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Causeway toll hike draws criticism

Vote by GNOEC set for Aug. 17**

by John H. Walker

Motorists can expect to pay more to cross the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway if the members of the Greater New Orleans Expressway Commission (GNOEC) follow the recommendation made by the agency's staff at a July 20 meeting held on the north shore in Council Chambers at the Parish Administrative Complex. The increased revenue will be used to fund \$103 million in bridge safety improvements.

The commission will consider a \$1 increase, from \$2 to \$3, for toll tag passes and a \$2 increase, from \$3 to \$5, for single cash tolls for two-axle vehicles when it next meets on Wednesday, Aug. 17. That meeting will also be held on the north shore, in Council Chambers, 21454 Koop Dr., beginning at 6 p.m..

Causeway General Manager Carlton Dufrechou, during a 22-minute presentation, detailed the results of a safety study conducted by the Texas A&M Traffic Institute and reviewed the plan to increase the height of the railings on the southbound span and to add safety bays between the bridge crossovers.

Dufrechou told the audience of about 75 people that 14 vehicles have gone over the railings since 1994, resulting in 11 fatalities. Thirteen of the 14 overboard incidents took place on the older southbound span, where the railings are six inches lower than the northbound structure. The estimated cost of raising the southbound rails from 25 to 46 inches is \$40 million.

The remaining \$63 million would go toward construction of the safety bays, or shoulders, intended to provide drivers with a place to pull over if they have mechanical problems or a flat tire. Six 672-foot-long shoulders will be built between the existing crossovers in an effort to reduce rear-end crashes.

There were more than 2,000 breakdowns on the bridge in 2015, making shoulders the Causeway's number one priority, Dufrechou said. Following the presentation, audience members raised a number of questions, concerns and criticisms.

Several suggested the increased overboard incidents and rear-end accidents were the result of inattentive drivers.

Mitchell Christian, of the Mandeville area, said the expenditures would "protect speeders, tailgaters, people who use their cell phones, text or drink coffee.

"What about the residents who don't break the rules?," he asked.

Christian also said he would like to see social media use blocked on the Causeway, which brought a loud round of applause from the packed audience.

Mandeville resident Charles Goodwin expressed concern that the higher railings would bounce "vehicles back into the flow traffic" and cause more accidents.

Goodwin also said he believes drivers need to take personal responsibility for their actions. "Don't make the rest of us pay for the irresponsibility of others."

Others agreed, saying that many of the rear-end accidents on the bridge are caused when drivers who are not paying

attention crash into stalled cars.

Other speakers made the case – to loud applause – for either closing the Causeway to 18-wheelers and pickups pulling trailers or restricting them to the right lane.

The commission can raise the tolls without permission from any other governmental body, but it will have to get permission from the bridge's owners – St. Tammany and Jefferson parishes – before selling the bonds to fund the improvements.

Carlo Hernandez, of “unincorporated Mandeville,” said he hopes the commission can find other funding sources. “I suspect most of the people here are opposed to this. I just hope there are other means to fund the necessary improvements.”

But commission chairman Anthony Ligi, Jr., said bridge officials have looked everywhere for funding and had no luck obtaining state and federal grants. “We have not been able to shake anything loose,” he said. “Nobody up here is excited about raising tolls.”

There were some supporters. A former state trooper said he considers the Causeway toll to be a user fee. “You don't use it,” he said, “you don't pay for it.”

Bonnie Eades, of the Northshore Business Council, told commissioners she believes the proposed shoulders will be “a wonderful enhancement” to the bridge.

St. Tammany Parish District 4 Councilman Michael Lorino, Jr., who previously was a member of the GNOEC, noted that bridge officials have been studying the safety concerns and looking for revenue to fund the improvements for more than two years. The \$1 toll increase for toll tag users and the expenditures will be worth it if they save just one life, he said. “This is not a tax. This is a safety issue.”

The commissioners also questioned the GNOEC's responsibility for policing the Huey P. Long Bridge, and said Causeway revenue should not be used to pay for traffic officers and patrols on that bridge.

“Put all the money on the Causeway where it should be,” said Terry Willis.

**** Correction from Greater New Orleans Expressway Commission: The vote will be on August 10, 2016.**

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