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Task force reviewing Crescent City Connection tolls holds first meeting

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By **Paul Rioux, The Times-Picayune**

Meeting for the first time Friday, members of a **task force** created by the state Legislature to analyze the **scheduled expiration** of Crescent City Connection tolls said it is unclear whether they will make a recommendation on whether the tolls should be renewed.



The Times-Picayune

Crescent City Connection

The 10-member committee was formed to "analyze the transition to a toll-free bridge" and issue a report on its findings and recommendations by Feb. 1.

The legislation's somewhat nebulous wording leaves open the question of whether the panel will take a stand on the critical issue of whether the legislature should renew the tolls before they expire Dec. 31, 2012.

Task force member William Aaron said he hasn't ruled out making a recommendation

on the tolls' fate.

"I'm coming to the table with an open slate to hear the information and collectively make some recommendations," Aaron said after the two-hour meeting, which mostly involved organizational matters.

The toll, which is collected from east-bank-bound motorists, is \$1 per two-axle vehicle for those paying cash and 40 cents for those with electronic toll tags.

With the state facing a multibillion-dollar backlog of transportation projects, renewal proponents say the tolls provide a steady source of revenue for bridge maintenance while subsidizing three Mississippi River ferries that might otherwise have to be scaled back or eliminated.

But with bonds financing the bridge's second span set to be paid off before the tolls expire, some bridge users have questioned why the tolls should be renewed, especially after many planned West Bank road-improvement projects were never completed because anticipated toll surpluses failed to materialize.

The Bureau of Governmental Research **released a study** in April saying bridge tolls should be allowed to expire because only 19 percent of toll revenue goes to policing and maintaining the bridge. The report said much of the rest is spent on "far-flung" services, including the ferries, which consume 32 percent of toll revenue.

The tolls account for about three-quarters of the bridge's \$27 million annual budget, meaning wholesale budget cuts would be needed if the tolls lapse.

The task force is charged with reviewing six areas of bridge operations: administrative structure, governance, maintenance, traffic control, ferry service and potential revenue sources, including the sale of bonds to finance road projects.

Members decided to meet every two weeks and divide the work between three committees.

The task force has two non-voting co-chairs, Rhett Desselle, an assistant transportation secretary, and Walter Brooks, executive director of the Regional Planning Commission.

The panel will have 10 voting members nominated by various business and civic groups. Here are the seven members who have been appointed so far along with the nominating organization:

Aaron, Jefferson Business Council; Fay Faron, Friends of the Ferry of New Orleans; Brian Heiden, Harvey Canal Industrial Association; Richard Legendre, Jefferson Chamber of Commerce; Pamela Lormand-Bialous, Algiers Neighborhood President's Council; Glenn Orgeron, Algiers Economic Development Foundation; and David Pavlovich, Plaquemines Association of Business and Industry.

Before the panel was created, the state Department of Transportation and Development had hired a consultant to develop a "sunset" plan to dramatically scale back bridge operations if the tolls are allowed to expire. But that work has largely been put on hold, Desselle said.

"They're still looking at some big-picture issues, but they're not doing any detailed work." he said.

Desselle said the contractor's work on the plan will be provided to the task force.

Task force members also requested information about other toll bridges that have gone toll-free.

"I'm going to have to dig to find any information on that," Desselle said. "There are a few, but there aren't many."

"There's a statement right there," Heiden said.

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