

West Bank Business Report Bank

Toll takers

Decisions are in the works as to which projects will get funding from fees collected on the Crescent City Connection

By Sonya Stinson *Contributing Writer*

WITH THE PUBLIC comment period ended, the Crescent City Connection Oversight Authority will get down to deciding which of several West Bank road improvement projects will have first dibs on funding from the bridge's excess toll revenue.

The Crescent City Connection collects close to \$20 million a year, according to state Rep. Jackie Clarkson (D-Algiers). Maintenance and staffing of the bridge costs \$15 million a year, leaving \$5 million for other projects. With the tolls extended to 2012, the Oversight Authority has projected that about \$47 million above the cost of operating the bridge will have accumulated by then.

But with the estimated cost of all of the proposed road improvements totaling nearly \$80 million, there won't be enough money to do them all.

"Everybody's got their pet projects," says Clarkson, who acknowledges that she favors giving priority to building an exit ramp at Mardi Gras Boulevard, at a cost of \$7 million. "The oversight committee will make the decision for where we go next."

That decision could come by the end of June, according to Alan LeVasseur, executive director of the Crescent City Connection Division of the Department of Transportation and Development. By law, the basis for deciding will be which projects will have the greatest impact on bridge traffic, he says.

In addition to the Mardi Gras Boulevard ramp, the other projects under consideration include bridge and expressway painting (\$13 million); entrance and exit ramps from the West Bank Expressway to Peters Road (\$5.6 million); widening Peters Road from two lanes to four (\$12 million); extending Peters Road to Louisiana Highway 23 (\$20 million); an exit ramp at Barataria

Boulevard (\$2.7 million); widening Barataria Boulevard (\$700,000); extending Fourth Street to Burmaster Street in Gretna (\$3 million); and widening part of Lapacko Boulevard (\$10 million).

The West Bank Inter-Parish Transportation Committee of the New Orleans Regional Chamber of Commerce listed the widening of Peters Road, the Peters Road entrance and exit ramps and the extension of Fourth Street as its top priorities.

The committee chose its priorities based on such criteria as economic development, land use and which projects could be completed quickly, says Peggy Bourgeois, Jefferson Parish area manager for the New Orleans Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Other considerations were cost, the support of the business community, relieving traffic congestion, minimum right-of-way acquisition and minimum negative community impact, according to a letter to LeVasseur outlining the committee's choices.

The Harvey Canal Industrial Association would like to see the improvements to Peters Road done first, says the association's president, Ed Cooper. "There's a lot of traffic on Peters Road, and we certainly need improvements to the road to make it safer and make the traffic flow more smoothly," says Cooper, who says the work was first proposed some 20 years ago but has been held up for lack of funding.

"The businesses have waited patiently for the improvements ... and we really need them," Cooper says.

Gretna Mayor Ronnie Harris favors the Fourth Street extension project, citing the need to alleviate heavy truck traffic in the city's residential areas.

Ed Cooper says improvements to Peters Road can't come soon enough

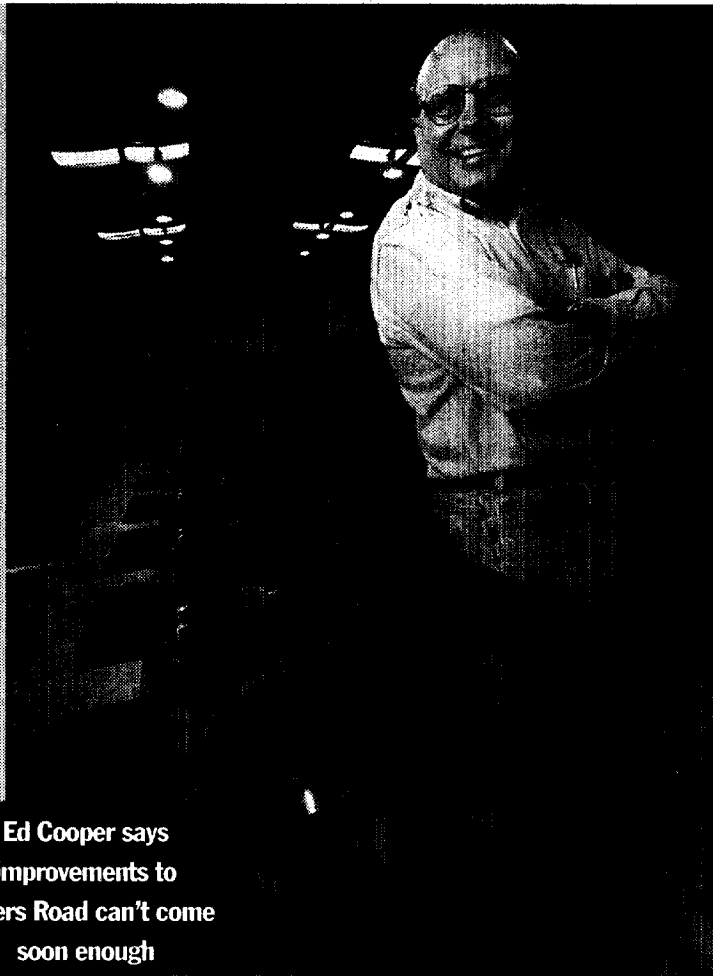


PHOTO BY CHERYL GERBER

Algiers Point making strides on the trail to a comeback

By Christine Richard *Staff Writer*

WHEN BARBARA LONGWORTH bought her Victorian-era single shotgun home in Algiers Point in 1991, the house was uninhabitable, she says. Vandals had stripped the interior, electric wires hung useless and the plumbing was rusted. Its condition was not unique — many turn-of-the-century bungalows and older homes in the neighborhood were in similar shape, she says.

In the nine years since, Algiers Point, a part of Old Algiers on the West Bank, has done an about-face. Instead of blighted streets with occasional renovations, the ratio has reversed. In fact, prospective home buyers will have a difficult time finding a home selling for less than \$100,000 in Algiers Point, says Latter & Blum Inc./Realtors agent Dianne Lambert. Prices have increased phenomenally, she says. "Renovations are exquisite, comparable to vintage homes in Uptown New Orleans."

Longworth, also a Latter & Blum agent, sold an Algiers Point home last year for more than \$300,000 — a landmark price, she says, especially considering that just six years ago many homes were selling for about \$40,000. Houses don't stay on the market for more than 60 days, she says, while not so long ago properties sat vacant for years.

Algiers Point is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city, settled in 1719, and has the best-preserved housing stock in the city, says Longworth says. Another reason people flock there, she says, is its proximity to downtown and the French Quarter via the Canal Street ferry. Only a half-mile of water and about seven minutes separate Algiers Point from the east bank.

It is also a neighborhood, in the true sense of the word, "where (people) still sit outside on the stoop," Longworth says.

Crime in the district is extremely low, says Darlene Bairnsfather, president of the Algiers Police Advisory Committee. According to New Orleans Police Department crime statistics, the Fourth District, which encompasses only Algiers, had the lowest number of reported crimes in 1999.

While residential revitalization has skated

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"By connecting the industrial riverfronts of Harvey, Gretna and Marrero, the 18-wheeler traffic wouldn't get lost in the city of Gretna and it would have a direct link to the bridge," Harris says. "Now, you have a lot of underutilized industrial space, so access to transportation is a big selling point."

While the estimated cost of the Fourth Street project is \$3 million, Harris thinks it can get off the ground with a \$1.6 million allocation for the land purchase and design. Then the state could apply for a 20% matching grant from the federal Urban Aid program to fund the construction, he says.

The state law authorizing the use of toll revenue for these road improvements also mandates that four projects designed to expedite bridge traffic safely be completed before money is spent on anything else, Clarkson says.

"The first mandate was to paint the bridge, which we've started," Clarkson says. That \$42 million project is on track, with an estimated three years left to complete it. "It's a slow process, because it's done in phases, and we've finished Phase II now."

The other mandated projects are the opening of the bridge's higher occupancy vehicle lane to cars with two or more occupants, which has been accomplished through a bill Clarkson wrote; the installation of video technology, which is in progress; and the establishment of an additional toll lane for Algiers, which has yet to be done.

A new computer system and a light screen that can register vehicles with multiple axles were installed earlier this year. The video technology package will be complete in June, with the arrival of a camera that will keep track of which vehicles have toll tags. That will eliminate the need for mechanical arms controlling access to the bridge.

"When you go through a toll tag lane with a toll tag, it clicks in the machine and you keep going," Clarkson says. "You won't get stuck behind an arm. If somebody tries to go through without a toll tag, it doesn't hold up the whole lane." Instead, the camera will take a picture of the license plate and the vehicle's owner will be sent a bill.

Sen. Francis Heitmeier (D-New Orleans), chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, would like to see the toll revenue surplus used to pay off the bond indebtedness of the bridge, once expenses such as painting, maintenance and police services have been taken care of. He also would like to see the tolls reduced.

Like Clarkson, he says the main focus should be on providing safe and efficient transportation on the bridge, with other expenditures taking a backseat.

"One of the problems is that politicians are looking at the bridge as a cash cow and wanting to get their hands on the money," Heitmeier says. "I don't see it that way. I see it as a means of transportation, and I want to make sure that's the way it stays."

"As far as the prioritization (of road improvements), I will be working on that with the community with the funds that are already in existence, and go from there." •

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