

WEIGHING THE RISKS - If Crescent City Connection - Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - November 2, 2012 - page B 01

November 2, 2012 | Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) | Andrea Shaw Staff writer | Page B 01

New Orleans Mayor Mitch Landrieu applauded the effort that uprooted evidence of waste, questionable spending and costly operations at the Crescent City Connection.

But he said that should not be the deciding factor on why residents should vote against Tuesday's referendum that would continue the **tolls** on the bridge past December.

Landrieu joined the contentious debate over extending the **tolls** at a news conference Thursday morning. Later Thursday, City Councilwoman **Jackie Clarkson** argued for the toll extension and state Rep. Pat Connick, R-Harvey, urged voters to let the **tolls** expire at a political forum in Harahan.

"Waste, fraud and abuse in government should be unacceptable in government at any level," Landrieu said, referencing recent federal investigations into public corruption.

But the region's ability to compete nationally would be jeopardized if voters rejected the dedicated funding source the **tolls** provide for the bridge, Landrieu said. He said for the metro area to be a player nationally, "We need a bridge that is structurally sound. ... We need a funding source. ... That is what the **tolls** provide."

Landrieu led a group of elected officials from around the region outside the Port of New Orleans on Thursday morning, imploring residents to vote in support of the **tolls**. It was the latest news conference sponsoring by Bridging Progress, a political action committee of regional business groups that have mounted a campaign push for the continuation of the **tolls**.

Voters in Jefferson, Plaquemines and Orleans parishes are being asked to decide whether to extend the current **tolls** another 20 years. The **tolls** expire at the end of the year.

Officials said state budget woes and a backlog of \$12 billion in infrastructure projects will have a direct impact on the bridge's maintenance and operations if the **tolls** are not renewed. The **tolls** generate \$21 million annually.

Landrieu chastised Connick, state Treasurer John Kennedy and Gov. Bobby Jindal, saying they haven't offered alternative funding sources or guarantees to pay for bridge operations. Connick and Kennedy have publicly come out against the **tolls**.

With LSU eliminating more than 400 jobs from its hospital and a mental health hospital in Mandeville slated for closure, the Crescent City Connection doesn't stand a chance for financial support, Landrieu said.

"If we had a guarantee ... I don't think we would be standing here right now," he said.

State Sen. Conrad Appel, R-Metairie, warned that if the tolls go away, state officials could not guarantee that maintenance and operations could be maintained at an acceptable level. With the tolls paying for 13 miles of roadway and approaches, those needs won't go away and would mount as the Port of New Orleans grows, he said.

"The vote is extremely important," Appel said. "It's a vote about the prosperity of our community."

East bank-bound drivers pay 40 cents with a toll tag or \$1 with cash. Some officials said 40 cents is a minimal investment for such a large return.

"Forty cents to maintain a bridge, light a bridge, police a bridge," Clarkson said at the morning news conference. "We do not risk the maintenance, public safety and future economic development for 40 cents."

.....

Andrea Shaw can be reached at ashaw@nola.com or 504.826.3780.

Copyright, 2012, The Times-Picayune Publishing Corporation. All Rights Reserved. Used by NewsBank with Permission.