

## Officials mull \$1 to \$2 toll hike for Causeway commuters

By: Lance Traweek, Managing Editor July 19, 2016

Officials overseeing the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway are eyeing a toll increase for commuters.

The Greater New Orleans Expressway Commission is scheduled to hear on Wednesday a plan to increase the toll by \$1 for drivers with toll tags and \$2 for drivers without.

Currently, it costs \$2 to cross from the North Shore to the south shore if the driver has a toll tag. It costs \$3 without a tag.

Under the proposed increase, drivers with toll tags would pay \$3, and drivers without would pay \$5 per round trip. Northbound trips from the south shore are free.

Carlton Dufrechou, general manager, said the toll hike could pay for \$100 million to \$110 million worth of improvements on the bridge. The commission has been focused on ways to improve rails and add additional stopping areas.

He said the state does not have the ability to help with costs, and there have been three failed attempts to obtain federal grants.

“Our focus is getting our commuters back and forth safely and timely,” he said. “That’s why we’re pursuing this.”

The increase would be tied to the consumer price index, so every seven years there would be an adjustment, under the proposal. The improvement projects would be financed through 30-year bonds.

About two-thirds of bridge users have toll tags. The round trip, \$2 toll for tags today is the same round trip cash toll from 1956, he said.

Dufrechou will pitch the plan to the commission at 6 p.m. Wednesday at the St. Tammany Council Chambers, located at 21490 Koop Drive in Mandeville. A vote is not expected until August.

Dufrechou said the initiative was a culmination of two years of efforts “trying to get the Causeway into the 21<sup>st</sup> century as far as safety.”

“We’ve got a great bridge, structurally it’s very sound,” he said. “The maintenance has been continuous for the past 60 years.”

But traffic is six times what it was in 1969 when the northbound span was completed. He said the other challenge is the type of vehicles on the bridge. Now, one of every

two vehicles is a SUV or personal pickup.

As a result, the commission looked to add shoulders to the entire bridge, but that was a "dream," he said. That would cost an estimated \$1.8 billion.

Even with bonding rates lower than when the original bridge was built in 1956, the Causeway would have to charge a \$20 toll, "so that's not going to work," he said.

The biggest problem on the bridge daily is breakdowns, he said. On an average day, the Causeway will have six or more breakdowns on the bridge.

"Because there aren't any shoulders, it's imperative to get to the breakdown as quickly as possible," he said.

The emergency response time is less than five minutes.

In 2015, for example, there were 178 crashes and 65 of those crashes occurred in the first two minutes of a breakdown, with a vehicle behind the breakdown rear ending the broken down vehicle.

Because of this, the commission is proposing segmented shoulders, or safety bays, that would be about two blocks long, six northbound and six southbound. They would be spaced mid-span between each of the seven crossovers, which are currently about 3.5 miles apart.

He said building these would effectively triple the emergency stopping areas on the bridge. The cost of those are \$60 million.

And with 14 vehicle overboards in the past 20 years, the commission is also looking to install rails on the older and shorter southbound bridge. The concrete barrier on the 1956 bridge is 25 inches over the roadway. For the northbound bridge, which was completed in 1969, the design standards had changed and gone up to 31 inches.

"That six inches makes a tremendous difference when it comes to safety and keeping vehicles on the roadway," he said.

Eleven of those 14 overboards resulted in fatalities, with all but one occurring on the southbound bridge. Installing rails on the southbound bridge would cost about \$40 million.

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