continue that system? If we were operating a business this way, we'd be bankrupt."

Connick proposed revamping the **Crescent City Connection** division by removing any directors who have been involved with the agency for the past 10 years.

He also urged local residents to make their opinions known on the matter. "If the public has a concern, they need to step up and get involved," he said. "Now's the time."

Sen. David Heitmeier, D-Algiers, who attended transportation officials' presentation in April, said he is awaiting a more comprehensive report from the state before making any recommendations.

Even so, Heitmeier said many West Bank residents who use the bridge on a regular basis don't feel they're getting a fair exchange for the tolls they pay.

"If we feel we're getting premium service, then residents of the West Bank would be OK," he said.
"But right now, I'm not sure we feel we're getting premium service."

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The **Crescent City Connection** Oversight Authority's Thursday meeting begins at 1 p.m. in the conference room of the **Crescent City Connection** Administration Building, 2001 Mardi Gras Blvd. in Algiers.

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