

**Toll critics unload on task force - They say - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - February 1, 2012 - page B 01**

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Members of a task force that recommended renewing the Crescent City Connection tolls got an earful Tuesday night from toll opponents, who said the tolls amount to an unfair tax that has been chronically misspent.

Wade Perrin of Marrero said West Bank residents were promised when tolls were renewed in 1998 that surpluses would be used to pay for tens of millions of dollars in road projects.

But he said the surpluses were frittered away on wasteful spending and huge subsidies for three Mississippi River ferries that lose more than \$8 million a year, consuming one of every three toll dollars collected.

"If our money had been spent properly, we wouldn't be here," Perrin said. "We are already paying the gas tax. The tolls are double taxation, and it's time for that to end."

Perrin joined a crowd of more than 150 people, many of whom held placards that said, "Stop the tolls," at a town hall meeting in Marrero attended by seven task force members.

Created by the state Legislature, the task force voted 7-1 on Jan. 20 to urge lawmakers to extend the tolls before they expire at the end of the year.

Without the tolls, the bridge's budget would be slashed from \$27 million to about \$5 million, forcing wholesale cutbacks and a dependence on the underfunded state transportation department to pick up the slack, according to the group's report.

"If the tolls stop, somebody has to come up with the funds to provide the services we already get," task force member Glenn Orgeron said. "It's a quality of life issue."

But many of those in attendance scoffed at the notion that toll payers have enjoyed "enhanced services."

"I know you are worried about losing services, but you can't lose what you never had," state treasurer John Kennedy said.

In calling for the tolls to end, Kennedy cited state transportation department figures that show just 19 cents of every toll dollar is spent on maintaining and policing the bridge.

"Tolls are a user fee, not a tax. When you pay a user fee, you're supposed to get an equal amount of services back from the government," he said. "But if you pay \$1 in tolls, you don't get \$1 in services, you get 19 cents back."

Orgeron disputed that the toll, which is \$1 for those paying cash and 40 cents for those with

electronic toll tags, amounts to a tax.

"I'm a conservative. I'm a Republican. I'm not for taxes," Orgeron said. "If the toll was \$7 like on the Golden Gate Bridge, that would be a tax. But 40 cents, in our view, is a reasonable user fee."

Task force member Michael Teachworth, who cast the lone dissenting vote, drafted a minority opinion that said if the tolls expire, the remaining \$5 million would be enough to cover basic bridge services, including policing, lighting and landscaping. He said the state should pay to maintain the CCC as it does for all other Mississippi River bridges.

"We were promised that when the bridge was paid off, the tolls would go away," Teachworth said, noting that the last payment on bonds for the second span will be made before the end of the year. "We expect that promise to be kept."

Opposition to the tolls has been fueled by a series of bridge audits in recent years that documented poor planning and wasteful spending, including paying a \$4 million annual premium for an insurance policy deemed unnecessary and a recently completed \$3.8 million addition to the bridge's Algiers offices that could sit empty if the tolls are not renewed.

Task force member Rick Legendre said the group's report recommends restructuring the bridge administration with greater oversight from top-level state transportation officials. The report also includes a plan to privatize the ferries, with the goal of reducing the subsidy from bridge tolls to \$1 million.

"Not one of us would have voted for this if it were for the status quo," Legendre said.

Legendre also pointed out that the group's recommendation includes \$150 million in bond revenue for the road projects that were never completed.

"I don't want to walk away from all those projects we were promised," he said.

After a show of hands revealed that all but a few of those in attendance opposed the tolls, State Rep. Pat Connick, R-Harvey, faulted the task force for not seeking public input as it prepared its report at 14 meetings since July.

"You want to take these folks' money?" he said. "Come talk to them and give them a reason why."

Dennis C. Foltz of Terrytown said tollpayers haven't gotten much of a return on their collective \$21 million investment each year.

"I've heard people say the toll amounts to a couple Starbucks' coffees a month," he said. "Well, I'd like to know how many Starbucks franchises you could build if all \$21 million went to the West Bank."

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