

Official: Safety railings installed wrong

Lawsuit likely against Causeway contractor

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The Lake Pontchartrain Causeway and the contractor that erected the new steel rails on the southbound span appear to be gearing up for a court fight over the project.

On Wednesday, the Greater New Orleans Expressway Commission, which oversees the 24-mile bridge as well as the Huey P. Long Bridge, met behind closed doors to discuss the possibility of a lawsuit in connection with the rail project, which has dragged well past its estimated time of completion.

No suit has been filed, but Causeway General Manager Carlton Dufrechou said the 15-minute, closed-door briefing was to bring the five-member commission up to speed on the possibility.

The new railings for the southbound span have long been on the Causeway's wish list, spurred by a number of crashes in which vehicles flew off the roadway and into Lake Pontchartrain below. Nearly all of the crashes that involved vehicles going into the lake have occurred on the southbound span of the bridge, which dates to 1956 and has a lower railing height than the new northbound span, which opened in 1969.

The new railings and several pullout shoulders added to both spans are part of roughly \$100 million in bridge improvements financed by bonds backed with a 2019 toll increase.

➤ See **RAILINGS**, page **2B**

RAILINGS

Continued from page 1B

"Everything we do is about safety," Dufrechou said. Almost all of the problems have been corrected within the past year, and all the corrections should be done within the next four weeks, he said.

"That's why we press so hard to get the contractor to do it right," he said.

JB James Construction, of Baton Rouge, won the railing project with a \$33.6 million bid in 2018, outbidding several other firms. Later adjustments to the contract increased the price to around \$40 million.

The company did not return a call or email for comment.

The contract for the company called for it to install twin steel rails on top of the existing 25-inch-tall concrete railings on both sides of the southbound span.

The new rails were designed by a special traffic engineering group from Texas A&M University, which conducted extensive

tests to see what would be most effective in preventing vehicles from going over the edge of the bridge. Those so-called "overboard" crashes are frequently fatal.

But complications began almost as soon as the rail work began, Dufrechou said. The company's workers found that the original planners from the 1950s did not accurately reflect where in the existing concrete railing that steel rods were located. Thus, when workers began to drill into what they expected was only concrete, they were often hitting steel as well and it was damaging drills and drill bits.

Later, when inspectors from the Causeway Commission checked the installed railings, they found that some bolts used to anchor steel plates to the bridge were shorter than the design called for and crews had also not used epoxy as called for in the specifications, Dufrechou said. Most of those problems were on rails in the northwest side of the bridge, Dufrechou said.

"When we found them, we told

them they had to fix it," he said. "We are still finding a handful of other issues."

Despite the issues, none of the newly installed rails failed during a crash, Dufrechou said.

JB James finished installing the rails in June but has continued to work to fix the problems, Dufrechou said. But it hasn't been easy: Causeway officials have had to "hold their toes to the fire," Dufrechou said.

The company has had to examine or replace more than 120,000 bolts, he said.

Dufrechou said that in recent meetings, JB James management had said it was considering litigation against the Greater New Orleans Expressway Commission over the project.

Dufrechou said there have been zero overboard crashes on sections where the railings had been installed. But getting them in place in the way they were designed remains a key objective.

"We want to be absolutely sure the rails meet all design specifications," he said. "Motorists shouldn't be concerned."